



# FROM RELIANCE TO RESILIENCE: TIME FOR EUROPE'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

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## Introduction

Throughout 2025 European leaders intensified their engagement in the security sector, with a series of summits and consultations resulting in a wave of policy proposals and strategic initiatives all designed to strengthen the continent’s defense posture. This momentum has primarily been driven by two converging dynamics: Russia’s ongoing aggression against Ukraine, and the Trump administration’s recalibration of U.S. foreign policy towards an “America First” doctrine that conditions Washington’s commitment to NATO. In light of the growing fragility of the global order and multifaceted security challenges, Europe’s structural dependence on U.S. security guarantees has been exposed, underscoring the urgency of developing genuine strategic resilience and autonomy. Notably, the NATO summit in June 2025 marked a decisive point. European member states collectively agreed to increasing their defense expenditure to 5% of their GDP with a comprehensive review slated for 2029, coinciding with NATO’s 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Parallel to this financial commitment, the EU accelerated its planning and producing of documents to articulate a vision of a more coherent, agile, and integrated defense architecture. Yet despite the rhetorical alignment, implementation remains fragmented. Competences are dispersed across multiple institutions including the European Commission, the High Representative and the European External Action Service, the European Defense Agency, national governments, and various specialized programs such as ASAP, EDIRPA, and EDIP. This authority diffusion weakens Europe’s ability to act decisively and coherently, particularly as the

transatlantic consensus continues to erode. Europe no longer shares an assured strategic outlook with Washington and cannot afford to spend another electoral cycle awaiting a potential U.S. policy reversal (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2025). Strategic autonomy must evolve from an aspirational legislative debate to an operational reality.

## The Logic Behind Washington's Strategic Burden Shift

The urgency to transform Europe's security architecture has become more acute as pressure intensifies along NATO's eastern flank and American strategic attention continues to pivot toward the Indo-Pacific. This shift is not incidental but reflects a deliberate reordering of American defense priorities, long advocated by Elbridge Colby, the central intellectual architect of the 2025 *U.S. National Defense Strategy*. Colby's "prioritization" approach identifies China as the United States' principal threat, necessitating the realignment of resources from other regions (Insight Forward, 2025). The same logic is further echoed by figures traditionally associated with American primacy, such as Secretary of State Marco Rubio and National Security Advisor Mike Waltz who now increasingly embrace a "prioritizer" stance, emphasizing burden-sharing and a reassessment of alliance commitments (Ruge, 2024). The U.S. National Defense Strategy published in November 2025 formalizes this shift, codifying a doctrine of prioritization that places primary emphasis on the defense of U.S. territory and immediate theatres before committing resources to more distant regions (Insight Forward, 2025). The implications of this doctrinal shift are already visible in practice. The underfunding of the Baltic Security Initiative and the gradual redeployment of U.S. forces from Europe signal a transition from implicit strategic signaling to explicit policy implementation (Insight Forward, 2025). This trajectory was further reinforced during Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's October visit to NATO headquarters, where he publicly called for a "more European-led NATO," reinforcing perceptions that Washington is seeking to reduce its direct leadership role within the Alliance (McLeary & Jack, 2025). Once a strategic constant, Europe has now become a variable in Washington's calculus as reaffirmed by the U.S. National Strategy, which calls on European allies to assume greater responsibility for their own defense capabilities and regional stability. In the strategy, Europe is identified as a strategic challenge requiring managed stability, while Russia is notably absent from the list of primary adversaries. Instead, the strategy emphasizes the need to re-establish "strategic stability" with Moscow, framing a rapid ceasefire in Ukraine less as a European security imperative and more as a U.S. interest that would enable de-escalation with Russia and free strategic bandwidth to focus on China, an approach that can be described as reverse Kissinger strategy (White House, 2025). For Europe, this signals a more transactional and compartmentalized relationship with the United States, increasingly resembling a modernized Monroe Doctrine. European security is thus treated as primarily a European responsibility, driving a growing strategic decoupling and compelling the EU to confront strategic autonomy not as an ambition, but as a strategic necessity.

## Europe's Exposed Defense Gaps

A reduction of U.S. leadership to NATO exposes deep and persistent gaps in Europe's defense capabilities, leaving the continent ill-prepared to defend itself independently, should circumstances require it (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2025). Decades of underinvestment and reliance on external suppliers have hollowed Europe's ability to field and sustain modern forces without U.S. backing (Bronk, 2023). Most European states have prioritized procurement over production, importing major defense systems than developing them collaboratively (Andersson, 2023). EU-wide programs for main battle tanks, fighter jets, or submarines remain fragmented or stalled, forcing member states to source from American, Israeli, or South Korean firms (Andersson, 2023). Notably, between 2014–18 and 2019–23, European arms imports nearly doubled, rising by 94%, with 55% of the imports originating from the United States, according to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2024) data. This pattern pinpoints the strategic imperative to *invest more, invest together, and invest European* (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2025). As Commission President Ursula von der Leyen warned, “dependencies are ruthlessly weaponized” (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2025). At the same time, capability assessments reveal sharp shortfalls in European NATO members' readiness for high-intensity operations, particularly in maritime security and territorial defense against peer adversaries such as Russia (Barrie et al., 2019). Despite ambitious rhetoric, a competitive European defense industrial base remains elusive. Only 11% of European defense procurement occurs through joint initiatives, and national industrial policies continue to drive duplication, inefficiency, and limited interoperability (Mueller, 2024). The consequences are structural. Europe's defense ecosystem is fragmented along national lines while foreign suppliers consolidate their competitive edge (Karp & Maass, 2024). This dependency constrains Europe's control over critical technologies, hinders innovation, and prevents advanced capabilities scaling. Given that the defense sector is now a central arena of technological supremacy, the EU must strengthen its industrial and technological base to sustain long-term security autonomy (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2025). Ultimately, Europe must rethink its approach to the Defense Technological and Industrial Base (DTIB) as procurement remains overwhelmingly national, leading to fragmentation and inflated costs (Mueller, 2024). Expanding joint procurement would not only increase purchasing power, but would also create economies of scale, foster industrial integration and support the emergence of a competitive European defense sector. (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2025). Building a resilient European defense industrial base is thus key to reducing external dependencies and enabling more cohesive EU decision-making. This does not require further bureaucratization but rather, stronger political will and a substantially higher European military ambition as industrial independence ultimately enables the strategic autonomy Europe seeks (Zandee et al., 2020). To this end, Europe has developed several complementary funding mechanisms to enhance competitiveness, modernize defense capabilities, and reduce reliance on imports by enabling production at scale (European

Commission, Directorate General for Defense Industry and Space, 2025). Crucially, SAFE provides substantial financial support to Member States to reduce fragmentation, promote industrial-scale production, and foster joint procurement (European Commission, Directorate General for Defense Industry and Space, 2025). Alongside SAFE, EDIRPA and EDIP target capability surges and industrial consolidation, while the EDF, EPF, and other emergency measures collectively strengthen Europe's ability to act as a credible and autonomous security actor.

## Developing Readiness for Multifront Contingencies

As the European Union strives to cut through red tape, European intelligence warns that Russia could build sufficient capacity to launch another offensive within the coming years, while its ongoing grey-zone operations, from disinformation campaigns to sabotage, exploit Europe's slow adaptation and the moderate reduction of U.S. military presence (Fillingham, 2025). In a plausible scenario, a direct Russian attack on a NATO member would likely occur only when U.S. reinforcement is constrained during a simultaneous conflict in the Indo-Pacific (Bronk, 2023). Consequently, China has a clear interest in sustaining Russia as a persistent European threat diverting Western attention and resources toward Europe while the Republic of China is advancing its own strategic objectives (Bronk, 2023). Critically, Germany's Defense Minister Boris Pistorius warned on November 15<sup>th</sup> that "*this past summer may have been the last peaceful one*" for Europe, providing further credibility to the scenarios above (Barabaltchouk, 2025). Without accelerated investment in defense capabilities and coordinated planning, Europe risks leaving itself exposed to opportunistic aggression whilst reliant on an increasingly preoccupied transatlantic partner. The purpose of this scenario analysis is not to highlight Europe's depleted stockpiles or limited platforms, but to guide policy: invest decisively in research, dual-use technologies in critical sectors i.e. defense cyber, space and AI, ammunition production, storage, and the refurbishment of existing platforms such as main battle tanks and fighter jets (Andersson, 2023). Initiatives such as SAFE and ReArm Europe represent instrumental steps towards this objective, providing essential flow of investments, yet fragmentation of Europe's defense industrial base remains the foremost obstacle to achieving genuine industrial competitiveness, military integration and a scalable and sustained capability development (European Commission & High Representative, 2025). Divergent national priorities and concerns over efficiency continue to limit collaboration, reflecting long-standing tensions between defense industrial economies of scale, sovereignty, and joint strategic objectives (Karp & Maass, 2024). Europe must move beyond transactional thinking rediscovering shared interests that transcend narrow national objectives. As reports by key European opinion leaders, Niinistö and Draghi underscore, fragmented procurement increases costs and hinders innovation. Addressing this challenge requires traditionally high-cost capabilities such as airborne surveillance and strategic transport to form the core of joint European planning ensuring efficient pooling of resources and avoiding duplication (European Commission & High Representative, 2025).

## Operational Synergy Between EU and NATO

Traditionally, NATO has focused on hard security, addressing threats through military activities such as exercises and training missions primarily along the Eastern flank. In contrast, the European Union, fundamentally a non-military actor, has emphasized resilience-building and security initiatives in its neighborhood, including civilian and military missions that address political, economic, and societal vulnerabilities (Karp & Maass, 2024). As NATO's agenda increasingly expands to include resilience, energy security, and other policy areas historically under the EU's scope, the need for a coherent strategic partnership between the two organizations has become ever more pressing. Similarly, the EU has historically prioritized counterterrorism, cyber defense, and hybrid threats rather than conventional military aggression (Karp & Maass, 2024). Yet today's complex and blended threat environment creates space for a more proactive EU role in both prevention and response, bridging the gap between civilian security and military capability. Despite their distinct mandates, NATO and the EU share the core objective of keeping Europe secure (Niinistö, 2024). Achieving operational synergy between the two institutions is no longer optional but a strategic imperative for addressing the full spectrum of contemporary threats and ensuring Europe's resilience in an uncertain geopolitical landscape. As Commissioner Andrius Kubilius has emphasized, the EU must now transition from creating strategic opportunities to delivering tangible outcomes (European Commission, 2025).

### Delivering Tangible Outcomes: Advancing European Strategic Autonomy

Building on the need for operational synergy between NATO and the EU, advancing European Strategic Autonomy represents a critical progression in translating opportunities into tangible outcomes. By developing independent capabilities and integrated industrial capacity, the EU will not only strengthen its own security but also enhance NATO's readiness, reinforce collective deterrence, and improve burden-sharing across the Alliance. However, the history of European security cooperation is long and complex. Defense and military security in Europe remain predominantly national responsibilities, often operating in isolation from broader EU policies (Niinistö, 2024). The concept of "European Strategic Autonomy" (ESA) emerged in 2016 in the European Union's Global Strategy, sparking debate both within the EU and in Washington, raising concerns that it might signal a drift from NATO or a weakening of U.S. commitment to European defense (Zandee et al., 2020). Today, ESA remains a contested concept, but a clearer understanding has emerged. Strategic autonomy is not about abandoning the U.S. but about enhancing Europe's capacity to take responsibility for its own security while remaining fully committed to NATO as the primary organization for collective defense (NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2024). At its core, European Strategic Autonomy means the ability to make independent decisions and to possess the capabilities, structures, and resources required to implement them effectively (Zandee et al., 2020). It does not imply going alone rather, it allows Europe to operate autonomously, when necessary, while cooperating with partners whenever possible (Zandee et al., 2020). Achieving strategic autonomy requires parallel progress across political, institutional, industrial, and capability dimensions, prioritizing concrete military

capacities over the creation of new bureaucratic frameworks (Zandee et al., 2020). Without these investments, the EU cannot fully integrate its resources across institutional and operational divides, limiting its ability to prepare for and respond to large-scale, cross-sectoral crises (Karp & Maass, 2024). In essence, European strategic autonomy strengthens NATO, enhances Europe's credibility as a geopolitical actor, and ensures the continent can safeguard its security amongst global powers.

### European Strategic Autonomy as a Complimentary Pillar of Defense

As Winston Churchill famously noted, “there is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them.” (Karp & Maass, 2024). This sentiment captures the enduring truth of European security. NATO continues to serve as the cornerstone of collective defense, and misconceptions that European Strategic Autonomy (ESA) seeks to replace the Alliance only fuel unnecessary transatlantic concerns (Zandee et al., 2020). European leaders recognize that attempting to directly emulate NATO doctrines within a European framework would leave the EU a second-tier actor in global competition as it lacks the financial and industrial capacity to fill its capability gaps independently while NATO without U.S. support would be nothing than an empty shell underscoring the everlasting importance of EU-US cooperation. Europe must simply reject outdated assumptions that its defense role should be confined to soft power, while NATO alone holds the mantle of hard power (Zandee et al., 2020). To ensure an effective, resilient security posture, the EU must establish clear political decision-making pathways, reliable and flexible funding mechanisms, standardized operational frameworks, and institutionalized interfaces with NATO. These measures will enhance responsiveness and cohesion without undermining national sovereignty or NATO's command structures (Zandee et al., 2020). Equally crucial is rekindling a collective European sense of ownership over security. Decades of dependence on the United States have eroded Europe's capacity to reflect collectively on its geopolitical role and strategic priorities. Strengthening military capabilities must become a shared European objective, with ESA complementing and reinforcing NATO, rather than competing with it.

### European Security Council: Institutionalizing Strategic Oversight

Drawing on the foundations of European Strategic Autonomy, the EU must institutionalize decision-making and coordination at the highest political level. That is why we propose the establishment of a European Security Council as the next logical and concrete step in the evolution of European security governance. Far from being a “quick fix” or an additional bureaucratic layer, the ESC would consolidate strategic oversight, streamline operational coordination, and strengthen EU–NATO cooperation, reinforcing rather than challenging the Alliance (Zandee et al., 2020). By centralizing oversight, the ESC would enable Europe to treat military capabilities as a collective objective providing a unified forum to manage security-related issues, including readiness triggers, urgent industrial surge and interoperability standards. Such a council would align national output with broader EU ambitions ensuring the full spectrum

of defense capabilities is available when needed (Zandee et al., 2020). To complement long-term processes, the Council should include delegates from all EU members, the UK, the NATO Secretary General, and the President of the European Council, ensuring seamless coordination across legal frameworks, financing streams, and operational structures (Zandee et al., 2020). As a primary mandate, it should create fast political decision-making pathways, harnessing SAFE whilst institutionalizing EU–NATO operational synchronization by translating the Defense Readiness Roadmap 2030. In doing so, the ESC would preserve national sovereignty, enhance predictability and responsiveness, and reinforce the transatlantic bond critical to European security.

### Building a Capable Europe

A European Security Council would equip Europe with the comprehensive capacity to coordinate its resources effectively, overcoming operational and political silos, to prepare for and if necessary, respond to major crises. Today, Europe’s ability to act decisively is constrained by legal, institutional, and political fragmentation, which slows coordination and limits rapid response as demonstrated by recent Russian incursions over Polish territory, where the absence of U.S. support would severely compromise response capabilities (Buchanan Ponczek & Linnainmäki, 2025). By establishing a single body with the authority to monitor EU and NATO progress, enforce resilience metrics, and ensure synchronized action, Europe can emerge as a fully capable security guarantor (Zandee et al., 2020). Crucially, this does not replace NATO as EU-NATO cooperation remains indispensable to the continent’s security (European Commission & High Representative, 2025). However, Europe must be prepared and able to safeguard its own security interest. Security is the foundation upon which Europe’s values, economic competitiveness, and long-term prosperity rest. Loss of security threatens the very core of its societal stability and any future progress (Niinistö, 2024). The European Security Council would ensure that Europe not only withstands future crises but acts decisively and collectively, shifting from a state of reliance to one of resilience, and transforming European strategic autonomy from a concept to a reality while reinforcing the transatlantic bond.

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