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A European NATO:
Strategic Autonomy, Defence Union and the Future of Transatlantic Relations

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Summary

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and the return of Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025 have together produced the most consequential geopolitical jolt to European security since the end of the Cold War. The combination of a revisionist power at war on European soil and a transactional American administration openly questioning the unconditional nature of NATO's Article 5 has finally forced Europe to confront questions it has deferred for three decades: How much should Europeans rely on the United States for their own defence? What does it mean to build a 'European NATO'? And can the European Union develop credible autonomous defence structures without fracturing the transatlantic alliance?

This report aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of these questions. It defines the concept of a 'European NATO' — meaning the progressive Europeanisation of command, capability, and strategic decision-making within and alongside the Alliance — and distinguishes it from the more radical notion of replacing NATO with an EU defence organisation. It also probes the acute question of whether the EU needs its own independent command and control structure — and how far it has come toward that goal. Finally, it presents five differentiated policy scenarios with a comparative table.

The report's central findings are as follows: European strategic autonomy is achievable in limited, operational domains within a timeframe of five to ten years; full-spectrum collective defence without the United States remains a multi-decade project at best. The most viable near-term path is a strengthened European pillar within NATO — not decoupling from it. The EU has made genuine but insufficient progress on command structures; the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) requires significant expansion to serve as a credible autonomous headquarters. European defence spending has surged dramatically — reaching €864 billion in 2025 — but quantity does not automatically convert into usable military power without procurement consolidation, industrial integration, and political coherence. Above all, the report argues that Europe faces a structural, not cyclical, moment of strategic necessity.

Introduction: The New Strategic Context

Russia's Return to Imperial War

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine shattered three decades of post-Cold War assumptions about the European security order. The invasion was not merely a regional conflict: it was a direct assault on the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the rules-based international system that Europe's post-1945 order rested upon. For European NATO members, the invasion produced an immediate strategic shock. Defence spending, long stagnant across most of the Alliance, began to surge. Finland and Sweden abandoned their historic neutrality and joined NATO in 2023 and 2024 respectively, adding to the Alliance's northern flank. The NATO Strategic Concept adopted at the Madrid Summit in June 2022 named Russia as 'the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area' — the clearest formulation of the Russian threat in Alliance history.

Beyond the immediate military reality, Russia's war accelerated a broader reorientation of European strategic thinking. The invasion made tangible what analysts had argued for years: that European security could not be taken for granted, that the security dividend of the post-Cold War era had been spent, and that Europe would need to invest substantially in its own defence if it wished to maintain credible deterrence. The EU's Strategic Compass, adopted in March 2022 just weeks after the invasion began, represented the most significant strategic document in EU defence history, committing member states to developing a Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) of up to 5,000 troops, expanding the MPCC, and deepening cooperation through Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF).

The Return of Donald Trump and the Transatlantic Rupture

If Russia's invasion provided the external shock, the return of Donald Trump to the American presidency in January 2025 provided the internal one. Trump's second administration moved rapidly to signal a strategic reorientation toward the Indo-Pacific, openly questioning the unconditional nature of America's Article 5 commitment and demanding European allies spend up to 5% of GDP on defence. Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth stated bluntly in February 2025 that 'strategic realities prevent the US from taking primary responsibility for European conventional deterrence' — a formulation without precedent in NATO's history.[1]

The impact of this political earthquake on European capitals was immediate and profound. The Munich Security Conference of February 2025 was marked by open anxiety about American reliability. European leaders responded with a series of unprecedented commitments: the ReArm Europe plan, the Security

[1] Defence News, 'Hegseth to Europe: You Must Take Primary Responsibility for Your Own Conventional Defence,' 12 February 2025. The Financial Times similarly reported that Hegseth's statement 'represented the most explicit US disavowal of European conventional defence responsibility since NATO's founding.' See: Financial Times, 'Pentagon Chief Signals US Strategic Pivot Away from European Defence,' 13/2/2025.

Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument of €150 billion, activation of fiscal escape clauses for 15 EU member states, and the NATO Hague Summit of June 2025 establishing a binding 3.5% GDP defence spending target by 2035, plus 1,5% GDP for wider security-related expenditure. European defence spending — already on a sharp upward trajectory since 2022 — reached €864 billion in 2025, growing at 14% in a single year, the fastest rate of any region in the world, even as US defence spending declined by 7.5%.[2]

Yet spending increases, however dramatic, do not automatically translate into strategic capability. Europe still depends critically on the United States for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), strategic airlift, air-to-air refuelling, ballistic missile defence, space-based assets, and above all nuclear deterrence. Filling these gaps — the so-called 'strategic enablers' — is the central challenge of European strategic autonomy and the defining question of this report.

The U.S. Policy Position: Secretary Hegseth and Under Secretary Colby

The strategic reorientation demanded of European NATO allies has been articulated with exceptional clarity and directness by two key figures in the Trump administration's defence leadership: Secretary of War Pete Hegseth and Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby. Their statements at successive NATO ministerial meetings — Hegseth in Brussels in February 2025 and Colby in Brussels in February 2026 — represent the most explicit official U.S. articulation of a new transatlantic burden – shifting doctrine since the Alliance's founding. Taken together, they constitute a coherent and mutually reinforcing framework: Europe must assume primary responsibility for its own conventional defence, the era of American strategic subsidy is ending, and the Alliance's future credibility depends on European willingness to match that rhetorical commitment with real military investment and capability. Press coverage of both interventions confirmed that their impact on European capitals was immediate and profound.

Secretary Hegseth at the NATO Ministerial, Brussels (February 2025)

Secretary Hegseth's press conference following the February 2025 NATO Ministers of Defence Meeting in Brussels was the new administration's opening statement on transatlantic burden-sharing. Hegseth was blunt: European leaders must take primary responsibility for the defence of the continent. He called not just for the 2% GDP target long established by NATO, but for spending of approximately 5% of GDP — a figure he described as reflecting the genuine strategic requirements of the moment: "2 percent is a start, as President Trump has said, but it's not enough, nor is 3 percent, nor is 4 percent. More like 5 percent. Real investment. Real urgency."[3]

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[2] NATO Secretary General Annual Report 2025, NATO HQ Brussels, 26 March 2026; McKinsey & Company, 'NATO Defence Spending: Tracking the Numbers,' February 2026, which noted that European defence equities had delivered a 401% total shareholder return since 2022. The Guardian reported that 'the surge in European military budgets represents the most dramatic peacetime rearmament since the 1930s.' The Guardian, 'Europe's Defence Spending: Historic Turning Point or Too Little Too Late?' 28/3/2026.

[3] Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth, Press Conference Following NATO Ministers of Defence Meeting in Brussels, Belgium, 13/2/2025. U.S. Department of War Transcript. Available at: https://www.war.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/4066734/ [Accessed May 2026]. See also: U.S. Mission to NATO, 'Hegseth Tells NATO Hard Power Provides Deterrence, Defence,' available at: https://nato.usmission.gov/hegseth-tells-nato-

Hegseth grounded his demand in a frank assessment of strategic reality, invoking the limits of hard power and the lessons of recent history: "We can talk all we want about values. Values are important. But you can't shoot values. You can't shoot flags and you can't shoot strong speeches. There is no replacement for hard power." He was equally direct about the historical precedent, invoking President Eisenhower's warning that Europe risked making "a sucker out of Uncle Sam" and stating unequivocally: "President Trump will not allow anyone to turn Uncle Sam into Uncle Sucker." This invocation of Eisenhower was historically and rhetorically significant: it framed the current U.S. demand not as a Trumpian aberration but as a structural concern that has defined the burden-sharing debate since the Alliance's earliest years.[4]

On the question of European ownership, Hegseth was categorical: "Leaders of our European allies should take primary responsibility for defence of the continent, which means security ownership by all allies guided by a clear understanding of strategic realities." This formulation — primary responsibility resting with European allies, not shared between Europe and the United States — was without precedent in the public statements of a sitting U.S. Secretary of Defence. Hegseth also tied defence industrial reform directly to the burden-shifting imperative, warning that the war in Ukraine had exposed Europe's chronic underinvestment in production capacity, and demanding rapid expansion of the transatlantic defence industrial base on both sides of the Atlantic. He called on NATO to prioritise "reviving the transatlantic defence industrial base, rapidly fielding emerging technologies, prioritizing readiness and lethality, and establishing real deterrence."

On the question of U.S. troop presence in Europe and the geographical rebalancing of American strategic attention toward the Indo-Pacific, Hegseth offered a forthright explanation of comparative strategic logic: "It makes a lot of sense, just in a commonsense way, to use our comparative advantages. European countries spending here in defence of this continent, in defence of allies here against an aggressor on this continent with ambitions." He nonetheless denied that this represented abandonment: "We are committed to that NATO alliance. We understand the importance of that partnership, but it can't endure on the status quo forever in light of the threats we face and fiscal realities. Europe has to spend more. NATO has to spend more."[5]

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hard-power-provides-deterrence-defense/ PBS NewsHour reported live on the press conference: 'Hegseth denies U.S. is betraying Ukraine at meeting of NATO defence ministers,' 13/2/2025, available at: https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-live-hegseth-holds-news-conference-at-nato-defense-ministerial-meeting-in-brussels

[4] Hegseth, Press Conference, 13/2/2025, op. cit. The Eisenhower reference is drawn directly from Hegseth's prepared remarks. NPR reported on allied reactions: Schultz, T., 'Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth addresses NATO for the first time,' NPR, 13/2/2025, available at: https://www.npr.org/2025/02/13/nx-s1-5293160/defense-secretary-pete-hegseth-addresses-nato-for-the-first-time. The RFE/RL preview of the ministerial noted that Hegseth had previously described NATO as 'a defence arrangement for Europe, paid for and underwritten by the United States': Jozwiak, R., 'What To Expect From Pete Hegseth's First Meeting At NATO,' RFE/RL, 11/2/2025, available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/pete-hegseth-nato-defence-spending/33309792.html

[5] Hegseth, Press Conference, 13/2/2025, op. cit. On European reactions, PBS reported the EU's Kaja Kallas expressing concern that pre-negotiation concessions 'play to Russia's court'. French Defence Minister Sébastien Lecornu warned that 'the real question is will that still be the case in 10 or 15 years,' describing U.S. demands as 'a false debate.' See: PBS NewsHour, 13/2/2025, op. cit. The joint statement of Secretary General Rutte and Secretary Hegseth is available via U.S. Mission to NATO: 'Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth and Secretary General Mark Rutte Joint Statement at the NATO Defence Ministerial

Under Secretary Colby and the NATO 1.0 / 2.0 / 3.0 Framework (February 2026)

One year later, Under Secretary Colby's address to the NATO Defence Ministerial on 12 February 2026 provided the most intellectually systematic and historically grounded articulation of the U.S. burden-shifting doctrine to date. Where Hegseth had emphasised political will and financial commitment, Colby offered a conceptual framework for understanding the Alliance's trajectory through the categories of NATO 1.0, NATO 2.0, and NATO 3.0 — a framework that has since become a reference point in Alliance debates and academic commentary.[6]

NATO 1.0 refers, in Colby's framework, to the Cold War Alliance in its original and most demanding form: a hard-nosed, realistic, clear-eyed approach to deterrence and defence in which all allies were expected to carry their weight from the outset. Colby traced this ethos to Article III of the Washington Treaty and the Lisbon Commitments of 1951, noting that burden-sharing debates were a constant feature of the Cold War relationship — under Johnson, Nixon, Carter, and Reagan — and that President Eisenhower himself, "one of the men most responsible for Allied victory in the Second World War and the first SACEUR," was clear that NATO's success depended on allies stepping up to lead their own defence. Colby explicitly credited this demanding model with the Alliance's fundamental Cold War achievement: "It made sure that the USSR never saw military aggression against the Western Alliance as a viable strategy. It thus saw us through the Cold War with peace in Europe — an incredible achievement for which we must all be grateful."

NATO 2.0, in Colby's account, emerged with the collapse of the Soviet Union and dominated the post-Cold War era for approximately three decades. It was characterised by a shift away from Europe's defence toward "out of area" operations, "substantial disarmament on the continent," and a reorientation of the Alliance's conceptual framework "from the hard-nosed, flexible realism of the Cold War 'NATO 1.0' to much more of a liberal internationalist mindset of the 'rules-based international order.'" Colby's assessment of this phase was direct: "It is clear, however, that this approach of 'NATO 2.0' is no longer fit for purpose — certainly not for the United States and, we would submit, not for our allies either." Crucially, Colby argued that continuing to proclaim the commitments of NATO 2.0 without the capability to back them would not merely be inadequate but actively harmful: "Continuing to proclaim the shibboleths of 'NATO 2.0' without a credible strategy for how to meet them would not help Europe — it would hurt it, by perpetuating expectations that cannot realistically be met."

Meeting in Brussels, Belgium,' available at: https://nato.usmission.gov/secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-and-secretary-general-mark-rutte-joint-statement-at-the-nato-defense-ministerial-meeting-in-brussels-belgium/

[6] Under Secretary of Defence for Policy Elbridge Colby, 'Remarks at the NATO Defence Ministerial (As Prepared),' 12/2/2026. U.S. Department of War Speech. Available at: https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4404801/remarks-by-under-secretary-of-war-for-policy-elbridge-colby-at-the-nato-defense/ [Accessed May 2026]. The speech was also distributed by GlobalSecurity.org (https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2026/02/mil-260212-dod02.htm) and Public Technologies. The Small Wars Journal assessed the speech as 'one of the clearest official articulations to date on the strategic rebalancing within NATO,' noting that Colby argued 'Europe must assume primary responsibility for its own conventional defence': Small Wars Journal, 12/2/2026, available at: https://smallwarsjournal.com/2026/02/12/colby-nato-speech-rebalancing/

NATO 3.0, as Colby defined it, represents the necessary return to the logic of NATO 1.0 adapted to contemporary strategic realities: a model in which Europe assumes primary responsibility for the conventional defence of the European theatre, backed by American strategic power and nuclear deterrence, and in which the transatlantic relationship is defined not by European dependency on American resources but by "common strength and a shared grammar rooted in flexible realism." This vision is explicitly framed not as anti-European, but as an expression of confidence in Europe's capacity: "There is nothing anti-European about this vision. To the contrary, it reflects hope and indeed confidence in Europe's capacity to act substantially and vigorously." Colby acknowledged that signs of movement were already visible — increased spending across several allies, reformed procurement systems, a more demanding NATO defence planning process — but insisted that the pace must accelerate. He was categorical about what the Alliance's future should look like: "The promise of 2026 and the years beyond is this: a NATO in which Europe is the primary conventional defender of the European theatre, backed by American strategic power and global reach; an Alliance that is militarily credible, politically durable, and strategically realistic."[7]

The core strategic logic of Colby's speech was grounded in a clear-eyed analysis of what the United States can and cannot do simultaneously across multiple theatres. He argued that "a strategy that pretends the United States can indefinitely serve as the primary conventional defender of Europe while also carrying the decisive burden everywhere else is neither sustainable nor prudent. It is an aspiration divorced from resources." The prioritisation of the Indo-Pacific — where "only American power can play a decisive role" — was presented not as an abandonment of Europe but as the logical corollary of European allies' undeniable capability to field the forces required for their own conventional defence. On the U.S. commitment, Colby was explicit about what would remain: "We will continue to provide the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent. And we will also continue, in a more limited and focused fashion, to provide conventional capabilities that contribute to NATO's defence." Colby also stressed the imperative of moving beyond spending commitments to actual operational outputs: "For Europe, it means moving beyond inputs and intentions toward outputs and capabilities. Defence spending levels matter, and there is no substitute for it. But what matters at the end of the day is what those resources produce: ready forces, usable munitions, resilient logistics, and integrated command structures that work at scale under stress."

The reaction to both statements in European capitals and the press was significant. NPR reported that the Hegseth press conference left allies "confused and wondering what exactly lies in store" following U.S. signals that it had initiated Ukraine peace talks without European coordination. PBS noted that EU foreign

[7] Colby, Remarks at the NATO Defence Ministerial, 12/2/2026, op. cit. The NATO 1.0 / 2.0 / 3.0 framework was further elaborated by Colby in his subsequent appearance at the Munich Security Conference and in his address to the Council on Foreign Relations on 4/3/2026. At CFR, Colby confirmed: 'people are now bought into NATO 3.0, and similarly in the Indo-Pacific — the conversation I was having just before I came here with a major European ally is how do we think about syncing industrial production so that we can scale together.' See: Council on Foreign Relations, 'A Conversation with Elbridge Colby,' 4 /3/2026, available at: https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-elbridge-colby. At the Munich Security Conference, Colby was interviewed by Foreign Policy on Article 5, burden-sharing and the Indo-Pacific: Foreign Policy, 'Elbridge Colby: NATO Is Actually Stronger Than Ever,' 14/2/2026 [transcript dated 25/2/2026], available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/02/14/elbridge-colby-us-russia-nato-america-first/.

policy chief Kaja Kallas expressed surprise that the administration appeared to be listing concessions to Russia before negotiations had even formally begun. The Colby speech, described by the Small Wars Journal as "one of the clearest official articulations to date on the strategic rebalancing within NATO," was assessed by the SSRN working paper by Breitenbauch as creating a "structural dual-contingency planning requirement" for the Alliance, forcing NATO planners to test scenarios both with and without substantial U.S. conventional participation. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, for his part, explicitly welcomed Colby's presence at the ministerial, describing him as "a consistent force over the years for Europe and Canada to really step up, when it comes to defence spending, when it comes to defence industrial production."[8]

[8] NPR, 'Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth addresses NATO for the first time,' 13 February 2025, op. cit.; PBS NewsHour, 13/2/2025, op. cit.; Small Wars Journal, 12/2/2026, op. cit.; Breitenbauch, H., 'European contingency: NATO's defence plans after Colby,' SSRN Working Paper, 9/4/2026, available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=6587301; NATO Transcript, 'Remarks by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte and US Under Secretary of War, Elbridge A. Colby,' 12/2/2026, available at: https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2026/02/12/remarks-by-nato-secretary-general-mark-rutte-with-us-under-secretary-of-war

Defining 'European NATO': Concepts and Distinctions

What Is 'European NATO'?

The concept of a 'European NATO' is not a formal Alliance category but rather an analytical and political shorthand for a structural shift within the Alliance in which European allies progressively assume greater responsibility for strategic decision-making, military command, capability development, and industrial production. It refers to the Europeanisation of NATO — not its replacement or dissolution — and encompasses several interrelated dimensions:

- A stronger European pillar within NATO: European allies taking the lead in conventional deterrence on the continent, with the United States providing strategic enablers (nuclear deterrence, ISR, long-range precision strike) rather than serving as the primary conventional force.
- Redistribution of command roles: More European officers in key NATO command positions, including potentially the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), traditionally a US appointment since 1950.
- European-driven capability development: A shift away from dependence on US-manufactured systems toward domestically developed European platforms, driven by Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF), the European Defence Industry Program (EDIP) and the forthcoming programme for agile and rapid defence innovation (AGILE) for disruptive tech and SMEs.
- A European strategic culture: A shared European approach to risk assessment, threat identification, and willingness to use military force, which has historically been fragmented across member states.
- An EU defence dimension: Development of EU-specific instruments for crisis management, industrial policy, procurement coordination, and potentially collective territorial defence that operate in parallel to and complementary with NATO.

Crucially, 'European NATO' does not mean a European army, a European nuclear alliance, or a European security organisation that replaces NATO. As NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte warned the European Parliament in January 2026, anyone who believes Europe can defend itself without the United States in the near term is 'dreaming.'[9] The concept is better understood as a grand strategy of de-risking rather than decoupling — reducing European vulnerability to American volatility while preserving the fundamental transatlantic bond.

[9] According to a report on Greek website Capital.gr, entitled 'Plans for a more European NATO' 15 April 2026, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte mentioned that these discussions concern not only technical issues but also deeper strategic disagreements. Additionally, the Greek newspaper 'To Vima tis Kyriakis' said that the Trump administration could be Europe's chance, 'To Vima, 4 May 2025.

Key Terminological Distinctions

Key Concepts in European Security and Defence

European Strategic Autonomy (ESA): The EU's capacity to assess, decide, and act militarily without requiring permission from a third party. It exists on a spectrum from limited operational autonomy (crisis management) to full-spectrum collective defence.

European Pillar of NATO: A strengthened bloc of European NATO members which collectively carry primary responsibility for conventional deterrence in Europe, while the Alliance's integrated command structure, including Article 5, remains intact.

Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP): The EU's institutional framework for crisis management, peacekeeping, and security sector reform operations outside EU territory, established under the Treaty of Lisbon. This is something different from collective territorial defence.

European Defence Union (EDU): An aspirational concept — not yet achieved — for deep EU defence integration including common capability development, shared procurement, European-owned command structures, and potentially a mutual defence guarantee rooted in the EU Treaty (Article 42.7).

Strategic Enablers: Critical military capabilities — intelligence, reconnaissance, strategic airlift, ballistic missile defence, nuclear deterrence — currently dominated by the United States and representing Europe's most acute gap.

Berlin Plus Arrangements (2003): The formal framework under which the EU can access NATO planning assets and capabilities for EU-led operations.

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The Role of European Allies: Within and Alongside the Alliance

Inside NATO: Rebalancing Command and Burden-Sharing

The most immediate and practically achievable dimension of European NATO concerns the redistribution of roles and responsibilities within the existing Alliance structure. This involves three interconnected areas: spending and capability, command positions, and strategic planning.

Defence Spending and Investment

The original NATO target of 2% of GDP on defence, agreed at the Wales Summit in 2014, was long met by only a handful of allies. By 2025, the landscape had transformed dramatically. The NATO Hague Summit of June 2025 adopted a new binding commitment of 3.5% of GDP on core defence by 2035, with an additional 1.5% for defence-related expenditure including infrastructure, cyber, and resilience — an effective target of 5% of GDP, matching the Trump administration's longstanding demand**.** Poland has led the way, committing 4.7% of GDP in 2025, while Estonia and the Baltic states have exceeded 3%. However, Spain expressed its disagreement and received an opt-out from this arrangement. Germany overhauled its constitutional 'debt brake' to fund a massive multi-year rearmament programme. EU-27 defence expenditure reached €343 billion in 2024 — a 57% increase from €218 billion in 2021 — and is projected to rise further. However, increased spending alone is insufficient. Europe's defence industry, with an annual turnover of approximately €183 billion and some 600,000 jobs, remains smaller and less efficient than its American counterpart. Three decades of underinvestment have created structural weaknesses: outdated production lines, limited surge capacity, fragmented procurement across 27 national markets, and heavy reliance on US-manufactured platforms. US Foreign Military Sales represented 51% of European NATO countries' equipment spending between 2022 and 2024, up from 28% in the previous three-year period.[10] Correcting these structural imbalances — through EDIP, SAFE, and a consolidated European defence industrial market — is a prerequisite for genuine strategic autonomy.

Command and Leadership

The question of command distribution within NATO is politically sensitive but strategically central. The tradition of a US SACEUR — maintained since General Dwight Eisenhower in 1950 — reflects the Alliance's historical dependence on American military primacy. If Europeans are to assume greater strategic responsibility, a fundamental debate about the structure of NATO's command architecture becomes inevitable. Several proposals have been advanced: an empowered ‘European’ Deputy SACEUR who assumes operational command of the European theatre while the US retains strategic command; rotating

[10] European Parliament Think Tank, 'European Defence Industry,' 9/2/2026. Defence News reported that the shift toward European-manufactured systems remained slow, with EU ammunition production rising from 300,000 rounds per year in 2022 to an estimated 2 million by end-2025 — a pace described by the Financial Times as 'exceeding peacetime growth rates by a factor of three.' Defence News, 'Can Europe's Defence Industry Close the Gap?' 7/5/2026.

the SACEUR between US and European officers; or creating a European Operational Command within NATO's existing structure.

Any significant change to NATO's command architecture would require consensus among all 32 members and would face strong resistance from those — particularly in Eastern Europe — who believe US leadership of NATO commands is essential to the credibility of Article 5. Nevertheless, the question of Europeanising NATO's command positions is certain to gain political momentum as European spending rises, and the expectation of a genuine European contribution grows.

Alongside NATO: The EU's Parallel Role

Crisis Management and the CSDP

The EU's distinctive contribution to European security lies not in territorial collective defence — which remains NATO's exclusive domain — but in the broader spectrum of crisis management, security sector reform, stabilisation, and hybrid threat response. The CSDP has deployed over 40 military and civilian missions since 2003, operating in the Balkans, Africa, the Middle East, and the Eastern neighbourhood. These missions represent a unique EU capability: the ability to combine military crisis management with rule of law programmes, border assistance, training, and development instruments in a single integrated response.

Since February 2022, the EU member-states have also assumed an unprecedented role in supporting Ukraine — not through direct military intervention under NATO's Article 5 framework, but through the European Peace Facility (EPF), providing over €11 billion in military assistance to Ukrainian forces, and the EU Military Assistance Mission Ukraine (EUMAM UA) training Ukrainian soldiers on EU territory.

Defence Industrial Policy

A genuinely new EU role has emerged in defence industrial policy. The European Defence Fund (EDF), endowed with €7.95 billion for 2021–2027, has co-funded collaborative research and capability development across member states. The European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS, 2024) and the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP, 2025) go further: they establish binding targets for intra-European procurement (50% of procurement within the EU by 2030; 35% collaboratively). Additionally, the SAFE instrument was created, — a €150 billion loan programme to fund joint European defence investment. The ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 framework may mobilise up to €800 billion through a combination of these instruments, fiscal flexibility, and member state spending increases.

Hybrid Threats, Cyber, and Space

The EU has developed strength in domains that do not fall neatly within NATO's traditional hard-power focus: cyber security, hybrid threat response, resilience and civil preparedness, election security, and space. The EU Cyber Solidarity Act, the European Cyber Resilience Act, and the Space Strategy for Security

and Defence represent areas where EU regulatory and financial instruments can complement NATO's operational focus. The Niinistö Report (2024) on EU-wide civil preparedness pointed to the need for a 'whole of society' approach to resilience that goes beyond what NATO alone can deliver.

European Efforts for Autonomous Security Since 1991

The Post-Cold War Illusion of a Peace Dividend

The end of the Cold War in 1991 produced a broad assumption across European capitals that the era of great power conflict was over and that defence spending could be safely reduced in pursuit of a 'peace dividend.' Between 1991 and 2014, European NATO members consistently cut their armed forces, reduced defence budgets, and downsized military industrial capacity. Germany's armed forces shrank from 333,000 in 1998 to approximately 185,000 by 2014. France, the UK, Italy, and Spain all followed similar trajectories.[11] By 2014, only four of NATO's then-28 European members met the 2% GDP spending target, and the Alliance's European military capacity had been substantially hollowed out.
This strategic holiday was periodically interrupted by sobering operational experiences. The Yugoslav wars demonstrated European military dependence on the United States. The 2003 Iraq War exposed deep transatlantic divisions over the use of force. The 2011 Libyan intervention — in which the US, after initially leading, deliberately 'led from behind,' exposing European allies' lack of precision munitions, ISR, and aerial refuelling — laid bare the capability gaps in stark operational terms. Yet none of these shocks produced sustained European rearmament or institutional reform.

PESCO: Promise and Underperformance

The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), launched in December 2017 following the Brexit vote and Trump's first term, represented the most ambitious attempt at institutionalised EU defence cooperation. With 26 participating member states and more than 70 collaborative projects across land, air, maritime, cyber, and space domains, PESCO has created a new framework for binding commitments on capability development, spending, and interoperability. However, implementation has been hampered by inadequate financial planning, divergent national priorities, the fundamental reluctance of member states to genuinely pool sovereignty in defence, and limited political ownership at the highest levels.[12]

The Helsinki Headline Goal and Battle Groups: Repeated Disappointments

Europe's track record on rapid reaction force development is one of persistent ambition and disappointing delivery. The Helsinki Headline Goal (1999) — 60,000 troops deployable within 60 days — was never achieved. The EU Battlegroup concept (2004) created two standby battlegroups of approximately 1,500 troops each on a rotating basis; despite decades of maintenance, no EU Battlegroup has ever been

[11] For the relevant data, see NATO's factsheets on defence expenditures of its member-states for the years 1998 and 2014.
[12] For more details on PESCO, see below in paragraph 6.2.

deployed operationally [13], a fact that starkly illustrates the political constraints on EU military action. The 2007 Lisbon Treaty's introduction of a mutual defence clause (Article 42.7 TEU) remained largely symbolic; when France invoked it after the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, the response was bilateral rather than genuinely collective.

The EU Strategic Compass of 2022 attempted to correct this pattern by establishing a Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) of up to 5,000 troops and strategic enablers, such as strategic airlift, ISR capabilities and space-based communications — significantly larger than the battlegroup concept — and by assigning the MPCC as its preferred headquarters. The RDC achieved initial operational capability in 2025, though its actual deployment readiness and the political will to activate it remain untested.

The French Tradition of Strategic Autonomy

France has been the most consistent advocate of European strategic autonomy; a position rooted in Gaullist strategic culture and France's unique status as the only European nuclear power within NATO's integrated command. France rejoined NATO's integrated military command structure in 2009 after a 43-year absence but has simultaneously insisted on the EU's right and duty to develop independent military capacity. President Macron has been the most vocal European proponent of a genuine European defence identity, famously declaring NATO 'brain dead' in 2019 and calling for a 'European Sovereign' capable of acting autonomously in its strategic neighbourhood.[14]

Macron's April 2024 Sorbonne speech called for a 'European Defence Initiative,' including a rapid reaction force, European air defence, and a European long-range strike capability. His 2025 proposals regarding the extension of France's nuclear deterrence to European partners[15] — discussed with Germany, Poland, and other allies — represented perhaps the most dramatic development in European nuclear doctrine since the Cold War, though the practical implications and French political willingness to genuinely multilateralise the deterrent remains deeply uncertain.

The EU and Strategic Autonomy

Conceptual Clarification

The concept of 'European Strategic Autonomy' (ESA) has been simultaneously one of the most debated and least precisely defined concepts in European security discourse. Its meaning has evolved continuously since it gained currency in the EU Global Strategy of 2016 — from an initial focus on defence to encompass economic sovereignty, technological independence, supply chain resilience, cyber capacity, and space

[13] For more details on this specific issue, see Spyros Blavoukos and Panos Politis Lamprou," The 'Magnificent Seven' of European Defence Integration", ELIAMEP Policy Paper 73, June 2021.
[14] On Macron's comments, see Le Monde, 'Macron et l'autonomie stratégique européenne: du discours aux actes,' 26/4/2024.
[15] On Macron's speech concerning the extension of France's nuclear deterrence, see https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2026/03/02/visit-to-the-ile-longue-operational-base

capabilities. Some scholars and policymakers prefer the term 'strategic sovereignty,' others 'capacity to act,' arguing that 'autonomy' unnecessarily implies confrontation with the United States.

For the purposes of this report, European strategic autonomy in the defence domain is understood as the EU's and its member states' collective capacity to assess threats, make strategic decisions, and conduct military operations at a meaningful scale without requiring prior authorisation or enabling support from a third party — particularly the United States — when vital European interests are at stake. This is explicitly understood as a spectrum, not a binary. At one end lies operational autonomy for limited crisis management missions (evacuations, peace enforcement, maritime security) — achievable in the near term. At the other lies full-spectrum collective defence against a major military power — a multi-decade project involving massive capability investment and political integration far beyond what is currently envisaged.

American Perceptions: From the '3 Ds' to the Trump Paradox

American attitudes toward European strategic autonomy have oscillated between cautious support and active suspicion over the past three decades. The Clinton administration's Secretary of State Madeleine Albright famously set out the '3 Ds' framework in 1998 — European defence should not Decouple from the Alliance, not Duplicate existing NATO capabilities, and not Discriminate against non-EU NATO members. This framework effectively constrained European ambitions for a generation, as any EU defence initiative could be criticised on one or more of these grounds.

The Trump paradox is historically notable: an American administration whose unilateralism and transactionalism have done more than any previous administration to convince Europeans that they must develop autonomous capacity is simultaneously one of the most assertive in demanding that Europe shoulder its own defence burden. This paradox resolves itself only if one accepts that Trump's objective is not to weaken European defence but to make it financially and operationally less dependent on American resources — which is precisely what strategic autonomy advocates have argued for. The danger lies in the mismatch of timescales: Trump demands rapid burden-shifting that Europeans cannot responsibly achieve without years of capability development.

The Strategic Compass and Readiness 2030

The EU Strategic Compass, adopted in March 2022, was the most ambitious European strategic document since Saint-Malo (1998). It identified four operational priorities: acting (crisis management), securing (protecting EU and its partners), investing (building capabilities), and partnering (deepening cooperation). On capability development, it committed EU member states to PESCO fulfilment by 2025, MPCC expansion, the Rapid Deployment Capacity, enhanced cyber posture, and joint exercises. On the EU-NATO relationship, it affirmed complementarity while asserting the EU's right to autonomous action.

The March 2025 White Paper for European Defence — Readiness 2030 built further on this foundation[16], presenting the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 framework with its Security Action for Europe (SAFE) pillar — a €150 billion EU-backed loan instrument for joint defence procurement — alongside the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) with €1.5 billion allocated for 2026–2027 and European Defence Projects of Common Interests (EDPCIs). The combined financial mobilisation of up to €800 billion through SAFE and the activation of the national escape clause to allow increased defence spending by member-states represents an unprecedented EU commitment to defence investment, though the conversion of financial commitments into actual deployable military capability remains the central challenge.

The EU Defence Union: Progress and Gaps

The Vision of a European Defence Union

The concept of a European Defence Union (EDU) was first given prominent articulation by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who called in 2016 for a 'fully-fledged European Defence Union by 2025.' Juncker's vision envisaged the progressive convergence of European defence capabilities, industrial bases, and ultimately command structures into a genuinely unified defence entity — supplementary to NATO but institutionally distinct from it, rooted in EU treaty law, and accountable to EU democratic institutions.

By 2026, this vision has not been achieved. The EU has made significant progress in specific domains — capability development frameworks (EDF, PESCO, CARD), defence industrial policy (EDIS, EDIP, SAFE), operational coordination (MPCC), and cyber/space — but a European Defence Union in the full sense remains aspirational. The fundamental obstacles are political: member states remain deeply reluctant to pool sovereignty over defence, the most jealously guarded domain of national prerogative; NATO's integrated command structure provides a ready alternative; and the heterogeneity of European strategic cultures — ranging from the Gaullist tradition of French strategic independence to the Atlanticist orthodoxy of Poland and the Baltic states — makes genuine political convergence enormously difficult.

PESCO: The Engine of Defence Cooperation

PESCO, launched in December 2017 under Articles 42.6 and 46 of the Treaty on European Union and the Protocol No. 10, involves 26 participating member states (all except Malta) in more than 70 collaborative

[16] European Commission, White Paper on European Defense — Looking Ahead to 2030, March 2025. The French newspaper 'Les Échos' reported that the White Paper "reflects an ambition unprecedented in the history of EU defense policy, while leaving questions of political will entirely unresolved." Les Échos, "European Defense: The White Paper—A Founding Document or Wishful Thinking?" 20/3/2025. See also: Touteleurope.eu, "Defense: How the EU and NATO Are Working Together for European Security," 20/9/2025.

projects spanning all operational domains. Participating states undertake binding commitments on spending increases, collaborative procurement (35% target), PESCO project participation, and interoperability. PESCO has demonstrated genuine utility as a political forum for harmonising requirements and launching joint development programmes. Notable projects include the Eurodrone (MALE RPAS), the Cyber Ranges, the European Medical Command, the Multinational CBRN Battalion, the Military Mobility infrastructure programme, frequently mentioned as a "model PESCO project" as it fosters EU-NATO cooperation in a field of mutual interest[17] and TWISTER (space-based ballistic missile detection).

However, implementation has lagged seriously behind ambition. The second PESCO Strategic Review (2024) confirmed that commitments need to be made more measurable, that the link to EDF funding needs to be formalised, and that the operational dimension — PESCO forces actually deploying together — remains underdeveloped. Political ownership at the ministerial and head of government level has been insufficient, with PESCO largely relegated to defence ministry technocratic processes. As of 2025, a small number of the ongoing projects have been completed, and many of the most strategically significant projects remain in development phases. However, it should not be underestimated that the majority of the ongoing PESCO projects have seen progress.

The EDF and EDIP

The European Defence Fund (EDF, 2021–2027) with its €7.95 billion budget represents a historic breakthrough: the first time EU common funds have been used to co-finance collaborative defence research and capability development. EDF projects are selected based on collaborative criteria — they must involve, in principle, at least three entities from at least three member states and/or associated countries — creating financial incentives for the kind of cross-border cooperation that EU defence has historically lacked.

The European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), approved in December 2025 with a €1.5 billion work programme for 2026–2027, goes further: it funds not just research but actual production ramp-up, ammunition stockpiling, and common procurement. EDIP also includes the Ukraine Support Instrument (€300 million), reflecting the EU's commitment to sustaining Kyiv's defence capacity. Together with SAFE, these instruments aim to stimulate a consolidated European defence industrial market that can support the surge in defence spending with European-manufactured products rather than continuing the trend of large-scale US arms purchases.

The European Commission is also planning a massive boost in defence spending in the upcoming 7-year Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). According to the initial Commission's proposal, 131 billion euros ar scheduled to be allocated for defence purposes under the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) - a significant increase compared to the current MFF aiming to to end years of underinvestment by the EU.

[17] For more information on the PESCO Military Mobility project, see https://www.pesco.europa.eu/project/military-mobility/

Capability Gaps: The Strategic Enablers Problem

Despite this institutional and financial progress, Europe's fundamental capability gap lies not in infantry or armoured vehicles but in the strategic enablers that multiply the effectiveness of all other forces. These include: intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) systems including persistent airborne surveillance and space-based imagery; strategic airlift and aerial refuelling capabilities that allow European forces to deploy rapidly at scale; ballistic missile defence, where Europe depends on US PATRIOT and THAAD systems for upper-tier intercepts; advanced command, control, communications and intelligence (C3I) integration, which at its highest classification levels depends on US systems and architecture; and nuclear deterrence, where Europe relies entirely on the American extended deterrent except for France's independently commanded force de frappe.

Closing these gaps would require sustained investment over decades, deep political agreement on sharing sensitive capabilities across national boundaries, and willingness to accept significant US supply chain risk while European alternatives are developed. The European Union Institute for Strategic Studies (EUISS) assessment of June 2025 warned that even with the Trump administration's anticipated European Command (EUCOM) force reductions, European allies could not absorb the loss of US strategic enablers in the near term without significant degradation of the Alliance's deterrence posture.

Command and Control: Should the EU Develop Independent C2?

The Case for EU Command Structures

The question of whether the EU should develop its own independent command and control (C2) architecture is among the most practically significant — and politically contentious — in the European security debate. The argument for an autonomous EU C2 rests on three pillars.

First, operational necessity: if the EU is to conduct crisis management operations — including potentially more demanding executive operations involving combat elements — it cannot rely indefinitely on ad hoc national headquarters offered by willing member states, nor on Berlin Plus access to NATO's SHAPE (which is unavailable for EU operations where NATO as a whole is engaged or where political conditions prevent Alliance consensus). The EU needs a permanent, capable, and exercised planning and command structure.

Second, strategic credibility: a credible European security actor cannot depend on another organisation's command infrastructure. If European strategic autonomy means anything operationally, it must include the capacity to plan, direct, and terminate military operations through European-controlled channels.

Third, industrial and technological sovereignty: command and control systems are not merely operational tools — they are expressions of technological sovereignty. Dependence on US command architecture entails dependence on US communication protocols, encryption standards, satellite systems, and intelligence assessments. Building European C2 systems — from battlefield networks to the strategic level — is integral to genuine strategic autonomy.

The Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC)

The Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), established by the EU Council on 8 June 2017, is the EU's first and so far, only permanent military strategic headquarters. Located in Brussels and integrated within the EU Military Staff (EUMS), the MPCC initially assumed command of the three EU non-executive training missions in Somalia, Mali, and the Central African Republic. Its scope was expanded in November 2018 to include executive missions (operations with combat elements), and it subsequently assumed command of the EU Military Assistance Mission Ukraine (EUMAM UA).

The EU Strategic Compass designated the MPCC as the preferred military strategic-level C2 structure for the new Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) and for EU live exercises by 2025. The MPCC achieved a significant milestone in 2024's MILEX 24 exercise[18], successfully acting as the Operation HQ (OHQ), while Eurocorps functioned as the Force Headquarters (FHQ). As of 2025, the MPCC has reached its declared full operational capability (FOC), with the capacity to plan and conduct two small-scale or one medium-scale executive operation simultaneously, plus non-executive missions and live exercises.

The MPCC Director is double-hatted as the Director General of the EU Military Staff — a pragmatic arrangement that creates unity of direction but limits institutional depth. The MPCC has a maximum of approximately 200 personnel in its expanded configuration, compared to the thousands of staff at SHAPE. It relies partly on the Multinational Joint Headquarters Ulm (Germany) for planning support in exercises. Despite these constraints, the MPCC represents a genuine institutional achievement — the EU has, for the first time, a permanent command authority that can direct military operations through European political channels.

The Limits of the MPCC

The MPCC's limitations reflect deeper structural realities. It lacks the depth of staff expertise and the volume of personnel to plan and conduct large-scale operations — particularly high-intensity combat operations against a peer adversary. It has no dedicated communications infrastructure and depends on member state contributions for exercise support. It is not structured to provide the full range of NATO's planning functions: detailed contingency planning, force generation processes, logistics coordination, and the classified intelligence architecture that underpins NATO's operational planning. The MPCC is a crisis management headquarters, not a collective defence command. For NATO-level territorial defence, the EU would need fundamentally different — and far more extensive — command structures.

[18] The Greek edition of Euronews mentioned that in the defence exhibition DEFEA 2026 in Athens it was clearly noted that the efficiency of the European defence efforts depends on EU - NATO coordination," How can we speed up European defence?'. Euronews Greece, 7 May 2026.

The Debate on a Full European Operational HQ

An emerging debate concerns whether the MPCC should be expanded into a full European Operational Headquarters — an EU equivalent of SHAPE — capable of planning and commanding operations across the full spectrum of military tasks, including territorial defence. Advocates argue that such a headquarters is the logical endpoint of the European Defence Union and a prerequisite for genuine strategic autonomy. They point to the progressive development of the MPCC, the Eurocorps (a multinational corps headquarters available to both NATO and the EU), and the emerging EU RDC as building blocks that could be consolidated into a permanent European command structure.

Sceptics counter that a full EU operational headquarters would be ruinously expensive, would duplicate NATO's existing command structure, would require a level of political integration — including agreement on command authority, rules of engagement, and strategic direction — that EU member states have consistently refused to contemplate, and would undermine NATO cohesion by creating a parallel command system. NATO Secretary General Rutte's January 2026 warning against European defence structures that would replicate or substitute for American-provided capabilities is relevant here: building a European SHAPE-equivalent would be a multi-decade and multi-trillion-euro undertaking.

The most practical near-term pathway lies between these poles: a significantly expanded MPCC with greater staff depth, dedicated intelligence capabilities, permanent communications infrastructure, and the capacity to plan not only crisis management but also the higher end of the operational spectrum — without attempting to replicate NATO's collective defence planning functions. This expanded MPCC should have a direct link to the EU Political and Security Committee and should exercise regularly with EU member state forces, Eurocorps, and national operational headquarters.

Command Structures in the Nuclear Domain

The nuclear dimension of EU command is the most sensitive and least developed aspect of European strategic autonomy. France's 'force de frappe' remains strictly under national command — the French President alone holds the decision to use nuclear weapons, and France has historically refused to place its deterrent under any collective authority. The Franco-British nuclear relationship, codified in the 2010 Lancaster House Treaties, provides a bilateral framework for some cooperation in nuclear capabilities, but without a political commitment to extend deterrence.

Macron's 2025 proposals to open a structured dialogue on France's nuclear deterrence in the European context — potentially extending some form of French deterrence guarantee to EU partners — represent an unprecedented development. The practical modalities remain deeply unclear: France cannot credibly extend a nuclear guarantee without establishing some form of joint consultation and crisis management procedure, but any such procedure would begin to multilateralise a deterrent that French strategic culture has always insisted must remain sovereign. The debate is beginning, however, and it will inevitably involve questions of C2 — specifically, what consultation procedures, warning systems, and potentially delivery systems a European nuclear dimension would require.

Policy Scenarios: Five Pathways for European NATO

The following five scenarios represent analytically distinct pathways for the development of European NATO. They are not mutually exclusive — elements of several may co-exist — and they are presented in roughly ascending order of institutional ambition and political difficulty.

Scenario	Label	Key Features	Risks & Challenges	Feasibility
1	Reinforced European Pillar Within NATO	Europeans assume primary role in conventional deterrence; US retains nuclear umbrella and strategic enablers; EU defence spending reaches 3.5% GDP; command and planning roles redistributed within NATO structures toward European officers	Risk of weakening transatlantic bond if perceived as internal fragmentation; US may reduce commitments faster than Europeans can fill gap; requires unprecedented coordination among 32 allies	HIGH Near-term (2025-2030)
2	EU Defence Union (Complementary to NATO)	Full activation of PESCO, EDF, EDIP; MPCC upgraded to full operational headquarters; European Defence Union progressively institutionalised; EU acquires autonomous planning for crisis management; SAFE/ReArm deployed strategically	Possible institutional duplication with NATO; sovereignty concerns from member states; non-EU NATO members (UK, Turkey) excluded from EU structures	MEDIUM Medium-term (2027-2032)
3	Nuclear Strategic Dimension	France extends nuclear deterrence framework to EU	France's strategic culture resists multilateralisation of	LOW-MEDIUM

Scenario	Label	Key Features	Risks & Challenges	Feasibility
		partners; structured dialogue on nuclear burden-sharing; possible revision of Franco-British nuclear cooperation post-Brexit; European deterrence dialogue formalized at EU/NATO level	its deterrent; UK outside EU creates complications; US may object to reducing reliance on extended deterrence; legal and political hurdles immense	Long-term (2030+)
4	Differentiated Defence Integration / European Security Council (proposed by Commissioner of Defence and Space Andrius Kubilius as an intergovernmental structure)	Core group of willing and capable states (France, Germany, Poland, Nordics, Baltics) forge vanguard defence arrangement within EU/PESCO framework; others join progressively; functional sovereignty pooling in specific domains	Risk of two-tier Europe; smaller states may feel excluded from key decisions; institutional complexity; difficult to maintain political cohesion across a differentiated structure	MEDIUM-HIGH Medium-term (2026-2031)
5	Transatlantic Grand Bargain	Formal new burden-sharing compact between US and European NATO; Europeans commit to 3.5% GDP; US commits to maintaining Article 5; joint procurement frameworks; EU-NATO institutional reform to formalise European pillar with treaty basis	Dependent on US political will; Congressional approval required; Trump administration's transactionalism makes binding commitments uncertain; requires sustained diplomatic effort over multiple election cycles	MEDIUM Medium-term (2026-2030)

Analysis of Scenario Feasibility

Scenario 1 — the Reinforced European Pillar — represents the path of least institutional resistance and greatest near-term feasibility. It requires no new EU treaties, no new organisations, and no fundamental change to NATO's command structure. It relies on increased spending, capability development, and political agreement among European allies to take primary responsibility for conventional deterrence. Its principal risk is that Europe cannot fill the gap quickly enough if the United States reduces commitments before European capacity is ready.

Scenario 2 — the EU Defence Union — is more institutionally ambitious and requires sustained political will across 27 member states over multiple election cycles. PESCO must be fundamentally strengthened, the MPCC significantly expanded, and the EU's common defence provisions under Article 42 TEU meaningfully activated. This scenario is achievable over a 5–10 year horizon but requires breaking the political log-jam that has prevented genuine sovereignty pooling in defence.

Scenario 3 — the Nuclear Dimension — is the most uncertain and the longest-horizon scenario. It depends entirely on France's political decisions about its deterrent, which remain sovereign prerogatives. The Macron initiative of 2025 has opened the debate, but translation from rhetorical opening to operational arrangements would require years of classified negotiation and potentially treaty revision.

Scenario 4 — Differentiated Integration — may be the most politically realistic pathway for genuine capability development. A smaller group of capable states with aligned strategic cultures — France, Germany, Poland, the Nordics, and potentially the Baltics — can move faster in building shared command, procurement, and operational structures than all 27 EU members acting collectively. The risk is further fragmentation of European solidarity.

Scenario 5 — the Transatlantic Grand Bargain — represents the most favourable outcome for long-term Alliance stability but depends on variables beyond European control, primarily the US political cycle and Congressional disposition. It is the scenario that European diplomacy should work toward while building autonomous capacity as insurance.

Policy Recommendations

For European Governments

- Convert defence spending into deployable power: Create a dedicated European Defence Procurement Cell within EDA to channel increased national budgets toward jointly agreed capability priorities and avoid uncoordinated national purchases that perpetuate fragmentation.
- Enhance and deepen PESCO: Reform PESCO's governance to provide political-level ownership, establish a formal link to the EDF and EDIP, and focus on 10 to 15 high-priority flagship projects with clear delivery milestones and financial commitments.

- Invest in European strategic enablers: Prioritise collaborative development of ISR, aerial refuelling, precision strike, and cyber capabilities through EDF-funded programmes. Accelerate the Eurodrone, TWISTER space-based missile detection, and European communication satellite programmes.
- Preserve the transatlantic link: Pursue European capability development explicitly as a contribution to NATO burden-sharing, not as an alternative to it. Engage Washington as partners in the transition, offering concrete burden-sharing compacts that formalise European commitments.
- Develop a European nuclear dialogue: Support President Macron's invitation for a structured European nuclear discussion and develop a common European position on extended deterrence, consultation mechanisms, and burden-sharing in the nuclear domain.

For the EU Institutions

- Expand the MPCC significantly: Double the MPCC's planning staff, develop dedicated intelligence assessment capabilities, establish permanent communication infrastructure, and exercise the MPCC regularly in scenarios beyond crisis management — including resilience and civil-military support to allies.
- Implement SAFE strategically: Ensure the €150 billion SAFE instrument is deployed primarily to fund European-manufactured capabilities, with criteria that give priority to projects that fill identified strategic enablers' gaps and strengthen PESCO's operational dimension.
- Develop a European defence industrial market: Accelerate the implementation of EDIS targets (50% EU procurement by 2030), reduce national industrial protectionism, and create regulatory frameworks that enable cross-border mergers in the European defence industry.
- Resolve the NATO-EU institutional deadlock: Work diplomatically to address the Turkey-Cyprus participation issue by ensuring that the Republic of Cyprus can fully exercise its legitimate right as an EU member-state.

For NATO

- Reform the Defence Planning Process: Update NATO's defence planning methodology to account for variable US force availability, enabling the Alliance to plan contingencies in which European forces must carry primary operational responsibility with US support in strategic enabler domains only.
- Europeanise key command positions: Begin a structured discussion on rotating the SACEUR between US and European officers over an agreed multi-year timeline, while possibly offering more operational authority to DSCACEUR.
- Formalise the European pillar: Develop a formal European Pillar within NATO's institutional structure — not a new organisation but a recognised bloc of European allies with coordinated positions, shared planning processes, and common capability targets. However, a serious and in-depth discussion should take place on the possible inclusion of non-EU member-states such as the United Kingdom in such a format.

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