

BLOG — POST

European rearmament: the urgent need for a 'hybrid defence strategy'

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Nicole Gnesotto,
Vice-President of the Jacques Delors
Institute



Global military spending continues to rise: by 2025, it had reached \$2.9 trillion, equivalent to 2.5 per cent of global GDP, a level not seen for seventeen years. In 2026, the conflict in Iran and the ongoing war in Ukraine will inevitably push these figures to new heights.

For once, it is Europe that is seeing the largest increase. After decades of strategic complacency, Europeans have indeed been brought back to the brutal reality of the balance of power. Driven both by Russia's war against Ukraine (and perhaps beyond) and by American unpredictability, or even betrayal, a sort of European military awakening began in 2022.

The figures published on the Council of the European Union's website are particularly telling: defence spending by EU countries in 2026 has increased by 8.6 per cent compared with the previous year and by 75.3 per cent compared with 2021. It is expected to reach €454 billion in 2026, representing an average of 2.4 per cent of EU GDP. Defence manufacturers are the first to benefit: their turnover increased by 48 per cent between 2021 and 2024.

According to another equally reliable source, SIPRI, the rate of increase in NATO defence spending has not been this high since 1953. Other countries are not far behind: Russia spends 5.9 per cent of its GDP on defence (\$190 billion), while Ukraine spends 40 per cent (\$84 billion). The United States spent \$954 billion in 2025 and plans to spend \$1 trillion in 2026, equivalent to 3.2 per cent of GDP.

As far as Europe is concerned, why are all these figures both reassuring and unsatisfactory? The reassurance stems from the collective realisation among European countries of their new vulnerability: continuing to support Ukraine (€220 billion has already been allocated to the country's defence since the start of the war) and significantly strengthening defence capabilities are the two priority areas on which there is now a consensus. All countries have reached the 2 per cent of GDP target, including Germany, which now stands at 2.3 per cent, with €114 billion earmarked for defence in 2025. Poland leads the way, allocating 4.7 per cent of its GDP to defence.

The concern stems primarily from the coherence – or rather the lack of coherence – of these efforts. Admittedly, it is necessary to counter the most pressing Russian threat and equip the armed forces with robust capabilities. However, the continued purchase of American equipment raises questions. Although Finland, Germany and Sweden support greater European strategic autonomy, they are nevertheless purchasing F-35 fighter jets, whose use the United States could block if its own interests so required.

Berlin has also just purchased more than \$3 billion worth of American Tomahawk long-range cruise missiles, which the United States did not wish to deploy in Germany. Yet a European equivalent already exists, produced by the European missile manufacturer MBDA.

A second cause for concern stems from the lessons learnt from ongoing conflicts. The United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia – the three major powers involved in the conflicts in the Middle East – are currently suffering a severe setback in Iran, and in Yemen in the case of Riyadh. Even Donald Trump expressed 'surprise' that the Iranians were not bowing to American military superiority. As for Israel, its undeniable military might has done nothing to prevent either the country's moral collapse or the regional political impasse into which it is trapping itself.

On the other side of Europe, Russia is experiencing a similar failure with its military intervention in Ukraine, after more than four years of war and despite its undeniable demographic and military superiority. In other words, the billions allocated to European defence budgets are not enough to protect Europe: without a common defence strategy, and without prior arrangements to implement it – whether within NATO or through an ad hoc European framework – these billions risk being wasted. Or worse, they could become a dangerous waste of resources if they serve merely to renationalise the defence policies of European states. Germany now bears a major responsibility for determining the direction – whether nationalist or European – that these rearmament efforts will take.

The final cause for concern relates to the effects of these military dynamics on public opinion. The public is caught between two fears. The Russian threat is causing increasing anxiety among the population, as Putin is indeed manipulating Europeans by escalating his actions, incidents, drone incursions and other cyber-attacks against Europe. At the same time, the ill-timed statements and predictions by our European leaders regarding the imminence of a war in Europe (by 2030, according to the Germans!) are terrifying our populations just as much. The result? It is not democratic resilience that is gaining ground, but support for the far right and pro-Russian parties, in Germany and also in France.

Three urgent priorities arise from this observation: first, to put defence and the imperative of deterring war back at the heart of the European discourse, rather than the possibility of, or preparations for, war; second, to coordinate each country's rearmament efforts at the highest political level, among heads of state and government, with the Commission acting as the necessary driving force; and third, to define a 'hybrid defence strategy', with NATO if possible and without NATO if necessary.