BLOG POST

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Defending Europe – An Overview of Defence Efforts and Initiatives

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This event marked a major turning point in Europe's recent history and constituted the largest conventional conflict on the European continent since the Second World War. It represented a profound shift in the European Union's security environment. While several European countries had significantly reduced their defence spending since the end of the Cold War, the war in Ukraine has prompted a major reinvestment in military capabilities. At the same time, Europeans have had to contend with growing uncertainty over the United States' commitment to their security. For several years, successive US administrations have called on European countries to shoulder a greater share of the defence burden within the Atlantic Alliance.

Donald Trump's return to the US presidency in January 2025 has revived these concerns. His repeated calls for Europeans to spend more on their own defence, together with his more cautious approach to US security commitments in Europe, have intensified the debate over European strategic autonomy.

Against this backdrop, the prospect of a reduced US security guarantee has emerged as an additional factor encouraging European countries to strengthen their military capabilities.

Since 2014, NATO members have committed to spending at least 2% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defence. By 2025, a majority of European NATO members had reached this target, compared with only around ten countries at the beginning of the war in Ukraine. At the NATO summit in July 2025, European Allies went further, committing to raise defence-related spending to 5% of GDP: 3.5% for core defence expenditure and 1.5% for investment in infrastructure. According to NATO's 2025 annual report, defence spending by European Allies increased by around 20% compared with 2024.

Some countries, such as Poland, now report particularly high levels of spending, exceeding 4% of GDP. Within the European Union, the scale of the rearmament effort is particularly striking. Member States' defence expenditure increased by around 31% between 2021 and 2024. According to the European Commission's White Paper on European Defence, published in March 2025, defence spending reached €326 billion in 2024, including nearly €102 billion invested in military equipment and capabilities.

This increase in spending has been accompanied by a growing convergence in strategic perceptions. On 22 March 2022, the European Union adopted the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, the first document to set out a common assessment of threats and a shared vision of European security objectives through to 2030. Support for Ukraine has also been a major driver of closer cooperation among Member States. Since February 2022, the European Union and its Member States have mobilised several tens of billions of euros in military assistance.

In response to these challenges, the European Union has stepped up its role in the field of defence. Although defence remains primarily a national competence, a number of instruments have been established to support industrial cooperation and joint investment. These include the European Defence Fund (EDF), created under the 2021–2027 multiannual financial framework and endowed with around €8 billion; the ASAP Regulation (Act in Support of Ammunition Production), adopted in July 2023 to boost European ammunition production; and EDIRPA (European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act), aimed at encouraging joint procurement of military equipment. The European Commission took a further step forward in March 2024 with the launch of the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS), followed in March 2025 by the White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030 and the ReArm Europe initiative.

These measures seek to strengthen Europe's defence industrial and technological base, increase joint procurement and reduce external dependencies.

However, despite this growing convergence, significant limitations remain. The European Union is now the world's second-largest military spender in aggregate terms, behind the United States, but it still struggles to translate this financial effort into integrated operational capabilities.

In 2022, collaborative procurement accounted for only around 18% of European defence equipment expenditure, well below the 35% target set by Member States as early as 2007 within the framework of the European Defence Agency.

Major defence-producing countries, notably France and Germany, continue to rely predominantly on their national defence industries, while several European countries have turned to non-European suppliers, particularly from the United States, Israel and South Korea. This situation contributes to the fragmentation of the European defence market. It is reflected in the coexistence of numerous different weapons systems, separate supply chains and standards that are at times incompatible across European armed forces. Despite the increase in military spending, defence efforts therefore remain largely national and have yet to translate into genuine European integration in the field of defence.

The key challenge for the years ahead is therefore no longer simply to increase defence budgets, but to determine whether EU Member States can build together the capabilities and instruments needed to achieve greater strategic autonomy. Negotiations over the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034) are likely to be a decisive moment in determining whether the current phase of rearmament leads to the Europeanisation of defence or remains primarily the sum of national policies.

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