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A White Paper on the future of European defence: what for?



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When they took office, European Commissioners Kaja Kallas (Vice-President and High Representative) and Andrius Kubilius (in charge of defence and space) received a mission letter from President Von der Leyen asking them to work together on **drafting a White Paper on the future of European defence**.

Publication of this document is scheduled for mid-March. Its preparation is mobilising the relevant Commission departments, eliciting contributions from all the players involved (national administrations, parliamentarians, industrialists, think tanks, etc.), fuelling symposia, and ultimately creating a great deal of expectation. The President of the European Council, Antonia Costa, made the same point on 3 February at the end of the informal meeting of Heads of State and Government devoted to defence (“*Now the time has come to make choices and to take decisions!*”).

It is therefore legitimate to ask what such a European White Paper could - and should - contribute. Let's try the exercise with regard to *defence investment, which is the area that is highest on the agenda*¹ and could most easily be the subject of concrete initiatives by the Commission.

¹ “It should identify (...) investments needs to deliver full-spectrum European defence capabilities based on joint investments, ...” (Mission statement by A. Kubilius)

Let's start by recalling what has preceded this exercise since February 2022:²

- March 2022: adoption of a [Strategic Compass for Security and Defence](#). This fairly exhaustive document, produced under the leadership of the predecessors of Kaja Kallas and Andrius Kubilius, was negotiated with the Member States. Published under the French Presidency, it owes its relatively ambitious content to the urgency created by the Russian attack in Ukraine. The section entitled “Invest” contains the shared objective of increasing defence budgets, as well as a fairly extensive list of priority capability areas and critical military technologies, together with guidelines for future Commission proposals and rendez-vous clauses.
- In March 2023, in response to an injunction in this Strategic Compass, the Commission published a [European Defence Industrial Strategy](#) (EDIS). This document mainly served as an explanatory memorandum for its proposal for the [EDIP programme](#). The latter, financed by the EU to the tune of €1.5 billion, aims primarily to use subsidies to encourage Member States (1) to invest in their armaments production industries (this point is not open to debate), (2) to join forces to buy their defence equipment (this objective, while not disputed in principle, has however triggered difficult discussions around the notion of European preference).
- In 2023, under the aegis of the European Defence Agency, the EU [Capability Development Priorities](#) (CDP) document, a catalogue of 22 capability priorities covering the 5 operational environments (land, air, sea, space and cyber), was adopted by the Member States. This was followed in 2024 by the CARD report (“[Coordinated Annual Review on Defence](#)”), which lists 12 areas in which cooperation is recommended.
- A space strategy for security and defence and a strategy and action plan for maritime security were also published in 2023.

The future White Paper will have to take account of these various documents, and **connect capability objectives and industrial responses as clearly as possible**. However, it is clear that, with the exception of the EDIP programme (still pending), none of these strategies has any practical consequences for Member States’ armaments policies, whether in terms of investment choices or industrial allocations. Their lack of impact highlights the **gap between proclaimed intentions and their translation into reality**, fuelling euroscepticism, and even europhobia, when it comes to defence.

If the White Paper confines itself to consolidating and updating the recommendations of the *Strategic Compass*, it will not achieve its intended objective (“*choices and decisions*.”), at least as far as investment is concerned. Given this risk, what are **the challenges facing its authors?**

² For further information, please refer to Policy paper 308 of the Institut Jacques Delors (“[Defence 25: thinking outside the box](#)”, N. Gnesotto).

There are at least four:

1. **Drawing up a European White Paper:** some people may expect to see a White Paper modelled on the existing national White Papers or defence reviews (which are, incidentally, rather disparate in terms of structure and content). This would be a mistake, leading either to disappointment or to a challenge to the Commission's ambition to compete with democratically endorsed national strategies.

An EU White Paper should be of a different nature, **focusing first and foremost on what is politically and legally accessible at European level**. This means giving priority to **investment, technological and industrial issues, with the dual objective of defragmenting defence markets and gradually integrating value chains**.

As far as the geostrategic analysis is concerned, we can consider that the Strategic Compass has “done the job” and that updating it is part of its annual evaluation process.³

As far as the harmonisation of military requirements and planning is concerned, there is no need to reinvent the CDP and, above all, the substantial work carried out within NATO with the NDPP (NATO Defence Planning Process).

2. **A concern for pragmatism:** to be useful, this White Paper must not, like the documents that preceded it, confine itself to a description of threats and shared needs. As it does not have to be negotiated with national administrations, it can **enter into the engineering of cooperation mechanisms** and be daring in this respect. This is an area where it can stand out without competing with national defence reviews.

When Mrs Von der Leyen speaks of building a genuine “European Defence Union”, we can imagine that she is also referring to this idea: exploiting the possibilities opened up by the Treaties to take **regulatory and programmatic initiatives** at EU level **that oblige the Member States to step outside their national corridors**. European Defence Fund, ASAP, EDIRPA, EDIP: these programmes are already making an experimental contribution to this⁴. We need to build on these achievements and put on the table **tools that are more ambitious financially and more effective procedurally**.

3. **Adjusting the objectives:** to have a real impact, the future White Paper must target its investment intentions and avoid spreading itself thinly over too broad a spectrum that would be impossible to achieve.

As it cannot ignore capability priorities, it would be preferable for it to focus on **those listed in the latest CARD report**, which are therefore open to cooperation and at the same time **identified as “strategic enablers”**, i.e. resources that are shared by nature (either because they cannot be financed by a single State or because their use goes beyond borders): air transport, space services, air defence, underwater surveillance, etc.

³ See “2024 Progress report on the implementation of the strategic compass for security and defence.”

⁴ See the Infographic “[The EU and the defence industry](#)”, Institut Jacques Delors.

Similarly, as regards the technological developments to be prioritised, a long exhaustive catalogue would satisfy everyone, but would add nothing. It would be better to stick to those that are clearly in line with the capability issues selected, even if it means overlooking others that Member States with the means to do so will take on.

4. **Avoid the trap of short-termism:** the war in Ukraine is of course the main driving force behind Europe's awakening to defence issues. In the debates that feed into the White Paper, it could lead us to give priority to the need to support the Ukrainian army and to learn the lessons of the Russian-Ukrainian battlefield. This is essential and useful. But the industrial autonomy we are seeking also requires a forward-looking vision and investment in the technologies and weapons of the future. The exercise must therefore find and calibrate **the right balance between the resources we need to strengthen to help the Ukrainians and the tools we need at European level to prepare for the future**, particularly in terms of R&D and major cooperative programmes.

Incidentally, **the debate on European preference, which has become almost theological, would benefit from a more balanced approach:** the immediate off-the-shelf purchase of equipment useful to Ukraine calls for a less rigorous definition of the eligibility of the equipment concerned than the development of systems intended for the long-term defence of Europe, where the autonomy sought justifies stricter tracking.

The ambition of a European White Paper on defence is not new, and we are pleased to see this project coming to fruition. But **Mrs Kallas and Mr Kūbičius bear a heavy responsibility: not to disappoint by producing yet another strategy** which, while making its analyses and recommendations more relevant, would not lead to choices and decisions with very direct implications for the armaments policies of the Member States and for companies in the sector. **In addition to their Baltic nationality, which is conducive to determination, the two Commissioners have two significant advantages:** they do not have to negotiate their proposals ex ante with the Member States, and they can unashamedly draw on the numerous declarations adopted by the latter to confront them with their contradictions.

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