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Some thoughts about "Defence" within EU framework. From the "White Paper" to a real "EU Defence Strategy"

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Abstract:

The conflict in Ukraine, which has brought conventional war back to European territory, something which the European Union had considered extinct, together with the uncertainty generated by the new American administration in relation to the US commitment to the territorial defence of Europe within the NATO framework, have led to a situation of concern and insecurity as regards defence in Europe, which has caused the EU to react with the intention of assuming greater responsibility for its own defence, and to depend less on the American umbrella in NATO

Europe has assumed that it has to significantly increase defence spending, and thus, while the Commission is proposing initiatives both in the defence industry and in financing domains to develop military capabilities, the Council, the competent body in defence matters at EU institutional level, continues in the declarative sphere, but without yet being able to take any major decisions on the subject

The recently presented White Paper, essentially oriented towards defence spending (capabilities, defence industry, financing, etc), should give way to a proper White Paper on Defence, broader in scope and guiding possible EU decisions on the means necessary to strengthen European defence, on defining the structural framework in which it will be developed (strengthening the European dimension of NATO or other options), as well as on the necessary command and control and political decision-making structures. In essence, to guide the development of a strategic action of the Union in DEFENCE (with capital letters).

Keywords:

Defence, EU, NATO, European dimension of NATO, White Paper, military capabilities, financing, defence spending, EU Council in Defence Ministers format

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"If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favourable"

Seneca

Introduction

In the field of security and international relations, the strategic landscape has changed dramatically over the past 20 years. We have transitioned from the so-called *Pax Americana*, a unipolar moment in which the US held global hegemonic power¹, to a renewed era of great power competition. Multilateralism has lost influence, and power relations—understood increasingly through a realist lens—are taking centre stage. Organisations such as the UN, the OSCE² or the EU itself have less and less influence.

It is now the great powers—both those defending the rules-based order established after the Second World War (the United States) and those seeking to revise that order to suit their own interests (so-called *revisionist powers*, chiefly China and Russia)—that are shaping the new playing field. The remaining countries—other BRICS³, and those of the so-called Global South⁴—watch attentively as this new order takes form, preparing to take their positions. In this context, hard power and military capability have returned to prominence. A clear example of it is the fact that military spending has doubled globally so far this century, with Asia and China in particular, having tripled it.⁵

The European Union, an economic giant with a certain political and diplomatic relevance, lacks a solid and credible military instrument, which makes it lose influence on the new international stage.

¹ We can consider that the period of American hegemony (unipolar) covers the 1990s and the first years of the 21st century. We could situate the conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008 as the turning point where the change of panorama begins, which also coincides with the onset of the 2008 financial crisis, which affected economies around the world, but particularly the United States and Western countries.

Note: All hyperlinks are active as of 3 April 2025.

² OSCE - Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. <https://www.osce.org>

³ BRICS - an international political and economic association of emerging countries formed as an alternative to the G7 (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, United Kingdom, United States and United States). The name is made up of the initials of the first 5 members: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Created in 2010, in 2024 Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia and Iran joined.

⁴ The Global South is a hybrid concept, referring to geography, geopolitics, history and level of development, which encompasses a set of countries in both the third world and the developing world, and is usually identified with countries with low incomes, poverty, high population growth rates, poor health systems and generally poor infrastructure. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/comentarios/un-sur-global-geopolitico-hibrido-y-multipolar/>

⁵ Data from SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute). Available at: <https://www.sipri.org/>

Europe's concern with security and defence has been rather limited since the fall of the Soviet Union (1991), and in general, the prevailing attitude has been to protect ourselves under the umbrella of the US. Already in 1997, Zbigniew Brzezinski⁶ highlighted Europe's dependence on US security protection⁷—a comfortable arrangement for Europe, which showed little urgency in altering it or aspiring to become a great power⁸ in its own right. His analysis, though severe, reflected a reality that endured for decades.

Along similar lines, Ana Palacio reminds us that Europe—and particularly the EU—has lived with its back turned to this reality, in a dynamic where it perceived itself as the "light on the hill"⁹. The peace dividends following the end of the Cold War enabled the construction of a welfare state that underpinned a seemingly irresistible model destined to spread worldwide. This model was built on prosperity through regulation, influence based on norms, and stability through interdependence. The problem is that we are now entering an era in which this approach no longer holds; we are moving towards a reality in which security precedes prosperity, and power imposes order. Multilateralism—an intrinsic element of the EU's security and foreign policy (as outlined in both the 2003 and 2016 European Security Strategies)—has been overtaken by power politics, where strength, realism, and pragmatism dominate.¹⁰

In this new scenario, two circumstances have finally awakened the Union from its post-modernist slumber: the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the arrival of the new US Administration. The war added pressure to an already volatile environment, but the political shift in Washington introduced a new layer of mistrust. For the first time,

⁶ BZRESINKSI, Z. *The great global chessboard. American supremacy and its geostrategic imperatives*. Paidós, Barcelona, 1998, p. 67.

⁷ "The stark reality is that Western Europe, and also - to an increasing extent - Central Europe, remains a US protectorate, with allied states reminiscent of former vassals and tributaries. This is not healthy for either the United States or the European nations".

⁸ "It is unclear whether most Europeans even want Europe to be a great power and whether they are prepared to do what is necessary to make it one. Even the residual anti-American attitude of Europeans, currently quite weak, is surprisingly cynical: Europeans deplore US 'hegemony', but are comfortable under its protection".

⁹ PALACIO, Ana. "Ensimismamiento europeo y necesidad de acción", *El Mundo*. 22 February 2025. Available at: <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2025/02/21/67b87b91fc6c83e93d8b458e.html>

¹⁰ In 2017, in its *National Security Strategy*, the US already recognises great power rivalry as its main concern. However, at the EU level, the *Global Security Strategy* (2016) does not contemplate it, and it is not until the *Strategic Compass* (2022), approved a month after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, that the Union recognises the crisis of multilateralism and the return to a power politics, where soft power is used in an increasingly coercive manner. PONTIJAS, José. *A strategic compass for the security and defence of the European Union. One more document?* IEEE. 8 June 2022. https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2022/DIEEEA42_2022_JOSPON_UE.

European leaders are unsure whether the United States remains committed to NATO and to US leadership of the Alliance. ¹¹

Josep Borrell¹², the EU's High Representative until last December, stated in a recent interview that we no longer live in the multilateral world of the post-Cold War era, and that today's geopolitics is shaped by continental powers with hegemonic, if not imperial, ambitions. This demands a proportional response, including the construction of a genuine European Defence Union.

This paper aims to reflect on the EU's current defence situation, analysing the consequences of the new scenario, which some might consider "unforeseen"¹³, with a view to considering options for finding a course for European defence. The European defence vessel sails in stormy waters, and it is no longer clear whether it can afford to continue drifting without a compass, simply following the lead ship, as it has done until now.

The current defence framework in the European Union

In the process of its construction, the European Union has failed to establish an autonomous dimension in the field of defence. A lack of consensus in the early stages was compounded by a certain slackness in the last decades, in a period of relative peace at the global level, and comfortable under the protection of the American umbrella in the NATO framework.

Thus, the failure of the European Defence Community (EDC) initiative, which was sunk in the French Assembly in 1954, was compounded by the scant relevance of the Western European Union (WEU), an attractive initiative that remained largely dormant—earning it the nickname "*the sleeping beauty*." However, from the 1980s onwards it re-emerged, albeit with limited impetus, and began to shape the core of what would become part of the Union's external security action in crisis management, in the so-called *Petersberg*

¹¹ INSCHINGER, W. "Europe's Moment of Truth", published in *Foreign Affairs*. 2 March 2025. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/volodymyr-zelensky-trump-europes-moment-truth>

¹² <https://www.infodefensa.com/texto-diario/mostrar/5199395/josep-borrell-hemos-aumentar-apoyo-militar-ucrania-incluso-estadounidenses>

¹³ One should not really speak of an unforeseen scenario, as both the situation in Ukraine had been forewarned to some extent by numerous analysts, such as Kissinger or Mearsheimer, and even by Putin himself since the Munich Security Conference (2007), and the US calls for Europe to contribute more to its defence began as early as President Kennedy, and became more intense since Obama and his turn to the Pacific in 2011.

tasks. During the 1990s there were even discussions about the possibility of developing a European dimension within NATO via the *European Security and Defence Initiative (ESDI¹⁴)*, which failed at the will of some of the Allies. Under the slogan "*separable but not separate*" it sought to create this European defence dimension with the capacity for autonomous action, always within the NATO framework.

The initiative stalled, and with more modest ambitions—focused on crisis management outside EU territory rather than defence—a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) was established in 1999. Following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, this was renamed the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

As is often the case in Brussels' institutional language, names reflect wishes or aspirations rather than realities. Thus, it can be categorically stated that today the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is neither "Common" nor "Defence". It is an intergovernmental policy, and therefore not "Community" (hence the exclusive competence of the Council, of the Member States, and not of the European Commission), nor does it address defence, being competent only in crisis management tasks.

Such crisis management actions can only be carried out outside the territory of the Union, while the territorial defence of EU countries is framed within NATO, for those that are members of both organisations (23 of the 27). The four EU countries that are not NATO members (Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, and Malta) remain solely responsible for their own national defence.¹⁵ . With no plan for European defence outside NATO, we have relied on NATO and US capabilities for decades.

This is the current regulatory framework, clearly established in Article 42 of the Treaty. The Union does not engage in defence, it has no means or structures for defence, although it does for crisis management, but always outside the Union. Worthy of note is paragraph 7¹⁶ of the aforementioned Article 42, sometimes likened to Article 5 of the

¹⁴ The European Security and Defence Initiative (ESDI) was developed within the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Alliance to strengthen European security engagement and, at the same time, transatlantic cooperation. The ESDI developed alongside complementary initiatives carried out by other mutually reinforcing organisations, such as the Western European Union (WEU), which was later replaced by the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

¹⁵ Although article 42.7 of the ToL can be interpreted as a kind of support from the rest of the countries to a country that suffers an attack, the fact that the EU does not have its own defence structures or resources, but rather those of its Member States, limits the Union, as such, from mobilising as a whole in the face of a territorial aggression against a member state. This is a complex and detailed debate that this paper does not attempt to address.

¹⁶ If a Member State is the object of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall give it aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. This is without prejudice to the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States.

North Atlantic Treaty. It calls for support among Member States if one is attacked but given the lack of collective EU defence capabilities or command structures, any such support would be essentially bilateral.

This has shaped the playing field we have established for security and defence in the EU over the past 25 years, influenced by a strategic scenario where we had assumed that traditional warfare was banished from European territory, and where the Union was clearly committed to multilateralism, diplomacy, and crisis management missions and operations as instruments for preventing conflicts, leaving territorial defence (a circumstance that was considered highly unlikely) in the hands of the Member States themselves, 23 of which met this need within the framework of the Atlantic Alliance.

New strategic landscape: How is the European Union reacting?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 had a profound impact and caused deep concern across Europe, the EU and NATO itself. While not a "black swan"¹⁷, event, it could be better described as a "grey rhino"¹⁸ not wholly unexpected, but long underestimated. Conventional warfare, with all its rawness, magnified in media images and stories, and thought to have been eradicated from European territory, was back.

Europe is mobilising; on the one hand, the different countries significantly Ukraine, militarily, economically and diplomatically, taking clear (though not unanimous) sides, while the EU line mobilises its instruments to support Ukraine. On the other hand, NATO, in addition to providing diplomatic support, and without getting involved as an organisation in the conflict, is concentrating on deterrence on its "Eastern front" in the face of the possible Russian threat.

The scenario is therefore that of a conventional war on European territory, where support is clearly given to the party that has suffered aggression, while NATO, the territorial

¹⁷ In geopolitics, "black swans" are understood as those events that occur by "surprise", that have not been anticipated by prospective analysts, and that have a great impact. It is a concept developed by Nassim Taleb, in his work *The Black Swan. The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (2007). Examples of "black swans" are the attacks of 11 September 2001, or the outbreak of the First World War.

¹⁸ In contrast to black swans, "grey rhino" refers to those events that are obvious, have a clear probability of happening, are ignored (by decision-makers), and when they do happen they also have a major impact. An example of a "grey rhino" could be the COVID 19 pandemic.

defence instrument of most European countries, prepares for the possibility of territorial aggression against one of the allies by intensifying its deterrence actions.

The second event to add uncertainty and concern over Europe's territorial defence was the arrival of the new American administration this past January. President Trump and his close circle made a series of highly provocative remarks concerning NATO and European defence—criticising European disengagement and questioning US commitment to NATO, which deeply unsettled European allies.

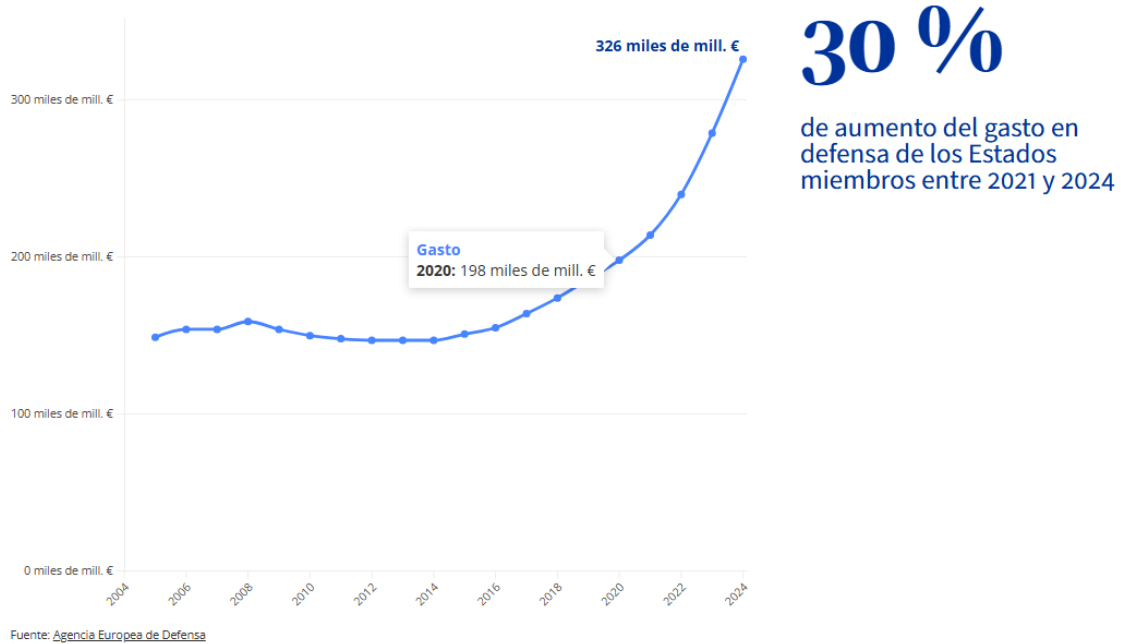
Donald Tusk emphasised on 2 November that Europe's future did not depend on American elections, but on Europeans themselves, who must grow up and build their own capabilities. He declared that the era of geopolitical outsourcing is over. While that dependence may be over, the reality remains that Europe needs the US and the US needs Europe to confront the threats from China and Russia, and to try to break the *Axis of Upheaval*¹⁹. As Churchill once said: "There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them", so abandoning them would be very difficult to reverse and possibly very costly.²⁰

Increased defence spending by European allies

For decades, NATO—and especially the United States—has called on European allies to increase their commitment to the Alliance, aiming for a more equitable distribution of contributions from different countries. The US defence spending was almost three times the sum of the other allies. And, in addition to its troop contributions, it also provided the strategic capabilities that no other ally could independently develop. At the 2014 Wales Summit, it was agreed that all allies would increase their defence spending to 2 per cent of GDP by 2024 (within a decade).

¹⁹ The 'Axis of Upheaval' is an expression that refers to the growing anti-Western collaboration between China, Russia, Iran and North Korea. It was first used in an article of the same name "The Axis of Upheaval" in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, 23 April 2024. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/axis-upheaval-russia-iran-north-korea-taylor-fontaine>

²⁰ <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/02/time-to-reassess-the-costs-of-euro-atlantic-security.html>



In the early years the increase in European defence spending was relatively slow, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the real fear of a conventional war situation on the EU's eastern border caused the process to accelerate.

Thus, as can be seen in the figure, defence spending by EU countries rose from around €150 billion in 2014 to almost €200 billion in 2020. By the end of 2024 it had risen to €326 billion, which is 1.99% of the combined average GDP of the 27, and it is estimated that by 2027 it could be close to €430 billion.

However, the spending that EU allies contribute to NATO,²¹ , is executed through 23 different budgets, and while they take into account the needs of NATO and EU capabilities, they are conditioned and prioritised by national interests.

This situation implies that we have 23 different sets of capabilities, which when added together to contribute to NATO result in real capabilities that are much smaller than the sum of their parts as a result of duplication and fragmentation. By way of example, we could say that we probably have more frigates than we need at a European level, of many different types that are not always interoperable with each other, and which are also

²¹ Given that 23 of the EU's 27 Member States are also NATO allies, the sum in absolute value of the expenditure of the 23 is 98% of the total of the EU-27, so it can be said that "practically" all defence spending accounted for in the EU framework can also be accounted for in the NATO framework.

organically integrated as part of each of the 23 national armed forces. This may satisfy the national interests of each country, but when we add them up, they are profoundly inefficient as a whole²². To this we add that certain capabilities are beyond the reach of European countries (strategic enablers such as intelligence, strategic transport, air-to-air refuelling, etc.) so that in NATO the only ally that can provide them. Added to this, certain capabilities (such as strategic enablers like intelligence, strategic transport, air-to-air refuelling, etc.) are beyond the reach of European countries— meaning that within NATO, the only ally able to provide them is the US.

What is the European Union, and in particular the European Commission, doing? The Defence (Industry) White Paper

Fragmentation and duplication are possibly the first aspects that the European Union faced in the area of defence and military capabilities. Various initiatives were launched to reduce these deficiencies, both by the Council (such as Permanent Structured Cooperation, where projects like the European corvette are a clear example) and by the European Commission itself.

Bearing in mind that in the current institutional framework competences in security and defence are exclusive to the Council, the Commission focused its efforts on areas where it does have competence, such as industrial and economic policy or in the framework of budgetary and deficit control of the Member States, oriented towards defence, acting as a "facilitator" for the development of military capabilities.

In recent years, tools such as the European Defence Funds have been created, and especially since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, new regulations have been developed and new tools such as ASPA have been created....

In March 2024, the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) was presented with the aim of strengthening the competitiveness and readiness of the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (DTIB). The underlying idea is to promote an EU-level

²² This is the case, for example, in the NATO framework, where each ally is assigned a number of capabilities in the NATO capability planning process (NDPP) with which it must contribute to the whole, but which are not always achieved, and when added to those of other countries, the result is not always effective due to fragmentation and duplication, as well as the consequent interoperability problems.

defence industry capable of producing more, and faster—which requires more cooperation and collective action among Europeans.

Along the same lines, the *Draghi Report*²³, presented in September 2024, was focusing on competitiveness and devoting its seventh chapter to "defence". It analyses the aforementioned situation of fragmentation of the European defence industry structure, with companies operating essentially oriented towards their national markets, in addition to the lack of coordination and standardisation within the Union, limited investment in research, development and innovation in defence, a strong dependence on solutions from third countries (mainly the US), and an almost non-existent governance of the European defence industry.²⁴), and an almost non-existent governance of defence industrial policy at the European level, where the Member States neither have the political will, nor have they created the necessary mechanisms to pool resources and jointly finance and acquire capabilities, and instead make almost abusive use of Article 346.

For her second Commission, President Von der Leyen created the role of the "Commissioner for Defence and Space", whose main mission is to act as a "facilitator" to encourage cooperation between member states, to promote the integration of European defence companies, as well as funding initiatives that favour the development of military capabilities. The only objection to this post is the name assigned to it, which follows the Brussels "tradition" of calling things by what we would like them to be and not by what they really are, which only generates confusion. The new Commissioner, with no actual defence competencies, does have them in industrial policy — in this case defence-oriented — so a more appropriate name would be Commissioner for the Defence Industry and Space.

In the framework of financing, also the responsibility of the Commission, the *ReArm Europe Plan (ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030)* was presented on 4 March with the idea of boosting the financing of military spending by giving EU countries greater financial flexibility. The Plan includes elements such as the relaxation of the deficit ceiling for

²³ Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strengthening-european-competitiveness/eu-competitiveness-looking-ahead_en

²⁴ In his report, Draghi points out that in one year (June 2022 to June 2023), EU countries invested (spent) approximately €75 billion on military capabilities, of which almost €50 billion was purchased from the US.

countries²⁵ (which would allow all member states to spend some €650 billion more on defence over four years), or a financing instrument with low-interest loans of up to €150 billion. These and other measures would be subject to certain conditions, and it should not be forgotten that this is only about promoting the need for defence capability development, where spending is borne exclusively by countries through their national defence budgets. In essence, Brussels allows and facilitates spending, but this is exclusive to the countries, which is not unreasonable, since the military capabilities that are developed, albeit in cooperation, will belong exclusively to the Member States, to their national armed forces.

The latest significant milestone was the presentation on March 19 by the Commission and the High Representative of the so-called *White Paper for European Defence*²⁶. It is a relevant document essentially aimed at filling capability gaps and supporting the European defence industry, deepening a single defence market and increasing "preparedness" at the European level for worst-case scenarios, improving, for example, military mobility, ammunition stocks, etc.).

While it is a constructive initiative, it has important limitations, the first of which is once again its very name. It is not really a White Paper²⁷ on "Defence", but essentially on "(Defence) Industry", which are two related but different areas, the former being much broader than the latter. Again, imprecise nomenclature is used, as the document is essentially about the defence industry and to pointing out shortfalls in military capabilities (which it groups into seven main areas), and not about "Defence" in capital letters as might be expected from the title.

In a strategic approach (*ends, ways and means*) to "European defence", the Commission would only be responsible for the *means* to achieve the objectives (*ends*), and not entirely, since the identification and definition of these capabilities (*means*) is the responsibility of the Member States (as actually stated in the *White Paper* itself) and therefore of the

²⁵ Activating the national safeguard clause of the Stability and Growth Pact that allows Member States to increase their defence spending by 1.0% of GDP, which could lead to spending of around €650 billion over four years.

²⁶ https://commission.europa.eu/topics/defence/future-european-defence_en

²⁷ A "White Paper" is a document published by governments or certain authorities to inform certain legislative bodies or public opinion, with the idea of helping to understand an issue or to solve or address a problem (e.g. designing a long-term policy).

Council, with the Commission being responsible for facilitating and optimizing their procurement through industrial and financial policies.

Along the same lines, Admiral García Sánchez²⁸ shares some reflections in which he considers that the document fulfils the forecasts, seeming more like the embryo of an industrial defence policy than a security and defence directive in the face of the existential threats that the Union is currently facing. He goes on to stress that the document is intended to set out the path for the necessary rearmament of the Union, a mission that he defines as impossible without an adequate strategy. Developing one of the parts without having defined the whole makes no sense, but we address this issue in the following sections, in the section on the Council's responsibilities.

In any case, and despite the Commission's desire to play a leading role in defining and developing a defence dimension (with capital letters) for the EU, its competences in this field are limited to the industrial and financial dimensions that "facilitate" the development of military means and capabilities by the member states. Possibly a necessary condition for progress in defence at the EU level, but clearly not sufficient.

What is the Council doing?

In the face of 'uncertainty' over the US commitment to European defence in the NATO framework, the Council is in the process of discussing and finding solutions to the new situation, where it is acting in an admittedly reactive manner. It is acting to satisfy the US demand that Europeans take responsibility for their own defence, for which they should initially reach a defence expenditure of 2% as agreed at the Wales Summit in 2014, although as Secretary General Rutte stated at a press conference on 2 April²⁹, it is foreseeable that will have to raise this expenditure clearly above 3% (this debate will possibly be addressed at the Hague Summit to be held in June). Added to this is the situation of the war in Ukraine, the strong support of Europe and the EU for one side, which contrasts with the new administration's stance on the conflict, both in relation to Moscow and Kiev, which is seeking a rapid peace agreement.

²⁸ <https://www.abc.es/opinion/fernando-garcia-sanchez-estrategia-puercoespín-camaleón-20250327155307-nt.html>

²⁹ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_234072.htm

Although the Council's involvement in defence issues has been rather limited in recent years, and has not been much more than declaratory, since the inauguration of President Trump in January, its activity has increased markedly. In fact, several extraordinary meetings of the European Council have been held (in different formats), as well as of various European leaders at the multilateral level (with the UK present and prominent in almost all of them) to address the challenges posed, both on European defence (reacting to the US's bid to reduce its ties with Europe) and on European support for Ukraine.

Thus, at the informal European Council of February 3³⁰, EU leaders discussed key issues relating to European defence, including collective capability development, the best use of the EU budget and private funding, and how to strengthen strategic partnerships. At the end of the meeting, Council President Antonio Costa declared that progress had been made in the discussions on building a Europe of Defence, driven by a shared sense of urgency, emphasizing that it is no longer a question of whether it will be done, but of "how" it will be done.³¹

Subsequently, a special European Council was held on March 6³² where, in addition to addressing the issue of support for Ukraine, European defence was again discussed, and the idea of an EU that is committed to taking more responsibility for its own defence, to being better equipped to act and to facing immediate and future challenges and threats (including Russia's war) in an autonomous manner was reiterated. Antonio Costa stated that decisive progress was being made towards a stronger and more sovereign Europe of Defence, and the Council Conclusions consider Russia's aggression in Ukraine and its impact on European and global security as an existential challenge for the EU.³³

On March 20, the day after the presentation of the White Paper, a new meeting of the European Council³⁴ was held, where, among other issues, European security and defence was again discussed, and where it was called upon to urgently accelerate the

³⁰ Referred to as "informal EU leaders' retreat". Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2025/02/03/>

³¹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/02/03/remarks-by-president-antonio-costa-at-the-press-conference-following-the-informal-eu-leaders-retreat-of-3-february-2025/>

³² <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2025/03/06/>

³³ Conclusions on *European defence* of the European Council meeting of 6 March 2025. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/tzkadtec/20250306-european-council-conclusions-en.pdf>

³⁴ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2025/03/20/>

implementation of the actions identified in the White Paper in relation to capabilities, as well as to continue working on options for financing them.

Despite all this institutional activity, with a more declarative than truly executive component, it can be assessed that the debate focuses on the factors affecting the problem, but not on the problem itself, which is the lack of capacity of Europeans to defend Europe on their own. It seems necessary and urgent for the EU to open a broad debate on the territorial defence of the continent, and to define its objectives, the means and ways to achieve them - in essence, to develop a strategic-level exercise on the issue. However, the Council is more focused on the *how* (on the basis of proposals presented to it by the Commission) than on the *what*.

As an additional note to these reflections, it is significant to point out that it is paradoxical that the Union's defence ministers are not actively involved in all these reflections (even if only at the level of discussions). Moving towards a "capitalized" defence dimension of the EU would require the active involvement and leadership of the aforementioned defence ministers, who currently have no Council formation of their own, and whose action in the EU is limited to the foreign affairs format, where it is the foreign ministers who take the final decisions. In this new scenario we are no longer talking only about external action and foreign policy, but about defence policy "in capital letters", which would strengthen the leading role of the defence ministers, and would even open the debate on the need to stop subordinating the CSDP to the CFSP, since it would no longer be just an operational capability for missions and crisis management operations abroad, but rather for defending European territory itself from external aggression.

Does the European Union need a "defence strategy"?

In the current scenario, with a traditional war conflict on Europe's eastern border, and with a US ally that is more Indo-Pacific oriented and in some quarters has raised doubts about its commitment level to Europe's defence, it seems pertinent to consider that the EU should take action and move more firmly from the declaratory to the executive.

Regarding territorial defence, the scenario we face in Europe is that of a NATO with greater involvement of European allies and a more uncertain and in any case less

protagonist role for the United States. The options for change in the Alliance are determined by the US position, which forces Europe to act reactively.

The alternatives for NATO's future could be fourfold:

- business as usual, with the US in a similar role to the current one and Europe more active and more engaged (development of the European dimension in NATO);
- a more European Alliance, with Europe playing a leading role in the territorial defence of the continent and American support on demand (European dimension in NATO with a certain strategic autonomy);
- an American drift towards a "sleeping" position where the European protagonism would be almost absolute and the US would support only in extreme cases;
- and a less likely last one with the US leaving the Alliance.

Given the US and European geopolitical and economic interests, coupled with cultural and historical factors, the first two options, particularly the second, are the most plausible. In any case, there is no doubt that Europe, and in some ways the European Union itself, needs to take more active charge of its territorial defence, and address defence issues in capital letters.

This essentially reactive scenario requires a strategic approach, in the sense that it is necessary to define EU defence objectives, identify and develop the means to achieve those objectives, and determine how those means will be used. In essence, this is a traditional strategic approach (*ends, ways and means*).

The current debate focuses on *means*, on the "ReArm Europe" initiative, on military capabilities and on how to finance them, which is important, but still only one part of the equation. This approach would only be useful if we were to continue with "*business as usual*", which would correspond to the first scenario. The objectives, command structures, decision-making processes, institutional framework for defence, etc. would be those of NATO, and it would not be necessary to create new structures or bodies to take charge of "defence" at the European level.

The most reasonable option in the face of an uncertain scenario, both in terms of threats (essentially from the East and South) and in terms of commitments from Western allies, would be to address a European-level debate on defence, with its own objectives

(compatible with NATO) and its own means and structures (also compatible with the Alliance). In addition to capabilities, it would be necessary to identify command and control structures and governance architecture (for decision-making), autonomous from NATO, though preferably not separate. In essence, this would bring back the idea of a European security architecture similar to the aforementioned ESDI, with an autonomous capacity to act, initially subordinate to NATO, but with the option to go further if necessary.

The other options, which are highly unlikely given the interests of the parties, would require a more comprehensive approach to this debate.

In any case, a new type of European leadership seems necessary, necessarily bold, and one that Ana Palacio³⁵ believes would need a "Churchill", both to defend its strategic security interests and to rebuild a worn-out NATO, where European powers must demonstrate that they can assume a more substantial responsibility that increases the Alliance's collective power³⁶. As Sven Biscop reminds us, NATO is an alliance, not a protectorate³⁷. To maintain the effectiveness of deterrence Europe must urgently strengthen NATO's European pillar, acquiring the conventional capabilities hitherto provided by the US, coordinating our defence efforts so that the combined forces constitute a complete and autonomous force package³⁸. The new NATO Force Model³⁹, where the highest readiness forces (0-10 days) are presumed to be European (not least because of deployment timelines), is the opportunity for European allies to take the lead.

In any case, this necessary strategic debate on the future of European defence (with capital letters), at the EU level, should at least address the following issues:

- *Defining goals and objectives* to be achieved, taking into account the different strategic cultures of member states. A good strategy starts with a clear objective; simply increasing spending does not solve Europe's problem; allies must be strategic about how and where they spend money.
- *Designing European security architecture models* according to different scenarios; from a reinforcement of NATO's European dimension (really from the contribution of the EU as a whole, with the collaboration of third European states such as the

³⁵ <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2025/02/15/67b0e7d9e4d4d8ab138b4577.html>

³⁶ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/20/europe-trump-nato-hegseth-vance-munich-defense-spending/>

³⁷ <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/trumps-europe-policy-no-longer-different-from-russia-and-china/>

³⁸ <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/disgrace-in-washington-decisions-in-london/>

³⁹ <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1937>

UK; for example, something similar to ESDI), to a European model built on the basis of the EU and open (or not) to third parties.

- *Identification of the means and capabilities needed for European defence (as a European NDPP⁴⁰), including the strategic enablers currently lacking in Europe, which are identified in the White Paper. Defence (Industry) Commissioner Kubilius himself has mentioned on several occasions⁴¹ that European efforts should be geared towards acquiring and developing the military capabilities identified for NATO plans.*
- *Articulating the instruments and mechanisms for capability development at the European level, fostering cooperation between countries and European development. The Commission's role, mentioned in previous paragraphs, as a "facilitator" at both the defence industry and funding levels is key.*

Considering that the capabilities to be developed, albeit collaboratively, will belong to the armed forces of the Member States, and that the costs of their development will be borne by those same States, seeking a common rather than a collective approach does not seem feasible in the first steps, especially given the differences in the strategic culture of the various countries.

Regarding the development of strategic enablers in particular, and bearing in mind that no country has the capacity to develop them on its own, ways should be sought to do so jointly, but above all to define their institutional and governance structure, which should be European and somewhat common (similar to what is happening with the AWACS in NATO).

The recently presented *ReArm Europe* plan⁴² is intended to be the main tool to support all these developments (necessary but not sufficient). It is not the central element of European defence, but an enabler).

⁴⁰ The NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) is the planning tool that seeks to harmonise national and NATO planning so that allies can provide the military forces and capabilities required by the Alliance in the most effective way. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49202.htm For its part, the EU has a similar tool, the Capability Development Plan (CDP), but given that the EU has been oriented towards crisis management tasks and not defence, it would be necessary to adapt it to the new reality, and possibly align it with NATO's. <https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/EU-defence-initiatives/priority-setting>

⁴¹ It was mentioned during the round table *Europe at a crossroads. Balancing transatlantic cooperation and European defence autonomy to meet current and future security challenges*, on the afternoon of 12 March, during the 2nd Strategy and Defence Forum in Paris (11-13 March), with the participation of Admiral Cavo Dragone (*Chairman* of the NATO Military Committee), Admiral Vandier (SACT), and Andrius Kubilius, the European Commission's Commissioner for Defence and Space. <https://www.parisdefenceandstrategyforum.com/>

⁴² https://commission.europa.eu/topics/defence/future-european-defence_en

- *Define military command and control structures*, whether at European level, NATO (in the framework of Berlin+), or any other option, in order to be able to develop European defence plans.
- *Regarding governance, defining the necessary structures and bodies*, as well as the decision-making procedures, for the political control and strategic direction of the different defence operations and activities. In this regard, it seems more than appropriate to consider the option of an EU Council in the form of defence ministers with competences and responsibilities to be defined.
- *Address the issue of nuclear deterrence*, either under the US and/or UK umbrella, or by France in the EU framework (which could include the UK if expanded to third European states).

It is generally considered that it would not be feasible to move towards commonality in European defence, at least initially, but that significant progress could be made at collective level in the EU framework, respecting the sovereignty of Member States, either within NATO or whatever structure is determined.

Reviewing what has been done so far, and with a broader vision, this debate could be substantiated in a kind of *White Paper on European Defence*, with more ambition than the one presented by the President of the Commission on 19 March, and which should possibly have been called *White Paper on the European Defence Industry*. As a result of this new White Paper (focused on defence in capital letters and not on the defence industry and financing), an EU defence strategy should be developed that complements and updates the current Global Strategy, clearly developing the "defence" dimension, and which, unlike the previous, essentially declarative ones, should be notoriously executive, with an achievable and responsible action plan.

While this new White Paper may be a desirable option to focus the debate, it would not be a prerequisite for the elaboration of such a defence strategy, which would be the central and fundamental element in establishing the defence dimension at the EU level. This exercise would have to be the first major step towards a Europe of Defence in its broadest sense and should be flexible enough to adapt to the NATO framework or to act autonomously if necessary.

In conclusion

It seems to be beyond doubt that defining an EU defence capability, developing capabilities and rearming, cooperating on defence at the European level, all within the framework of NATO, the EU, or both, is a necessity not an option. The histrionics and noise of the current debate should not distract us from the main problem, which is European defence, the will and the machinery to execute it. It is now a matter of articulating how to put it into action.

The problems of military capability shortfalls and the industrial and financial approach to defence have been identified and initiatives are already being articulated, particularly by the Commission, to address them (all that remains is for the Member States to implement them). But we must not forget that the plan to ReArm Europe is an important and necessary tool, in which the Commission, as facilitator, has a key role, but it is not the solution to Europe's defence problem, which has been practically ignored until now.

It is therefore necessary to address without delay the strategic dimension of the European defence problem; the development of institutions, structures and governance (whether within the NATO framework, autonomously, or some sort of combination of the two). It is not just a question of spending more on defence, which is also a necessary but not sufficient condition, but of determining in advance what we need to spend on, on what means and capabilities, to achieve what objectives, and how we are going to use those means to achieve the stated ends.

For Europeans to assume our defence responsibilities, whether within the NATO framework as called for by the United States or otherwise, is an exercise in responsibility that the Union cannot delay any longer. Admiral Cavo Dragone, chairman of the NATO Military Committee, reminded us⁴³ that the war in Ukraine has been the catalyst for a more active Europe in NATO, for a Europe that must be responsible for its conventional defence and must seek complementarity with the United States, not dependence, which would require strengthening NATO's European pillar.

EU member states need to stop being reactive, and address with determination the dilemma of defining the future of defence in Europe, working within the framework of the

⁴³ See note 41. Statements made at the same roundtable.

EU, and if deemed relevant, extended to third parties such as the UK, Norway, Turkey and other European countries. This requires a strategic debate, where the Council should lead the process, with the Commission acting as facilitator. A Defence White Paper, in its broadest sense, and not limited to the defence industry and market, could be a first step (optional but advisable) leading to a subsequent and necessary "EU Defence Strategy (with capital letters)".

This exercise, although indisputably linked, should not be subordinated to what happens in the war in Ukraine. It should be approached from a structural and not a conjunctural point of view, regardless of how the conflict develops, and under no circumstances should a future situation of peace and even stability in the area in the coming months or years lead us to retrace our steps, to forget about defence and to place it once again at the bottom of the EU agenda.

Europe, and in particular the European Union, in a world where power relations increasingly tend to be based on the law of force, which is the way it is and not the way we would like it to be, has to find its own way, equipping itself with the necessary tools to try to be a relevant actor at the global level.

In this new scenario, fragmentation in defence actions would not be admissible, and the immediate search for better conditions by promoting bilateral actions would be unacceptable. The EU must protect its unity, a fundamental value and strength of the Union, which has been so successful in sectors other than defence.

To build a Europe of Defence in its broadest sense, we need to start by laying solid foundations. It is not just a matter of "spend, spend, spend" on defence⁴⁴, but of determining what we want to do, where we want to go (*ends*), providing the right *means* for that journey, and using those means in the right *way* (*ways*) to navigate our way towards the goal we have set. In essence, it is a comprehensive exercise to agree on an EU Defence Strategy, in the broadest sense of the term defence, which should be the cornerstone on which Europe and the EU equip themselves with a deterrence and defence capability when

⁴⁴ In the framework of the special European Council on 6 March, where it was agreed to multiply security and defence spending to rearm Europe in the face of the "existential threat" posed by Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the US turnaround on this war following President Trump's arrival in the White House, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, upon her arrival at the meeting, declared: "The most important thing is to be very frank about rearming. I don't think we have much time: spend, spend, spend on defence and deterrence is the most important message. <https://efe.com/euro-efe/2025-03-06/ue-multiplicar-gasto-defensa-a-rearmar-europa/>

necessary. An exercise in which the Council should take a more active lead, the member states should make more binding commitments, the Commission should continue to act as a "facilitator" in industrial and financial matters, and where the EU Council, in the form of defence ministers, is called upon to play a major role.

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