

¿Vasallaje o amistad? El nuevo Cisma de Occidente

Resumen:

Durante décadas, el compromiso militar de EE. UU. con la OTAN permitió a los países europeos priorizar su desarrollo económico sin asumir los costes de su propia defensa. Sin embargo, el deterioro del orden internacional liberal ha puesto este modelo en cuestión y ha reabierto el debate sobre la autonomía estratégica europea.

El artículo analiza la seguridad y la defensa en el seno de la UE, examinando su marco jurídico, sus niveles funcionales y las limitaciones estructurales. Se identifican tres obstáculos principales: la fragmentación política; la descoordinación industrial; y la persistente dependencia de EE. UU.

A partir de este diagnóstico, se exploran tres posibles escenarios: la creación de un ejército europeo plenamente integrado; el establecimiento de un Consejo de Seguridad Europeo; y el refuerzo pragmático del pilar europeo dentro de la OTAN. Se concluye que es necesaria una mayor coordinación política, industrial y militar para reequilibrar la relación transatlántica y reforzar la posición de la UE.

Palabras clave:

UE, OTAN, EE. UU., seguridad, defensa, autonomía estratégica, soberanía, PESC, PCSD, PESCO, ejército europeo.

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1. HOW DID WE GET HERE?

For decades, European security has rested on a seemingly unquestionable premise: the United States' (US) military commitment to the continent. This cooperation was formalized after the Second World War with the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), conceived to protect Western Europe from the influence of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the potential spread of its ideology, communism. In this way, a fully symbiotic relationship was established: the US, in pursuit of its own strategic interests, undertook to extend its security umbrella beyond its national territory; Europe, for its part, accepted this guarantee of protection, voluntarily relinquished its military autonomy, and seized the opportunity to prioritise a project of integration that would ultimately crystallise in the European Union (EU).

The fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and subsequent German reunification (1990), the overwhelming American victory in the First Gulf War (1991), and the dissolution of the USSR (1991) appeared to confirm the triumph of the West. Our model—based on liberal democracy and the market economy—consolidated globally thanks to the moral, economic, and military might of the US. Indeed, such was this perceived hegemony that optimism permeated both international relations and academia, with scholars such as Fukuyama envisaging the “*end of history*”¹. European countries, benefiting from unprecedented stability, deemed it logical to focus their efforts on developing the welfare state while simultaneously delegating their defence within the NATO framework, under US leadership². In other words, foregoing the construction of an independent military capability was considered convenient, expedient, and—*a priori*—prudent, since the EU was conceived as a peace project in which war no longer had a place³.

Today, however, this mindset is confronted with a different strategic environment. The contemporary international order—the one we fashioned to prevent the recurrence of the great catastrophes of the last century—is eroding. This quiet process is primarily driven by geopolitical entropy, institutional obsolescence, and increasingly autocratic forms of leadership⁴. In essence, multilateralism survives by inertia, international law is interpreted

¹ FUKUYAMA, F. (1989). The End of History? *The National Interest*, 16, 3-18. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184>

² ART, R. J. (1996). Why Western Europe Needs the United States and NATO. *Political Science Quarterly*, 11(1), 1-39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2151926>

³ BORRELL FONTELLES, J. (2026, February 23). Europa ante la geopolítica actual: ¿quiere y puede la UE ser un actor global? In *Fundación Juan March*. Madrid, Spain. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQoLGpUsSYY&t=3s>

⁴ BECKLEY, M. (2025). The Stagnant Order: And the End of Rising Powers. In *Foreign Affairs*, 104(6), 8-27.

and applied selectively, and the international community appears to lack a shared normative compass. The President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has even stated that the EU can no longer rely on that rules-based world⁵. The annexation of Crimea (2014) and the invasion of Ukraine (2022) have shown that the violent revision of borders remains a reality on our continent, while China's rise calls into question the universality of the Western model. Even the US—considered the policeman of the world—is contributing to this deterioration by openly challenging the system in pursuit of its strategic interests, sovereignty, and competitiveness.

In this new geopolitical landscape, marked by multipolarity, Europe has lost the centrality it enjoyed during the Cold War. Obama initiated a pivot to Asia in 2011⁶, Biden reinforced the Indo-Pacific as a foreign policy priority⁷, and Trump has further consolidated this trajectory through more explicit and confrontational rhetoric. His National Security Strategy⁸ (2025), grounded in an “*America First*” approach, portrays European civilisation as facing an existential crisis. Basically, our historic ally appears increasingly distant, seeks to amplify critical voices within the EU itself, and demands—as has long been signalled—that we assume the primary burden of our own defence⁹.

This shift in paradigm has the potential to trigger a new schism within the West. While not a theological dispute over papal authority, the EU and the US have rarely been so far apart. Following operations in Venezuela and Iran, and statements regarding the possible annexation of Greenland, a profound divergence in priorities, perceptions, and responsibilities has emerged¹⁰. As Kaja Kallas, the EU's High Representative, has openly acknowledged, “*we do not see eye to eye on all issues*”¹¹. Surrounded by a growing sense of vulnerability, the EU has come to recognize that its bilateral relationship with the US is asymmetrical and conceals deep-seated dependencies within NATO. This evolution

⁵ VON DER LEYEN, U. (2026, March 9). *EU Ambassadors Conference*. Brussels, Belgium.

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/speech_26_576

⁶ OBAMA, B. (2011, November 17). Remarks to the Australian Parliament. In *The White House*. Canberra, Australia.

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>

⁷ See: <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>

⁸ See: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

⁹ COLOMINA, C. (2026, January 2). Las claves internacionales que van a marcar el año 2026. In *Hora25 SER*.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUjNXuYA_4

¹⁰ SCHADLOW, N. (2026, April 22). The real transatlantic divide is about more than Trump. In *Financial Times*.

<https://www.ft.com/content/e2fe4cce-d159-4d47-86c1-bc0bc1cdafbf>

¹¹ KALLAS, K. (2026, February 15). Who needs saving from whom? In *EU Debates*. Munich Security Conference, Germany.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGhHEn9UCqM>

compels the EU to rethink its defence from the ground up, amidst a sea of bureaucracy and in tension with its own political nature.

The question is as uncomfortable as it is unavoidable: have Europeans been genuine partners of the US or, rather, vassals under its protection?

2. WHAT ABOUT THE EU'S DEFENCE ARCHITECTURE?

The growing uncertainty calls for a thorough examination of the policies, structures, and instruments that enable the Union to act in the field of security and defence. These are set out in the Treaty on European Union¹² (TEU), within the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The following section analyses the legal framework and the different functional levels.

2.1. Legal framework:

The EU's external action is structured through the CFSP, established by the Maastricht Treaty¹³ (1993) and further developed in Title V of the TEU (Articles 21–41). Unlike other areas of integration, the CFSP—which encompasses matters such as the Union's diplomatic relations or the imposition of international sanctions—retains an essentially intergovernmental character. Decisions, for instance, are adopted unanimously in the Council in order to preserve the decision-making authority of Member States. This reflects an undeniable reality: foreign policy remains one of the most sensitive dimensions of national sovereignty.

Within this framework, the CSDP is articulated (Articles 42–46 TEU). Its origins are commonly traced back to the Saint-Malo Declaration¹⁴ (1998), when France and the United Kingdom underlined the need to equip the EU with an autonomous capacity to act in response to international crises, supported by credible means and its own decision-making structures. Since then, the CSDP has evolved into the principal operational arm of the CFSP, enabling the EU to coordinate crisis-management operations—both military and civilian—beyond its borders. The so-called “*Petersberg tasks*” (Article 43 TEU)

¹² See: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

¹³ See: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:11992M/TXT>

¹⁴ See: https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2008/3/31/f3cd16fb-fc37-4d52-936f-c8e9bc80f24f/publishable_en.pdf

include activities such as peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and post-conflict stabilisation. As such, this is not a system designed for classical territorial defence, but rather an instrument of “soft power”¹⁵ geared towards external projection.

The Treaty of Lisbon¹⁶ (2007), which amended both the TEU and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union¹⁷ (TFEU), also introduced a mutual defence clause. Article 42(7) TEU commits Member States to provide assistance in the event of armed aggression on EU territory. While this provision resembles the logic of a defensive alliance, the EU lacks genuinely integrated structures and capabilities of its own. In practice, each country ultimately—and unilaterally—determines the nature of the support to be provided. The same applies to Article 222 TFEU, which establishes solidarity among Member States in response to threats such as terrorism, natural disasters, or hybrid attacks.

This framework, however, would remain incomplete without addressing the relationship with NATO, which continues to provide for the collective defence of the continent (Article 42(2) TEU). In practice, the CSDP has developed as a complement to—rather than a substitute for—the Atlantic Alliance¹⁸. This synergy is implemented through institutional cooperation mechanisms in crisis management, such as the Berlin Plus Agreements¹⁹ (2003), as well as through joint declarations.

2.2. Functional levels:

In simple terms, this bureaucratic machinery is structured across four levels: political, strategic, operational, and—ultimately—capability development.

First, at the political level, the European Council and the Council of the European Union, together with the European External Action Service (EEAS), define the core priorities of foreign policy. The Global Strategy²⁰ (2016), presented by the then High Representative, Federica Mogherini, already urged Member States to strengthen the EU’s position in an increasingly competitive environment. Subsequently, following the invasion of Ukraine,

¹⁵ NYE, J. (1990). Soft power. *Foreign Policy*, 80, 153. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>

¹⁶ See: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/lis/sign/eng>

¹⁷ See: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:12012E/TXT:en:PDF>

¹⁸ LAORGA, R., Cordova, R. & López, T (Eds.). (2025). *Seguridad y defensa. Los retos de la seguridad española y europea ante la nueva Comisión Europea* (1st ed.). Dykinson, S.L. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/ji.38479288>

¹⁹ EUROPEAN UNION [EU]. (n.d.). *Cooperation with NATO*. EUR-Lex. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/cooperation-with-nato.html>

²⁰ See: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf

Josep Borrell's Strategic Compass²¹ (2022) established a more “concrete and directly applicable”²² framework for the development of military capabilities, the enhancement of operational readiness, and the strengthening of the European defence industry²³. Although these documents are not enshrined in the Treaties, they guide the implementation of the CSDP.

Next, at the strategic level, political guidance is translated into planning. Responsibility for the planning of the missions and operations lies with bodies such as the Political and Security Committee²⁴ (PSC), composed of permanent ambassadors; the European Union Military Committee²⁵ (EUMC), the PSC's highest military advisory body, made up of the Chiefs of Defence of the respective Member States; and the European Union Military Staff²⁶ (EUMS), the primary source of military expertise within the EEAS.

Third, at the operational level, we turn to the actual conduct of the “Petersberg tasks”. At present, the EU maintains around 20 missions in third countries across Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, involving approximately 4,000 personnel²⁷. Notable examples include Operation EUNAVFOR Atalanta, launched in 2008 to combat piracy in the Indian Ocean²⁸; the EU Training Mission in Somalia (EUTM Somalia)²⁹; and the civilian mission EULEX Kosovo, aimed at strengthening the rule of law in the Western Balkans³⁰. In essence, at the operational level it is clear that the CSDP is predominantly expeditionary in nature, focusing on promoting security and fostering development beyond the Union's borders.

²¹ See: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf

²² BORRELL FONTELLES, J. (2022). La nueva Europa de la Defensa y la Brújula Estratégica. In *Ministerio de Defensa*. Centro Superior de Estudios de la Defensa Nacional (CESEDEN), Madrid, Spain. https://www.defensa.gob.es/Galerias/main/la_nueva_europa_defensa_y_brujula_estrategica.pdf

²³ KNEZOVIC, S., & DUIĆ, D. (2023). The EU's Strategic Compass – Anything new for the EU's CSDP? In *Zeitschrift Für Europarechtliche Studien*, 26(2), 219-238. <https://doi.org/10.5771/1435-439x-2023-2-219>

²⁴ COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. (2001). Decision 2001/78/CFSP. In *Official Journal of the European Union*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32001D0078>

²⁵ COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. (2001). Decision 2001/79/CFSP. In *Official Journal of the European Union*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32001D0079>

²⁶ COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. (2001). Decision 2001/80/CFSP. In *Official Journal of the European Union*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32001D0080>

²⁷ EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE [EEAS]. (2026, February). *Eu missions and operations*. EEAS. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2026/documents/EU-mission-and-operation_2026-v3.pdf

²⁸ COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. (2024). Decision 2024/3186/CFSP. In *Official Journal of the European Union*. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202403186

²⁹ COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. (2010). Decision 2010/197/CFSP. In *Official Journal of the European Union*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32010D0197>

³⁰ COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. (2008). Decision 2008/814/CFSP. In *Official Journal of the European Union*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32008D0814>

Finally, the architecture is completed by the capability level, through instruments designed to reinforce strategic autonomy. The European Defence Agency³¹ (EDA), for instance, serves as a forum for cooperation among Member States to stimulate technological and military development. In this regard, the European Defence Fund³² (EDF) seeks to finance collaborative research and development in order to strengthen the defence industrial base. Also noteworthy is Permanent Structured Cooperation³³ (PESCO), launched in 2017 as a mechanism for deeper integration, which twenty-six Member States have joined (Articles 42(6) and 46 TEU and Protocol No. 10³⁴). Participating countries voluntarily commit to jointly developing military capabilities, coordinating investment, and enhancing the interoperability of their armed forces. More recently, Commission initiatives, such as the White Paper on the Future of European Defence³⁵ (2025) and its ReArm Europe Plan (2025), envisage mobilising up to €800 billion over a four-year period to reduce external dependencies³⁶.

2.3. European defence does not exist:

In short, although there is an institutional framework that promotes cooperation among Member States at the industrial level, we cannot—and should not—speak of a European defence architecture. The Union does not constitute a military alliance and, despite what its name might suggest, the CSDP is neither truly common nor concerned with traditional defence. At its core, it focuses on external crisis management and relies on voluntary contributions, as there are no mechanisms to guarantee Member State commitment.

Against this backdrop, and in the current geopolitical context, it is not far-fetched to question the effectiveness of subordinating security to external action, relying on voluntary intergovernmental mechanisms, and relegating defence to NATO.

³¹ COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. (2011). Decision 2011/411/CFSP. In *Official Journal of the European Union*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32011D0411>

³² COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION & EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. (2021). Regulation 2021/697/EU. In *Official Journal of the European Union*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R0697>

³³ COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. (2017). Decision 2017/2315/CFSP. In *Official Journal of the European Union*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017D2315>

³⁴ See: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:12016M/PRO/10>

³⁵ See: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dc0-3867b4373019_en?filename=White%20paper%20for%20European%20defence%20%E2%80%93%20Readiness%202030.pdf

³⁶ Of the €800 billion, €650 billion correspond to additional fiscal space that allows defence spending to increase (around 0.375% of GDP per year) without being counted for deficit purposes (3%), while the remainder (€150 billion) consists of repayable loans. The burden falls on the Member States.

3. KEY LIMITATIONS

However sophisticated it may appear, the EU faces structural constraints that condition its strategic autonomy. These barriers—political, industrial, and technical—help to explain why the Union continues—and will continue—to depend on US protection.

3.1. Political limitations:

The first factor preventing progress towards genuine territorial defence is the lack of political will. Paradoxically, the EU's very structure, combined with the absence of a shared strategic culture, produces a form of systemic paralysis.



Figure 1: The three main authorities of the EU. From left to right: Ursula von der Leyen, President of the Commission; António Costa, President of the European Council; and Kaja Kallas, High Representative. Source: Bendo (2026)³⁷.

As regards institutional design, Kaja Kallas occupies a politically complex role³⁸, as she holds no direct executive authority over the Member States and her influence depends on consensus within the Council. And even though a Commissioner for Defence and Space was introduced in the College to oversee industrial programmes at the capability level, Andrius Kubilius remains, in effect, a “*king without a kingdom*”³⁹. Under the Treaties, the Commission plays only a limited role in matters of security and defence. Moreover, within such a supranational framework, unanimity constrains the potential of the CFSP,

³⁷ BENDO, D. (2026). Videoconference with Middle East leaders. In *European Commission Audiovisual Portal*. <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/media/photo/P-069223>

³⁸ BARIGAZZI, J. (2026, January 26). The 5 hardest jobs in Brussels. *POLITICO*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/5-hard-jobs-brussels-mark-rutte-paula-pinho-kaja-kallas-balint-odor-maros-sefcovic/>

³⁹ ERLANGER, S. & GROSS, J. (2024, September 20). *Europe's new defense chief: 'A king without a kingdom'?* The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/20/world/europe/defense-commissioner-military-ukraine-russia.html>

whose coordination is further hampered by institutional disputes and leadership rivalries⁴⁰. This is evidenced, for instance, by Viktor Orbán’s repeated vetoes of support packages for Ukraine and sanctions against Russia⁴¹. As Henry Kissinger, former US Secretary of State, once observed, it is difficult to identify a single, competent, and authorised interlocutor within the EU, someone whom to call directly. All of this highlights why, even in the face of external crises, the Union struggles to take swift or unified decisions.

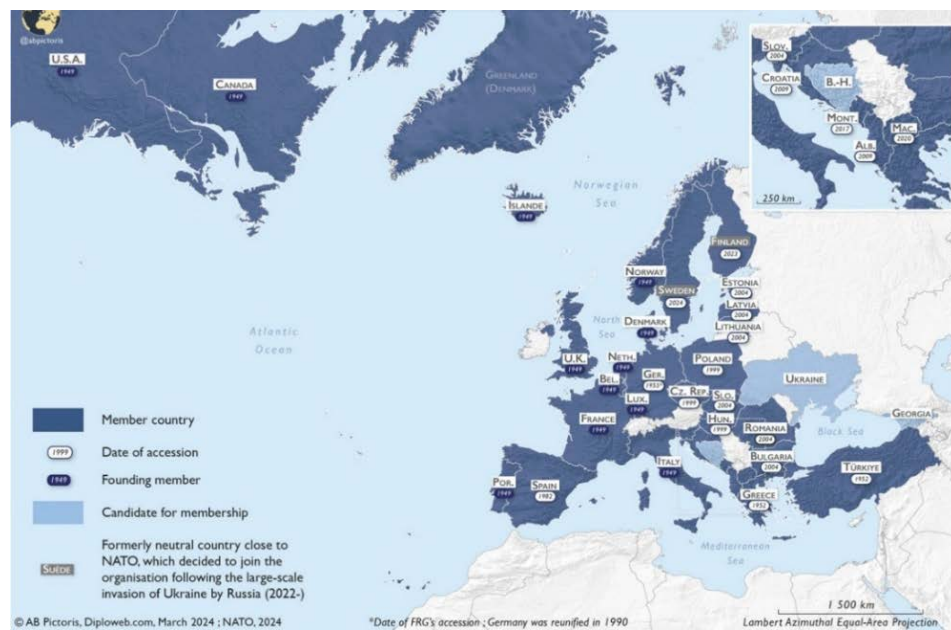


Figure 2: NATO members. Source: Verluise (2024)⁴².

Geographically, the situation becomes even more complex: not all NATO members belong to the EU—such as Turkey, Norway or the United Kingdom—and, conversely, some EU Member States—Austria and Ireland, for instance—remain neutral. In practice, there is also a degree of strategic cacophony: while several Eastern European countries perceive Russia as an existential threat due to their proximity and therefore advocate a strong transatlantic link, Southern States tend to focus more on instability in the Sahel and migration flows across the Mediterranean Sea⁴³.

⁴⁰ BARIGAZZI, op. cit., p. 9.

⁴¹ LIBOREIRO, J. (2026, April 23). EU approves €90 billion loan for Ukraine after Hungary lifts controversial veto. *Euronews*. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/04/23/eu-approves-90-billion-loan-for-ukraine-after-hungary-lifts-controversial-veto>

⁴² VERLUISE, P. (2024, July). The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation Map. In *Diploweb AB Pictoris*. <https://www.diploweb.com/Map-The-North-Atlantic-Treaty-Organisation-NATO-in-2024.html>

⁴³ BORRELL FONTELLES, J. (2025, March). *Europa a las riendas de su seguridad*. I Jornadas Geopolíticas del IEEE. La Granja de San Ildefonso, Segovia. <https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/3090998/JG2025.pdf/4f4c39cf-1b18-3ebd-9e6d-3a137bcdd531?t=1765876872146>

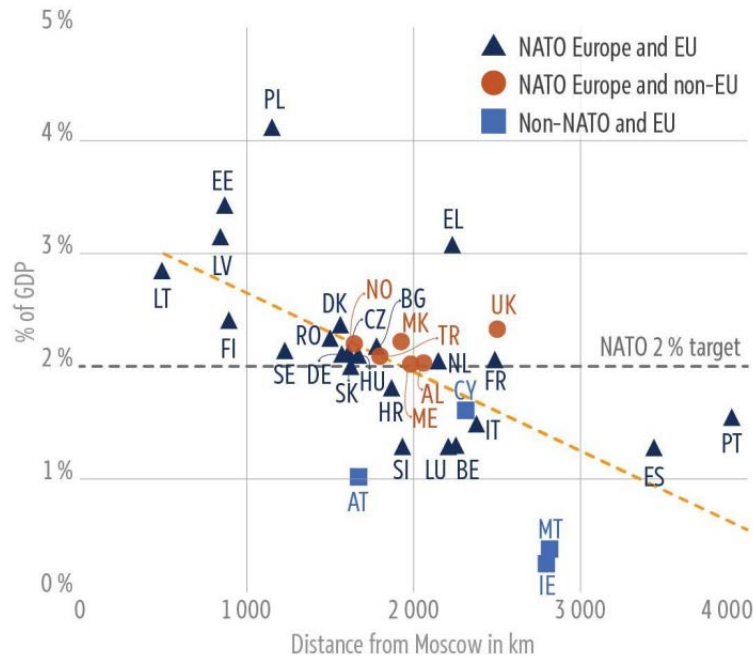


Figure 3: Defence spending (% of GDP) in 2024 by country, according to the distance of its capital from Moscow (km). Source: Clapp et al. (2025)⁴⁴.

In short, as long as formal decision-making in defence continues to rest with the Member States, the EU will not become a fully-fledged global actor. To achieve more coherent strategic planning, it would be advisable to move towards qualified majority voting and to establish a Council of EU Defence Ministers, as Spain proposed during its rotating Council Presidency in 2010⁴⁵. Building a common strategic culture—and achieving greater autonomy—will therefore require stronger and more durable consensus.

3.2. Industrial limitations:

The second major obstacle is the lack of industrial coordination and cooperation.

In the absence of genuine political cohesion, Member States continue to invest in defence independently, thus duplicating efforts and generating significant inefficiencies. Many investments are directed towards incompatible national systems, which undermines interoperability and increases maintenance costs⁴⁶. As an illustration, while the US

⁴⁴ CLAPP, S., HÖFLMAYER, M., LAZAROU, E., & PARI, M. (2025). ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030 Briefing. In *European Parliamentary Research Service*.

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/769566/EPRS_BRI\(2025\)769566_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/769566/EPRS_BRI(2025)769566_EN.pdf)

⁴⁵ GONZÁLEZ BONDIA, A., & JENNE, N. (2010). Entre la iniciativa y la pérdida de competencias: la nueva Política Común de Seguridad y Defensa (PCSD). In *La presidencia española de la Unión Europea (2010)* (pp. 99-105).

<https://obs-europa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/barbc3a9-2010-entre-la-irrelevancia-internacional-y-el-aprendizaje-institucional-la-presidencia-espac3b1ola-de-la-unic3b3n-europea-1.pdf>

⁴⁶ SÁNCHEZ MARTÍN, P. (2026, February). *La industria de la defensa europea: retos, oportunidades y perspectivas*. IEEE Opinion Paper No. 20/2026. <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/industria-defensa-europea-2026>

operates 33 different weapons systems, European countries collectively use around 179, more than five times as many⁴⁷.

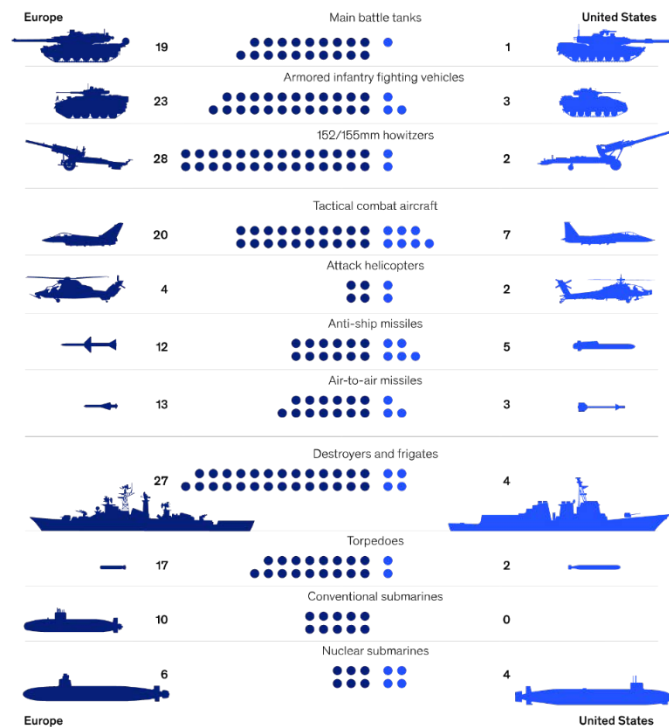


Figure 4: Weapons systems of Europe (179, left) and the U.S. (33, right). Note: data derived from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). Source: Chinn et al. (2024)⁴⁸.

In this unfavourable environment for cooperation, it is logical that the European Defence Industrial Strategy⁴⁹ (EDIS) proposes that Member States jointly procure at least 40% of their military equipment by 2030.

Such fragmented decision-making is also reflected in the difficulty of reaching consensus within PESCO. Despite its considerable potential, many of these projects tend to focus on relatively modest capabilities, fail to address major strategic issues—such as transport, missile defence, or intelligence—, and are constrained by national interests⁵⁰.

⁴⁷ CHINN, D., GRIEBMANN, N., LAVANDIER, H., OCEJO, R., OTTO, T., & WAGNER, K. (2024). Innovation and efficiency: Increasing Europe's defense capabilities. *McKinsey & Company*. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/aerospace-and-defense/our-insights/innovation-and-efficiency-increasing-europes-defense-capabilities#/>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ EUROPEAN COMMISSION. (2024, March 5). *A new European Defence Industrial Strategy: Achieving EU readiness through a responsive and resilient European Defence Industry*. https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/643c4a00-0da9-4768-83cd-a5628f5c3063_en?filename=EDIS%20Joint%20Communication.pdf

⁵⁰ MARTÍ SEMPERE, C. (2024, May 6). *Una revisión de la Colaboración Estructurada Permanente*. Real Instituto Elcano. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/una-revision-de-la-colaboracion-estructurada-permanente/>

Indeed, former Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker once described PESCO as the “*sleeping beauty*”⁵¹.

The frequent use of Article 346 TFEU, which allows Member States to invoke exemptions from the defence internal market on grounds of national security, further exacerbates this inefficiency⁵². As a result, while Member States’ defence spending is high in absolute terms—and comparable to that of other major powers—, its overall impact is limited, as resources are allocated more towards volume than coordination. In addition, over several decades, parts of industrial production in strategic sectors were progressively outsourced in pursuit of lower costs and more efficient global supply chains⁵³. Although this model proved effective in general terms, at the European level it generated inefficiencies and created logistical dependencies that now constrain the EU’s responsiveness in an increasingly competitive environment⁵⁴. In this regard, Belgian Prime Minister De Wever warned that dependence on Russian energy, Chinese manufacturing, and US military protection risks turning Europe into a “*slave*”⁵⁵.

Taken together, as long as these inefficiencies persist, European strategic autonomy will remain difficult to achieve.

3.3. Technical limitations:

The fragmentation of capabilities described above has a direct strategic consequence: it reinforces structural dependence on NATO and, ultimately, on Washington.

Trends in Member States’ defence spending show that, after decades of sustained decline driven by the so-called “*peace dividend*”⁵⁶, investment only began to rise significantly again from 2022 onwards, as a direct consequence of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. This turning point, however, does not alter the fact that Europe remains

⁵¹ JUNCKER, J.-C. (2017, December 11). *The Sleeping Beauty of the Lisbon Treaty*. Twitter/X.

<https://x.com/junckereu/status/940175532196589568?lang=en>

⁵² DESCALZO GONZÁLEZ, A. (2025, October 10). La contratación pública en Defensa y el artículo o 346 del TFUE. *La Razón*. https://www.larazon.es/economia/contratacion-publica-defensa-articulo-346-tfue_2025101068e884fee81f41796942700a.html

⁵³ DELL’ANNA, A., & BECQUET, L. (2026, January 8). *La externalización destruye tres veces más empleo del que crea en la UE*. Euronews. <https://es.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/01/08/externalizacion-destruye-empleo-crea-ue>

⁵⁴ SÁNCHEZ MARTÍN, op. cit., p. 11.

⁵⁵ DE WEVER, B. (2026, January 20). Redefining Europe’s Place in the World. In *Reuters*. World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHSML4Y3grc>

⁵⁶ BERMÚDEZ, Á. (2025, March 17). *Dividendos de la paz: cómo se benefició Europa con el fin de la Guerra Fría y cuánto deberá invertir ahora en defensa*. BBC News Mundo. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articulos/cx2gk6ve85jo>

dependent on critical capabilities, such as nuclear deterrence, intelligence, and certain operational command structures.

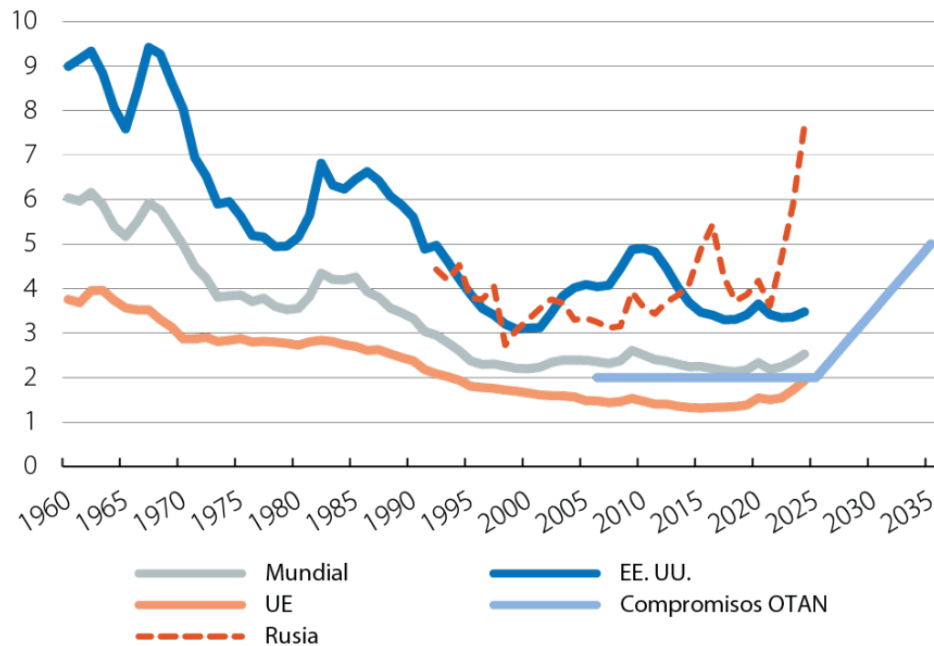


Figure 5: Global defence spending and NATO commitments. Note: data derived from the World Bank and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and based on the NATO definition. Source: Martínez Turégano (2025)⁵⁷.

Moreover, within current fiscal frameworks, financing such a rapid increase remains challenging. Despite the Commission’s efforts to introduce flexibility, national budgets are structured around extensive welfare systems—pensions, healthcare, and education—which account for the bulk of public expenditure. Redirecting resources towards defence therefore entails politically costly decisions⁵⁸. In this context, some Member States have considered resorting to debt issuance, both at national level and potentially jointly, following precedents such as the pandemic response⁵⁹. In short, even where there is consensus on the need to strengthen military capabilities, the question of financing remains complex.

⁵⁷ MARTÍNEZ TURÉGANO, D. (2025, August 28). Un 5% del PIB en defensa: ¿por qué?, ¿para qué?, ¿es factible? *CaixaBank Research*. https://www.caixabankresearch.com/es/economia-y-mercados/sector-publico/5-del-pib-defensa-factible#footnote_B7EKZ3Kz37UQViSep9rOYU7fFXk4LMLVu0Izi0YPo_mrlHJ1Xqb3BR

⁵⁸ METSOLA, R. (2026, February 3). *Diálogo con la presidenta del Parlamento Europeo*. CaixaForum Madrid. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CF1lhcdLhgM>

⁵⁹ RECACHA, V. (2025, April 12). España propone un «instrumento común» en la UE para acelerar la subida del gasto en defensa. *The Objective*. <https://theobjective.com/economia/2025-04-12/gobierno-propone-instrumento-financiero-ue/>

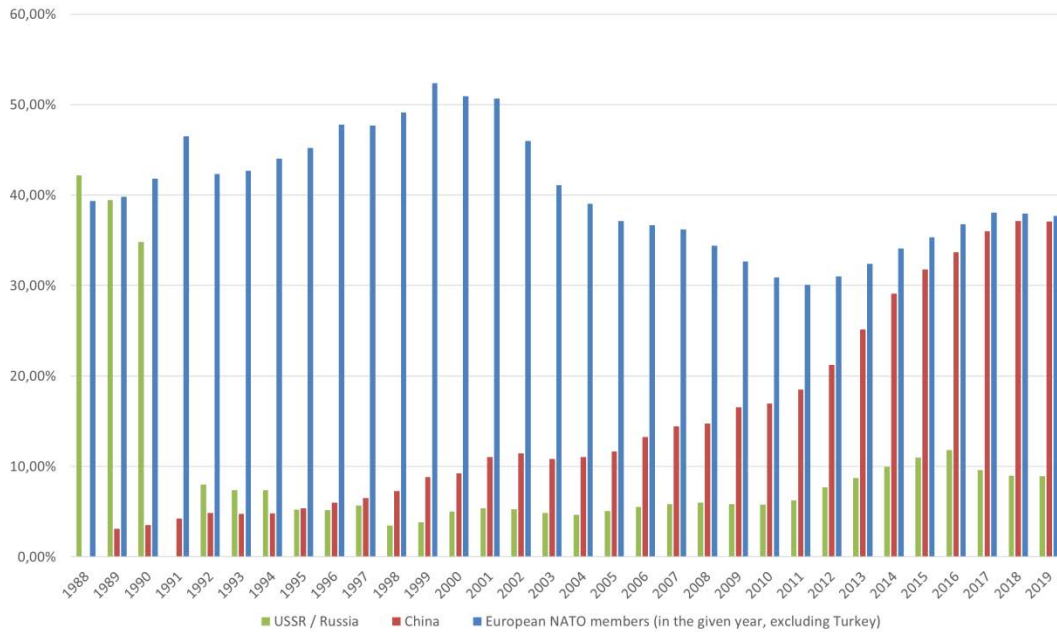


Figure 6: Military budget as a percentage of U.S. military expenditure (1988–2019). Note: data derived from SIPRI. Source: Winston (2020)⁶⁰.

Compounding this, the US—contributing over one trillion dollars annually—accounts for roughly two-thirds of NATO’s total budget^{61, 62}. The scale of this disparity is reflected in comparative trends in global military spending, with US financial dominance translating into a decisive technological advantage. This helps to explain why, even when Member States increase their defence investment, a significant proportion of that expenditure is channelled into procuring equipment developed by the American defence industry⁶³. The International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR), a body of US government rules, further deepens this dependence by conditioning the use of European military systems that incorporate US technology⁶⁴. Indeed, the US supplies up to 60% of EU arms imports⁶⁵, a considerable share for a partner that has become unpredictable.

⁶⁰ WINSTON. (2020, August). *Military budget as % of USA military expenditures*. Wikipedia. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e7/Military_budget_in_%25_of_USA_military_expenditures_1988-2019.svg

⁶¹ NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANISATION [NATO]. (2025). *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025)*. <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/finance/def-exp-2025-en.pdf>

⁶² MERINO, Á. (2025, October). El gasto en defensa de los países de la OTAN. *El Orden Mundial*. <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/gasto-defensa-paises-otan/>

⁶³ MEJINO-LÓPEZ, J., & WOLFF, G. B. (2025). Europe’s dependence on US foreign military sales and what to do about it. *Bruegel*, 27. https://www.bruegel.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/PB%2027_6.pdf

⁶⁴ FIOTT, D. (2019). The poison pill: EU defence on US terms? In *European Union Institute For Security Studies (EUISS)*. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/7%20US-EU%20defence%20industries.pdf>

⁶⁵ MERINO, Á. (2024, May 15). *Las empresas de armas más grandes del mundo*. *El Orden Mundial*. <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/empresas-armas-mas-grandes-mundo/>

Calls to raise defence spending to 5% of GDP in order to relieve the “*American taxpayer*”⁶⁶ also reflect a transformation in the transatlantic relationship. For leaders such as Pedro Sánchez, this budgetary target appears “*arbitrary*”⁶⁷. And while Emmanuel Macron previously spoke of NATO’s “*brain death*”⁶⁸, concerns over so-called “*decoupling*”, a potential disengagement of the US, have intensified in recent weeks⁶⁹. At a conference in Washington, Trump criticised certain allies for being “*unwilling*”⁷⁰ to assume greater responsibilities, despite having been protected “*for many, many years [...] from horrible outside sources*”⁷¹. In light of his threats over Greenland and Europe’s reluctance to engage in Iran, Josep Borrell has suggested that the Alliance may be entering a phase of “*hibernation*”⁷², i.e., formal structures remain in place, but political momentum dissipates as mutual trust erodes.

In sum, the defence of the continent rests on an uncertain American leadership that is difficult to replace in the short term. Moreover, initiatives aimed at strengthening European strategic autonomy represent a complex budgetary puzzle and may, paradoxically, deepen dependence on the US.

3.4. Limitations reinforce one another and perpetuate dependence:

Ultimately, the EU conceals three structural limitations. This situation can be summarised as a vicious circle, whereby the absence of political will and of a shared strategic culture prevents industrial integration and drives Member States to acquire capabilities in isolation, often turning to the US market. The lack of a common and sovereign technological base entrenches the need for NATO’s security umbrella and, in turn, discourages meaningful debate within Europe. In essence, these limitations are both the cause and the consequence of our strategic dependence.

⁶⁶ TRUMP, D. (2019, April). *Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and US President Donald Trump during their meeting in the Oval Office of the White House*. Washington, D.C., USA. <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2019/04/02/remarks>

⁶⁷ SÁNCHEZ, P. (2026, March 16). The Only European Leader Defying Trump? En *The Rest Is Politics: Leading*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEzKyw2rbhs&t=4s>

⁶⁸ MACRON, E. (2019, November 7). *NATO is becoming brain-dead*. The Economist. <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>

⁶⁹ VINO CUR, N., & Sheftalovich, Z. (2026, February). Europe begins its slow retreat from US dependence. *POLITICO*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-begins-retreat-united-states-dependence-donald-trump-rocks-transatlantic-relationship/>

⁷⁰ TRUMP, D. (2026, March 16). *President participates in a lunch with the Trump Kennedy Center Board Members*. Washington, D.C., USA. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LseQ1ecp-ZM>

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² BORRELL FONTELLES, op. cit., p. 10.

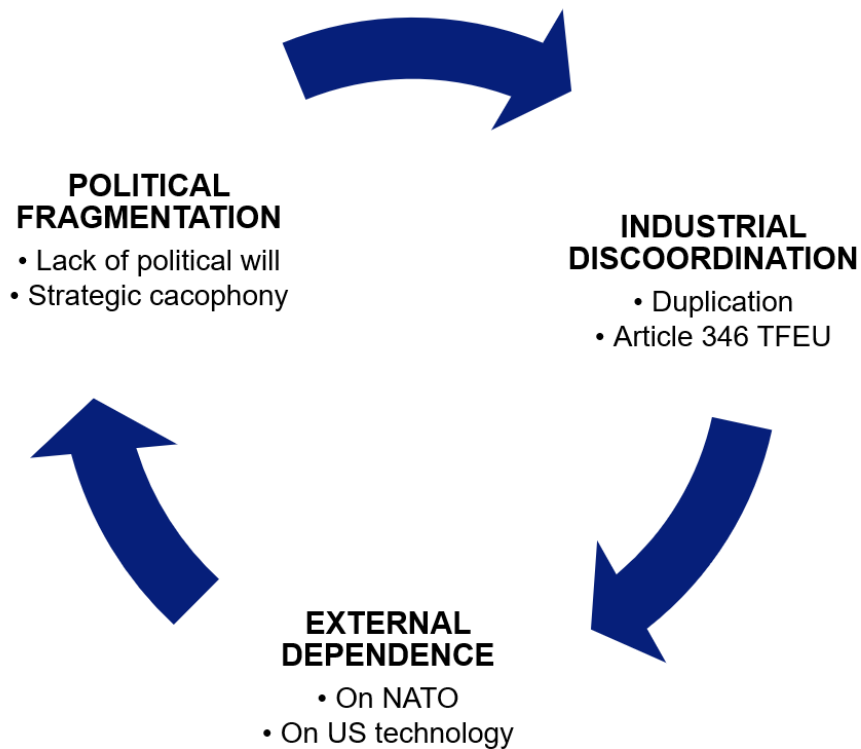


Figure 7: Vicious circle of EU defence. Source: own elaboration.

Under this self-reinforcing dynamic, the EU begins to resemble a *de facto* US protectorate and drifts away from geopolitical relevance. As Mario Draghi has noted, Europe possesses sufficient capital to act autonomously, yet fails to organise itself and translate that potential into real influence⁷³. In any case, in a context of “*polycrisis*”⁷⁴, the current model appears increasingly anachronistic and citizens themselves seem to be calling on the Union to strengthen its position in the world⁷⁵. Without a shift capable of breaking this cycle, so-called strategic autonomy will remain—at best—a rhetorical aspiration.

⁷³ DRAGHI, M. (2024). *The future of European competitiveness*.

https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/draghi-report_en#paragraph_47059

⁷⁴ JUNCKER, J.-C. (2016, June 21). *Speech at the Annual General Meeting of the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV)*. Athens, Greece. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/SPEECH_16_2293

⁷⁵ EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. (2025, September). *Spring 2025 survey*.

<https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3572?etrans=en>

4. EUROPE'S STRATEGIC DILEMMA: POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

The foregoing assessment points to a strategic dilemma that is difficult to ignore. If the current structure perpetuates dependence on the US, the EU must decide how far it is willing to transform its model. This situation compels a reassessment of the balance between integration, sovereignty, and NATO.

The different alternatives can be arranged according to their level of ambition: at the most federal end lies the proposal to create a genuine European army, implying a fully integrated common defence; at an intermediate level, there are institutional arrangements aimed at improving coordination among Member States; and, finally, more pragmatic alternatives focus on strengthening specific capabilities within existing structures.

4.1. The federal response, a European army:

The most ambitious proposal to address structural limitations is to move towards a genuine common defence, completing the integration process with the creation of a European army. From a federalist perspective, this solution is logical: having unified armed forces, a single command structure, and a shared doctrine would allow the EU to overcome fragmentation, generate economies of scale, and achieve credible deterrence.

However, this option entails political and strategic obstacles. The creation of European armed forces would require an unprecedented transfer of sovereignty and would undoubtedly demand a profound reform of the TEU, something difficult to achieve in a system that still operates by unanimity. Moreover, differing strategic cultures, divergent threat perceptions, and the presence of traditionally neutral countries complicate any attempt at full military integration. Within NATO itself, voices such as that of the Secretary General have already warned that the creation of parallel military structures is unrealistic, would lead to duplication, and could ultimately weaken the coherence of the European security system⁷⁶.

These challenges are compounded by significant practical difficulties. The armed forces of European countries operate highly diverse weapons systems and administrative

⁷⁶ RUTTE, M. (2026, January 26). *Remarks by NATO Secretary General at the meeting of the European Parliament's Committee On Foreign Affairs (AFET) And Committee On Security And Defence (SEDE)*. Brussels, Belgium. <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2026/01/26/remarks-by-nato-secretary-general-mark-rutte-at-the-meeting-of-the-european-parliaments-committee-on-security-and-defence>

procedures⁷⁷. Put differently, interoperability remains imperfect and military mobility across the continent continues to face bureaucratic barriers, which—in some cases—delay the movement of heavy equipment between Member States by weeks⁷⁸.

Even if these logistical issues were resolved, a fundamental question would remain, that of nuclear deterrence in the Euro-Atlantic space, currently guaranteed by the US within NATO⁷⁹. France, the EU's only nuclear power, maintains an independent deterrence outside allied mechanisms. While the possibility of extending its coverage to the entire continent has been raised, its feasibility remains uncertain⁸⁰. Would Macron genuinely be willing to “*nuclearise*” Europe, or to sacrifice Paris for Riga? What is more, a clear political authority capable of authorising the use of force would be required, and the EU currently lacks such a decision-making centre.

For these reasons, while this proposal may represent the most coherent political solution, it also is the most ambitious and the least plausible. Ultimately, the debate over its feasibility reflects Europe's core dilemma: to move towards much deeper integration or to accept that autonomy will continue to rest on twenty-seven “*bonsai*”⁸¹ armies and NATO.

4.2. The intermediate response, a European Security Council:

Naturally, Brussels has begun to explore intermediate solutions that do not require full military integration. Among these, the creation of a European Security Council—an idea introduced into political debate by the then German Chancellor Angela Merkel⁸²—stands out. Although this initiative was never formalised, it remains one of the most frequently cited when seeking to strengthen cooperation without fundamentally reforming the

⁷⁷ CARDERO OZARÍN, D. (2025). Los tres pecados que impiden hablar de un ejército europeo. *Revista Ejército*, 998, 60-65. <https://ejercito.defensa.gob.es/Galerias/multimedia/revista-ejercito/2025/998/accesible/998-revista-ejercito.pdf>

⁷⁸ See: https://transport.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/commission-moves-towards-military-schengen-and-transformation-defence-industry-2025-11-19_en?prefLang=es

⁷⁹ NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANISATION [NATO]. (2012, May 12). *Deterrence and Defence Posture Review*. <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2012/05/20/deterrence-and-defence-posture-review>

⁸⁰ MACRON, E. (2026, March 2). *Discours du Président de la République sur la dissuasion nucléaire de la France*. Île-Longue, France. <https://uk.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/discours-du-president-sur-la-dissuasion-nucleaire>

⁸¹ BORRELL FONTELLES, J. (2022, August 27). Foreign interventions and the future of European defence. In *European Union External Action Service [EEAS]*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/foreign-interventions-and-future-european-defence_en

⁸² MERKEL, A. (2018, November 13). *Speech to the European Parliament*. Strasbourg, France. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/service/archive/speech-by-federal-chancellor-angela-merkel-to-the-european-parliament-strasbourg-13-november-2018-1550688>

Treaties. The Commissioner for Defence and Space has himself stressed that “*this is exactly what is now very much needed*”⁸³.

The logic underpinning this proposal is relatively straightforward: if one of the main limitations of the CFSP and CSDP lies in the difficulty of decision-making among twenty-seven Member States with differing strategic perspectives, a smaller body could facilitate coordination in times of crisis. This Council, partly inspired by the United Nations model and the E5 group⁸⁴, would function as a permanent forum for a limited number of countries—likely those with the greatest military capabilities or political weight—with the aim of defining common positions, coordinating responses, and providing clearer direction for European security and defence initiatives.

From an institutional standpoint, this solution offers several advantages. First, it is relatively feasible, as it does not require the creation of new armed forces or a significant transfer of sovereignty. Second, it could substantially improve European governance by enabling a smaller group of leaders to take decisions more swiftly. Such a body could also incorporate non-EU actors, such as the United Kingdom—a leading military powers—or Turkey.

Nevertheless, this proposal also faces significant obstacles. The first concerns its potential impact on the EU’s political cohesion. It could reinforce the perception of a multi-speed Europe in which a core group of countries takes strategic decisions, while others are relegated to a secondary role. Although this logic of differentiated integration has been advocated by several policymakers, it would also generate tensions within a project that is, at least formally, based on equality among Member States. The second criticism relates to the legitimacy of decisions taken in a restricted format. While unanimity in European foreign policy is often criticised for its slowness, it also ensures that all countries have an equal voice on matters directly affecting their sovereignty. Replacing it with more flexible mechanisms might improve efficiency, but would—to a certain extent—reduce the perceived legitimacy of the decisions among those excluded from the core.

⁸³ KUBILIUS, A. (2026, January 11). *Europe under pressure*. Folk och Försvar National Conference, Stockholm, Sweden.

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/speech_26_69/SPEECH_26_69_EN.pdf

⁸⁴ BURZEC, M. (2026, February 20). El grupo E5 se reúne en Polonia para garantizar la unidad y la seguridad en Europa. *Euronews*. <https://es.euronews.com/2026/02/20/grupo-e5-se-reune-en-polonia-garantizar-unidad-y-seguridad-europa>

Consequently, the European Security Council represents a middle-ground solution between the federal ambition of a European army and the preservation of the current status quo. While it would not resolve all structural limitations, it could contribute to improved coordination in the short term.

4.3. The pragmatic response, autonomy within NATO:

Alongside more ambitious proposals, there is a third, more pragmatic alternative: strengthening the European pillar within NATO in order to achieve greater autonomy. This approach appears more feasible within existing frameworks, as it requires the reconfiguration of institutional, industrial, and military structures originally designed to externalise defence.

As the German leader Friedrich Merz noted at the Munich Security Conference, Europe's dependence was "*self-inflicted*"⁸⁵ and must therefore be corrected through greater political will. Mark Rutte has likewise praised this "*real shift in mindset*"⁸⁶ in Europe. Key initiatives in this regard include developing a more integrated European defence industry; expanding joint procurement programmes; reducing technological dependence on third countries in strategic sectors; and even establishing European operational structures capable of planning and conducting military operations. At the same time, it would be necessary to further enhance interoperability among national armed forces, standardise weapons systems, and streamline logistical procedures.

To overcome institutional deadlock, align EU and NATO action, and break this cycle of dependence, more flexible forms of cooperation must be pursued⁸⁷. A model based on coalitions of the willing—similar to those developed in the eurozone or in support of Ukraine—would allow different countries to participate in specific initiatives according to their capabilities and political will. While this approach would consolidate a variable-geometry model of participation, Javier Solana has suggested that it could facilitate the

⁸⁵ MERZ, F. (2026, February 13). *Rede von Bundeskanzler bei der Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz*. Munich, Germany. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMHEVx_G3FM

⁸⁶ RUTTE, M. (2026, February 12). *Press conference following the meeting of NATO Ministers of Defence in Brussels*. NATO. <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2026/02/12/press-conference-by-the-nato-secretary-general-following-the-meeting-of-nato-ministers-of-defence>

⁸⁷ FIOTT, D. (2018). Strategic autonomy: Towards 'European sovereignty' in defence? In *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)*.

https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%2012_Strategic%20Autonomy.pdf

implementation of concrete projects⁸⁸. The aim shall not be to create a single European army, but rather to ensure that the twenty-seven national forces operate as a coherent system within NATO⁸⁹.

In sum, this third option appears to be the most realistic way of addressing Europe's strategic dilemma. Although it does not entail a radical transformation, it offers a gradual pathway to strengthening the continent's defence capabilities without fracturing its institutions. The key question is whether Europe can build a more balanced transatlantic relationship in which both pillars—American and European—contribute symmetrically to their stability.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Europe is still in its geopolitical adolescence. For decades, it has lived under the American security umbrella, assuming that it could externalise its defence indefinitely. That decision—understandable in its historical context—allowed the European project to take precedence and the welfare state to consolidate. However, the gradual erosion of the liberal international order, the rise of new powers, and shifting priorities in Washington have exposed an uncomfortable reality: European prosperity has been underpinned by a logic of subordination.

Despite its apparent complexity, the EU does not possess formal structures dedicated to defence, but rather mechanisms for external crisis management within the framework of the CSDP. Indeed, there are deep-seated political, industrial, and technical limitations that perpetuate a condition of dependence. Breaking this vicious circle requires firm political will.

In this context, the future of European defence appears to oscillate between three possible paths: the creation of a fully integrated European army, arguably the most effective in theory yet unfeasible in practice; the establishment of a European Security Council, a viable but complex solution; or the strengthening of the European pillar within NATO, the most pragmatic and realistic option. This latter approach would help to bridge

⁸⁸ SOLANA, J. (2026, April 15). Interview "El Objetivo". In *La Sexta*. https://www.lasexta.com/programas/el-objetivo/javier-solana-augura-acuerdo-eeuu-iran-pocos-dias-trump-trata-todas-sus-fuerzas-salir-este-embrollo_2026041569dfed53b7e0a27eb99918f6.html

⁸⁹ SCHULZE ZUMKLEY, G. (2026, March 11). *Visit to the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany*. Madrid, Spain.

the gap between ambition and capability, foster the development of the defence industry, and enhance military interoperability without fracturing existing structures.

Ultimately, European strategic autonomy does not consist in replicating American military power or severing the transatlantic bond, but rather in maturing within the Alliance so as to be able to act decisively when our interest so requires. Otherwise, the widening gap now emerging could give rise to another schism within the Western world.

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