

La defensa entre dos pilares: la OTAN, la UE y la batalla por la voz europea

Resumen:

El artículo analiza el resurgir del debate sobre el «pilar europeo de la OTAN» en el contexto de la guerra de Ucrania, la reelección de Donald Trump y la Estrategia de Seguridad Nacional de EE. UU. de 2025, que reconfiguran la relación transatlántica y relativizan el papel de la UE como socio esencial. Desde una perspectiva de las relaciones entre organizaciones internacionales, se examina cómo la OTAN y la UE, instituciones con solapamientos en miembros y funciones, pueden articular un pilar europeo principalmente funcional y normativo —más que orgánico—, capaz de sostener la cohesión aliada y de responder a un eventual *burden shifting* estadounidense. El trabajo combina un marco institucionalista con el debate reciente sobre el pilar europeo para identificar obstáculos políticos e institucionales, así como oportunidades ligadas al planeamiento de capacidades y a la base tecnológica e industrial de defensa europea, poniendo el foco en la necesidad de una mayor convergencia entre el Proceso de Planeamiento de Defensa OTAN (NDPP) y los instrumentos de la UE.

Keywords:

Pilar europeo de la OTAN, relaciones OTAN-UE, Proceso Planeamiento Defensa OTAN (NDPP), industria europea de defensa, seguridad euroatlántica.

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Introduction

In 2024, European institutions received the Niinistö report, which called for a greater contribution from the European Union (EU) to its security "as part of a re-balanced transatlantic relationship"¹. The war in Ukraine, Donald Trump's return to the White House and the 2025 United States (US) National Security Strategy^{2, 3} have reopened the debate on the European pillar of NATO, questioning the structural nature of the US military presence in Europe and relativising the EU's role as an essential partner⁴. Added to this is growing US pressure on Greenland, which fuels the risk of a schism in the West and, in the extreme, a NATO very different from the one we know today, which may even implode⁵.

The possibility of a 'dormant'⁶ or hibernating NATO – formally intact, but with much less commitment from the US – would force European allies to take on a substantially greater share of the continent's defence. A Europeanisation⁷ of the Alliance would have considerable political, financial, military and industrial costs⁸. If it continues to exist, Europeans would soon have to lead NATO⁹.

¹ NIINISTÖ, S. Safer Together: Strengthening Europe's Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness. Brussels, European Commission, 2024, p. 123.

² COLOM PIELLA, G. *From liberal hegemony to America First doctrine: implications of the NSS 2025 for Europe*. IEEE Analysis Document, 85/2025. https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieeee/hegemonia_liberal_2025_dieeeo110, and MÁRQUEZ DE LA RUBIA, F. *The United States National Security Strategy (2025): analysis and comparison with the NSS 2022*. IEEE Analysis Document, 84/2025. [The United States National Security Strategy \(2025\): analysis and comparison with the NSS 2022 - CESEDEN](https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieeee/nss_2025_analysis_comparison)

Note: All hyperlinks in this article are active as of 12 January 2026.

³ EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. *At a glance, the 2025 US National Security Strategy*. 2025. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2025/779261/EPRS_ATA\(2025\)779261_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2025/779261/EPRS_ATA(2025)779261_EN.pdf)

⁴ LINDSTROM, G. and TARDY, T. "The scope of EU–NATO cooperation," in Tardy, T. (ed.) *The EU and NATO: The essential partners*. Paris, European Union Institute for Security Studies / Publications Office of the European Union, 2019, pp. 5–12. https://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/08e9e07b-cd30-11e9-992f-01aa75ed71a1.0001.01/DOC_1

⁵ BERGMANN, M. 'The NSS That Could Destroy the NATO Alliance', Centre for Strategic and International Studies. 2025. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/nss-could-destroy-nato-alliance>

⁶ MAITRA, S. 'The Best NATO Is a Dormant NATO. Less Reliance on America Would Yield a Stronger Alliance and a Safer Europe', *Foreign Affairs*. 2024. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/europe/best-nato-dormant-nato?check_logged_in=1

⁷ DAALDER, I., GRAND, C. and SCHWARZER, D. (eds.) "A New Transatlantic Bargain. The Case for Building a Strong European Pillar," *Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs*. 2025. https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/Belfer_A%20New%20Transatlantic%20Bargain_Report_Pages.pdf

⁸ BARRY, B. *et al.* "Defending Europe Without the United States: Costs and Consequences." *International Institute for Strategic Studies*. 2025. <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2025/05/defending-europe-without-the-united-states-costs-and-consequences/>

⁹ VANDIVER, J. "US sets deadline for Europe to lead NATO by 2027," *Stars and Stripes*. 7 December 2025. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/2025/12/08/pentagon-deadline-nato-defense-2027/>

In this context, it is urgent to define what the "European pillar of NATO"¹⁰ is, so that it ceases to be a purely rhetorical construct and begins to take shape as a possible European response to a potential shift of burdens from the US to Europe.

Historically, the defence of the continent was first framed in the 1948 Brussels Treaty and, from 1949, in NATO, which brought together the main European allies with the US and Canada. Jolyon Howorth offers a masterful summary of how the problem of Europe's defence has evolved since the end of the Cold War:

"The 'solution' was initially sought in identifying a distinct European capacity from within NATO. When that proved unworkable, the challenge of EU 'autonomy' led to the launch of CSDP. The limited ambition of that policy area, in the context of mounting tensions in Eastern Europe, led to a return to the idea of the 'Europeanisation of NATO'. With the re-election of Donald Trump in 2024, the challenge has become the *European replacement of NATO*. The stakes could not be higher."¹¹.

Today, the question is no longer whether Europe should contribute more, but how to organise that contribution within an Alliance in the midst of an identity crisis and subject to an increasingly transactional logic¹². This paper examines the debate on the 'European pillar of NATO' from the perspective of relations between international organisations, reviewing how that pillar has been conceived, how the European contribution¹³ to the cohesion and objectives of the Alliance has been approached, and how new practices might be implemented in terms of specific structures and roles. It thus examines how NATO and the EU, as institutions with overlapping memberships and functions, can give political form and practical expression to a European pillar that is primarily functional and normative, rather than organic, and that is capable of sustaining allied cohesion while giving substance to the EU's voice in Euro-Atlantic security, despite the strategic divergences that persist among Europeans and, in particular, with the US¹⁴, which today

¹⁰ TARDY, T. *The narrow but unavoidable path of NATO's European pillar*. 2025 a, p. 8.

<https://institutdelors.eu/publications/le-chemin-etroit-mais-incontournable-du-pilier-europeen-de-lotan/>

¹¹ HOWORTH, J. "European Defence and NATO: From Competition to Cooperation to Replacement?", *JCMS*, Volume 63. Annual Review. 2025, pp. 156-168. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.70010>

¹² CASTILLA, J. C. *NATO between Washington and The Hague: identity crisis and discourse*. 2025.

https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2766091/la_otan_entre_washington_y_la_haya_2025_dieeee57.pdf/01bab9f4-f4cd-9650-6792-1ae4100f914b?t=1757409522057

¹³ TARDY, T. "The European pillar of NATO. What French leadership?", *Jacques Delors Institute Policy Paper*. 2025b. <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/the-european-pillar-of-nato/>

¹⁴ TARDY, T. *Ibid.* 2025 a, p. 4.

tends to treat the Union more as a rival than as a partner¹⁵; a 'predatory hegemon' in the words of neorealist Stephen M. Walt¹⁶.

Background and issues related to the defence pillar

NATO has been discussing how to strengthen its European component since at least the late 1980s, but key issues remain unresolved. The term 'European pillar of NATO'¹⁷ appeared in the 1991 Strategic Concept and was shortly afterwards associated with the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI)¹⁸, channelled through the Western European Union (WEU), which sought to articulate a European voice on defence within the Alliance, including in the definition of capabilities. With the rise of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the ESDI fell into disuse in the late 1990s and progress was made towards NATO–EU cooperation, crystallising in the 2003 Berlin Plus arrangements to coordinate operations and capabilities. Within this framework, the NATO–EU Capability Group was created as a joint body (at the inter-institutional level, in Koops's terms¹⁹) to coordinate defence planning.

The WEU, which had been virtually inactive in the first decade of this century, was formally dissolved in 2011, while NATO–EU cooperation was relaunched in 2016 through joint declarations and successive implementation reports. However, the notion of a European pillar of the Alliance has remained vague, failing to translate into a specific architecture or a clearly accepted division of roles between the European allies, NATO and the EU.

In this context, a number of questions associated with a possible European defence pillar remain open: which countries to include, who would command operations, and how to reduce dependence on US capabilities. The debate continues over its scope, particularly whether it should encompass all European allies regardless of their EU membership, or

¹⁵ BISCOP, S. "NATO: The Damage Is Done," *Egmont Policy Brief 379*. Brussels, Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations, 2025. https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2025/05/Sven-Biscop_Policy_Brief_379_vFinal.pdf?type=pdf

¹⁶ WALT, S. M. «The Predatory Hegemon», *Foreign Affairs*. 3 de febrero de 2026 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/predatory-hegemon-walt> .

¹⁷ TARDY, T. *Ibid.* 2025a, p. 7.

¹⁸ HOWORTH, J. *European Integration and Defence: The Ultimate Challenge?* Paris, WEU-ISS, 2000, p. 156.

¹⁹ KOOPS, J. A. "Inter-Organisationalism in International Relations: A Multilevel Framework of Analysis," in *Palgrave Handbook of Inter-Organisational Relations in World Politics*. 2017, pp. 189-216.

instead refer primarily to the Union as a political core, or even be built around a smaller group of states.

There is also ongoing discussion about the relationship between the European pillar and strategic autonomy, especially whether the aim is to strengthen NATO or to prepare a possible partial substitute for the US commitment. Finally, the desirable degree of reinforcement of the European defence technological and industrial base is contested, notably how far this can go without generating inefficient duplication.

Added to this are debates on burden-sharing²⁰ and on the possible shifting of responsibility for conventional deterrence onto Europe (burden-shifting)²¹, as well as on the role the EU should play in Euro-Atlantic defence governance: how EU–NATO complementarity is to be substantiated, how visible the Union ought to be and how nuclear deterrence should be reconfigured²².

Theoretical approach to cooperation between NATO and the EU

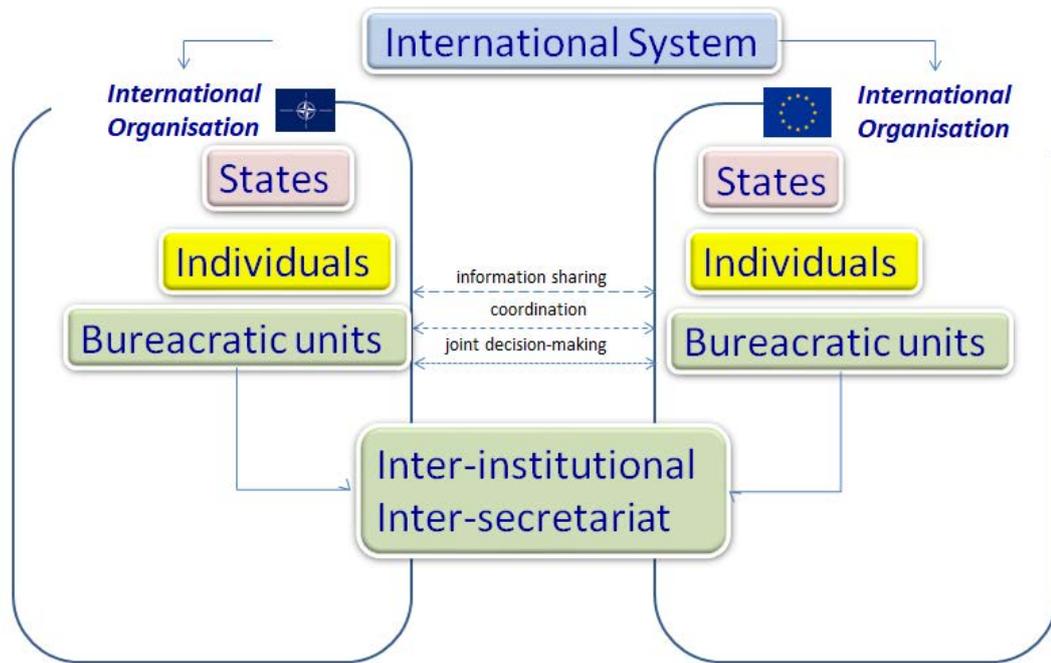
To analyse NATO's European pillar, it is useful to frame the NATO–EU relationship as one between international organisations (interorganisational relations, IOR), in the sense proposed by Rafael Biermann and Joachim Koops²³. This makes it possible to move beyond the mere aggregation of national positions and to consider how the rules, practices and structures of both organisations shape their ability to cooperate and to articulate a recognisable European pillar.

²⁰ RAIK, K. "From Burden-Sharing to Burden-Shifting? Europe at Pains to Adapt to the Changing Transatlantic Alliance", *ICDS Analysis* (International Centre for Defence and Security). 2025. <https://icds.ee/en/from-burden-sharing-to-burden-shifting-europe-at-pains-to-adapt-to-the-changing-transatlantic-alliance/>

²¹ MAITRA, S. "The Europe Question, the Rationale of Burden Shifting, and the Promise of Germany." 2025. <https://www.stimson.org/2025/the-europe-question-the-rationale-of-burden-shifting-and-the-promise-of-germany/>

²² TARDY, T. Ibid. 2025a.

²³ BIERMANN, R. & KOOPS, J. A. "Studying relations among international organisations in world politics: Core concepts, approaches and a research agenda," in BIERMANN, R. & KOOPS, J. A. (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Inter-Organisational Relations in World Politics*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 1–46.



(Own elaboration, based on Biermann (2008) and Koops (2017)) (Castilla, 2024, p. 72)²⁴.

Figure 1. IOR levels of analysis and forms of cooperation

According to Koops, interorganisational relations involve at least five interrelated levels: the international system environment, the member states, individuals (particularly leaders), the bureaucracies of each organisation, and the formal and informal inter-institutional links. In the case of NATO and the EU, their interaction is shaped by the institutional framework: both must adapt their policies and recognise each other as relevant actors if cooperation is to be effective²⁵.

Applied to the NATO–EU case, this relates both to the national strategies of the European allies and to the interaction between the North Atlantic Council (NAC), certain EU institutions and their respective civilian and military structures, as well as to the joint mechanisms that link them (joint declarations, working groups and arrangements such as Berlin Plus).

From a broader institutionalist perspective, W. Richard Scott distinguishes three ‘pillars’ of organisations — regulatory, normative and cultural-cognitive — which provide different types of stability and legitimacy²⁶. The regulatory one rests on formal rules and procedures that channel behaviour; the normative on shared values and expectations

²⁴ CASTILLA [thesis]. Ibid., 2024, p. 72.

²⁵ CASTILLA [thesis]. Ibid., 2024, p. 325.

²⁶ SCOTT, W. R. *Institutions and organizations*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage, 2001.

about what 'ought' to be done; and the cultural-cognitive on internalised frames of reference and meanings. In the NATO–EU context, the Alliance principally embodies a highly developed regulatory pillar for collective defence, while the EU has been shaping the normative and cultural-cognitive dimensions in relation to capabilities, industry and political integration.

The positive evolution of NATO-EU cooperation since 2016, with joint declarations and implementation reports, is coupled with the recent deterioration of the transatlantic relationship, leading to a reconsideration of the approaches presented so far. Although in June 2024 US President Biden accepted the expression 'European pillar of transatlantic security' in the Franco-American roadmap²⁷, Trump's subsequent political shift nullified the value of that gesture. In 2025, Thierry Tardy in effect incorporated the idea of two pillars — European and American ²⁸— defining the former on the basis of three components: the defence policies of the European allies; the CSDP and initiatives relating to the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB); and *ad hoc* multilateral political frameworks linked to defence, such as the coalition of the willing for Ukraine.

²⁷ "The leaders reaffirmed the importance of strengthening the strategic partnership between NATO and the European Union, and of promoting a stronger and more capable European defence that reinforces the *European pillar of transatlantic security* and contributes positively to collective security. The United States supports the growing investments by European allies and partners in military capabilities that strengthen our shared defence, in full complementarity with NATO." <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2024/06/08/french-american-roadmap>

²⁸ TARDY, T. Ibid. 2025a, p. 5.

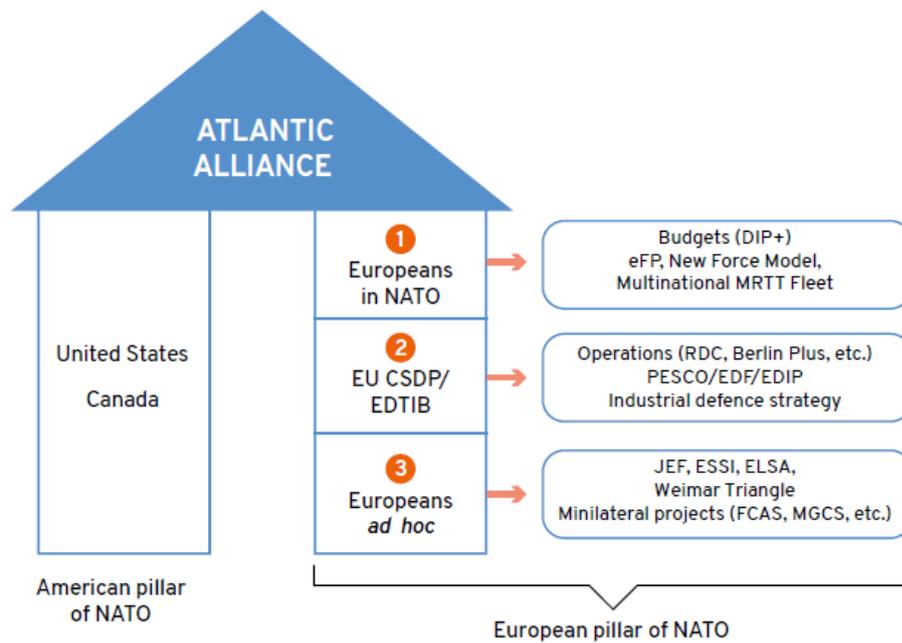


Figure 2. The three components of NATO's European pillar, according to Tardy (2025b)

Precisely this threefold definition of the European pillar highlights a certain tension in Tardy’s proposal, since the three elements clearly extend beyond the strictly allied perimeter that the expression ‘European pillar of NATO’ would appear to imply. In practice, the scheme points instead to a composite European defence pillar — encompassing the CSDP, the EDTIB and *ad hoc* formats — on which the allied European pillar would rest and which cannot be confined to what takes place within NATO’s formal structures.

It is argued that the European allied component cannot at present be understood as an organic, regulatory pillar, but rather as a functional and normative one under construction: a combination of practices, capability decisions and European political convergence which, if properly articulated, could translate into more structured influence for the EU and the European allies in Euro-Atlantic security governance.

Without being exhaustive, it is useful to examine what some key countries understand, explicitly or implicitly, by the ‘European pillar’ in terms of its function (whether strengthening the Alliance, moving towards greater strategic autonomy or preparing for a possible partial replacement of the US commitment), the types of capabilities that Europe

is expected to develop in order to give it real substance, and the more or less precise references to its political and geographical scope.

National perspectives on NATO's European pillar

The United Kingdom employs a broad definition of the European pillar²⁹, without specifying it either politically or instrumentally. This can be inferred from its 2025 National Security Strategy³⁰, which reaffirms a NATO-first defence policy and the objective of strengthening the Alliance through new burden-sharing arrangements and greater European capability efforts, without explicitly using the term 'European pillar of NATO'. In practice, London does not elaborate the concept politically and conceives of the European pillar as the sum of the security and defence efforts of the European countries within the Alliance, rather than as a construct anchored in the EU.

Germany's 2023 National Security Strategy³¹ explicitly refers to the need to "consolidate the European pillar of NATO" and, later, to the "European pillar of the transatlantic defence community", stressing that the more the allies on the continent contribute, the stronger the Alliance will be. Berlin thus adopts a distinctly NATO-centric vision: the European pillar is understood in terms of greater investment, a stronger presence on the eastern flank and better alignment with allied capability goals, while the EU is conceived primarily as a supporting framework to enhance Europe's contribution to NATO, avoiding duplication of structures or any questioning of the link with the US³².

Recent statements by Chancellor Merz call for strengthening Europe in order to move towards greater autonomy from Washington³³, but without specifying how this desirable independence should be articulated or signalling any willingness to loosen reliance on US guarantees, which are no longer perceived as fully secure³⁴. For the moment, the effect is that the concept of the European pillar is being employed as a vehicle for

²⁹ MONAGHAN in BERGMANN, M., BESCH, S., DROIN, M. and MONAGHAN, S. "Strengthening NATO's European Pillar," *CSIS Online Event*. 27 March 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKvGwFDZfiA>

³⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-2025-security-for-the-british-people-in-a-dangerous-world>

³¹ <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-EN.pdf>

³² BESCH in BERGMANN *et al.* Ibid. 2024.

³³ "Germany's Merz vows 'independence' from Trump's America, warning NATO may soon be dead," *Politico*. 23/2/2025. <https://www.politico.eu/article/friedrich-merz-germany-election-united-states-donald-trump-nato/>

³⁴ [Federal Chancellor's New Year's Address 2026 | Federal Government](#)

reinforcement within NATO, rather than as a step towards full European strategic autonomy.

Following France's full reintegration into the Allied military structure in 2009, the "Europeanisation of NATO" remained for years more an aspiration than a reality³⁵. The 2025 French National Strategic Review³⁶ goes a step further by presenting a "rebalanced European pillar of NATO" as a central objective: strengthening the European component within the Alliance so that Europe can sustain the defence of the continent even with more limited US support. This pillar is conceived as a step towards European strategic autonomy, drawing on EU institutions and a core group of states (Germany, the United Kingdom, Poland, Italy, and the Baltic and Nordic countries), with no explicit mention of Spain.

A more ambitious French reading of the European defence pillar would extend beyond the Alliance and refer to the capacity of Europeans to support one another both within and outside NATO, pooling their efforts across all frameworks (NATO, the EU, and multilateral and bilateral formats) to form a robust pillar³⁷. This would entail fully developing the mutual assistance clause in Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and, in the medium term, possibly assigning a greater role to the French nuclear capability in Europe's strategic balance.

In the Italian case, the approach to the 'European pillar' rests on a twofold premise: reaffirming the centrality of NATO as the political-military pillar of the transatlantic link and, at the same time, strengthening the European dimension of defence through the EU and shared industrial programmes. The 2025 National Strategic Security Report³⁸ does not use the term '*pillardo*', but sets out a two-track approach: full integration into the Alliance's deterrence posture vis-à-vis Russia, and the reinforcement of Italy's participation in EU initiatives in order to achieve a more credible and autonomous posture within the European framework. In this way, a possible 'European pillar of NATO' would emerge from the practical convergence between allied planning and European capabilities, without calling into question the role of the Alliance or the US commitment.

³⁵ VÉDRINE, H. "The Consequences of France's Return to NATO's Integrated Military Command". 2012. <https://otan.delegfrance.org/The-Vedrine-report>, cited by HOWORTH, J. Ibid. 2025, p. 156.

³⁶ https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20250713_NP_SGDSN_Plaquette_RNS2025_FR.pdf

³⁷ DROIN in BERGMANN *et al.* Ibid. 2024.

³⁸ *Per Una Strategia Di Sicurezza Nazionale*, Rapporto [Sicurezza.pdf](#).

The Polish government approved a new National Security Strategy in July 2025, updating the 2020 version, although for the moment only its main points have been made public on the official website³⁹. In essence, its approach to the European pillar coincides with the German one: NATO remains the cornerstone of Poland's security and defence, while the EU is viewed as a complementary framework for capability development and political cohesion.

Poland seeks to shape its security policy in relation to NATO and the EU by maintaining its strategic partnership with the US⁴⁰, intensifying regional and bilateral cooperation, and participating in *ad hoc* coalitions, but without presenting the European pillar as an alternative to US leadership.

Spain's 2021 National Security Strategy, under the heading of 'European strategic autonomy', stresses that deepening EU–NATO complementarity is an essential pillar of European security, and that a Europe with greater capabilities contributes to a stronger Alliance. In 2025, the process of reviewing this document was launched⁴¹. Thus far, Spain's position is broadly similar to Italy's: both seek to harmonise their security and defence policies within NATO and the EU, promoting the strengthening of the European pillar inside the Alliance. In line with this, Spain has developed a particularly close relationship with Türkiye — as well as with other countries — in the fields of security, defence and the defence-related industry⁴².

In a sense, Türkiye shares the United Kingdom's broad, Alliance-centred conception of the European pillar. Ankara bases its position on its non-public National Security Policy Document (the 'Red Book') and perceives reluctance on the part of some European partners (France, Austria, Greece and Cyprus) to integrate it into EU defence initiatives. Recent analyses point to three possible trajectories for the allied European pillar: that the debate gradually fades and dependence on the US persists; that a strong pillar is consolidated which fully includes Türkiye (an unlikely scenario); or, more plausibly, that

³⁹ [National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland - Chancellery of the Prime Minister - Gov.pl Portal](#)

⁴⁰ LORENZ, W. and PIETREWICZ, O. "NATO Summit in The Hague: Will the Alliance Maintain Its Credibility?", *PISM Bulletin*. 25 June 2025. <https://pism.pl/publications/nato-summit-in-the-hague-will-the-alliance-maintain-its-credibility>

⁴¹ https://www.boe.es/diario_boe/txt.php?id=BOE-A-2025-10370

⁴² BUENO, A. and SOLER I LECHA, E. "Despite the EU: Spain's Security and Defence Cooperation with Türkiye", *CATS Network Papers*, 18. Berlin, Centre for Applied Türkiye Studies (CATS), Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 2025. https://www.cats-network.eu/assets/cats/CATS_Network_Paper_Briefs/CATS_Network_Paper_No._18_17.06.2025.pdf

the EU strengthens its defence role without Türkiye, fragmenting the European pillar while Ankara relies on NATO and on bilateral agreements with partners such as Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom and Norway⁴³. This dilemma illustrates the extent to which the configuration of the European pillar is shaped by internal political tensions within Europe and by the treatment of key allies on the EU's periphery.

Taken together, these national perspectives show that, beyond the consensus on the need for greater European effort, there is no single conception of NATO's European pillar. The United Kingdom tends to identify it with the sum of the contributions of all European allies; Germany and Poland use it as a vehicle for strengthening the Alliance from within; France conceives it as a step towards broader strategic autonomy; Italy and Spain seek to balance NATO and the EU through parallel efforts that strengthen the European dimension without questioning the transatlantic link; and Türkiye aspires not to be marginalised in any future configuration. Against this backdrop, proposals by experts such as Thierry Tardy and Sven Biscop offer useful frameworks for systematising the different ways of understanding what this pillar should be and how it might be articulated in practice.

Other exploratory visions

Between 2018 and 2019, Biscop viewed Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) as the main route to establishing a European defence pillar with integrated forces capable of operating under either the NATO or the EU flag. He argued that, *de facto*, there were already two pillars within the Alliance — one European and one North American — and that the next step was to translate that duality into specifically European levels of ambition and capability objectives within the allied framework⁴⁴.

Biscop highlighted the limitations of the NDPP in reflecting Europeans' collective needs, particularly the lack of enablers and the assignment of targets that many allies could not efficiently meet on their own. To address this, he proposed that the EU, via the Capability Development Plan (CDP), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and,

⁴³ COŞKUN, A. "Türkiye's role in the European defence pillar". 23/7/2024. <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/Türkiye-europe-defense-pillar/>

⁴⁴ BISCOP, S. "EU-NATO Relations: A Long-Term Perspective." 2018, p. 91. <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2018/11/NeD150.pdf>

above all, PESCO, should pool national efforts in multinational projects capable of generating a European force package.

During the same period, Tardy adopted a more cautious stance on the explicit establishment of a European pillar within NATO. In his work on European defence and EU–NATO relations, he prioritised the smooth functioning of institutional cooperation, the management of political deadlocks and the avoidance of duplication over the declared construction of two balanced pillars that might rekindle mistrust in Washington and among the most Atlanticist allies⁴⁵.

While Biscop advocated that EU states set a collective capability target and a European force package integrated into NATO, thus structuring a clearly identifiable European pillar, Tardy emphasised breaking the political-strategic ‘glass ceiling’ on EU–NATO complementarity rather than redesigning the NDPP. For Tardy, European defence should above all translate into better task-sharing and practical synergies – military mobility, crisis management, resilience – with autonomy understood in terms of burden-sharing, and not as a step towards an EU–US alliance with two almost symmetrical pillars or as a plan B in the event of a US withdrawal.

The combination of PCSD and ETDIB that Tardy later incorporated into his concept, in fact points towards something akin to an ‘extended CSDP’⁴⁶, capable of also covering the territorial defence of EU member states by allocating NATO capability targets to the European allies. This enhanced CSDP would bring together both the Union’s initiatives on capabilities and industry and the security and defence agreements concluded since 2024 with NATO allies and other key partners (including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Ukraine), projecting the European defence pillar beyond the formal limits of the Alliance by means of EU-driven initiatives.

In January 2025, during the presentation in Brussels of IEEE Strategy Notebook 228⁴⁷, Professor Natividad Fernández Sola asked Biscop whether he envisaged an ‘EU pillar in

⁴⁵ TARDY, T. "European defence: what impact for NATO?", *NDC Policy Brief* No. 05 – December 2018. <https://www.ndc.nato.int/download/european-defence-what-impact-for-nato/> LINDSTROM, G. and TARDY, T. "The scope of EU–NATO cooperation", in TARDY, T. (ed.) *The EU and NATO: The essential partners*. Paris, European Union Institute for Security Studies / Publications Office of the European Union, 2019, pp. 5–12. https://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/08e9e07b-cd30-11e9-992f-01aa75ed71a1.0001.01/DOC_1

⁴⁶ Previous works have proposed a kind of "extended CSDP". CASTILLA, J. C. *Ibid.* 2024, p. 325.

⁴⁷ *EU Common Security and Defence Policy. Quo Vadis?* IEEE. https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/cuaderno_de_estrategia_228

NATO' rather than a 'European pillar'. He replied that the latter notion was preferable because it was more inclusive. In this, he agreed with Tardy: "the European pillar of NATO makes cooperation with the United Kingdom essential; without it, the pillar cannot exist"⁴⁸.

The concept of a European pillar still lacked clear instrumental content: it remained to be specified how it could be translated into capabilities, force structures and command arrangements. The following May, Biscop elaborated on his response in *NATO: The Damage Is Done – So Think Big*⁴⁹, where he proposed an architecture for a European pillar of NATO capable of sustaining the conventional defence of the continent even in the initial absence of US forces. This would amount to a complete European force, organised around a fully operational package of conventional capabilities, distinct from US forces but politically integrated into the Alliance. Such a design would require significantly raising European allies' capability targets – especially in strategic enablers – revising the NDPP and 'Europeanising' the Alliance by staffing its command-and-control structures accordingly, thereby ensuring full and effective European access at the strategic and operational levels for conventional defence. A 'European, not EU' pillar is envisaged, including all allies willing to contribute to the security of the continent, notably the United Kingdom and Türkiye, while also remaining open to non-European countries such as Canada.

Unlike in his earlier work, Biscop scarcely mentions PESCO, which he believes has squandered its 'last chance'⁵⁰ to become the driving force behind the European pillar, owing to insufficient financial commitments by the member states, as confirmed by the 2025 strategic review of PESCO. Instead, the EU's role would be to act as a facilitator of the NDPP – through its fiscal rules, funding instruments and industrial policy favouring joint development and procurement – thereby contributing to the implementation of allied objectives in the fourth step of the NDPP process, in line with the central role that Tardy assigns to the CSDP–EDTIB nexus.

⁴⁸ TARDY, T. 2025 a, *Ibid*, p. 7.

⁴⁹ BISCOP, S. *NATO: The Damage Is Done – So Think Big*, *Egmont Policy Brief* 379. Brussels, Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations, 2025. https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2025/05/Sven-Biscop_Policy_Brief_379_vFinal.pdf?type=pdf

⁵⁰ BISCOP, Sven and CÓZAR MURILLO, Beatriz. "PESCO: The Last Chance," *Egmont Policy Brief* 341. Brussels, Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations, 2024, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/pesco-the-last-chance/>

Incorporating into the first step of the NDPP, within its political guidance, a requirement that the European force package be capable of defending the territory of those EU member states that are allies would constitute a significant step forward in giving operational content to Article 42(7) TEU.

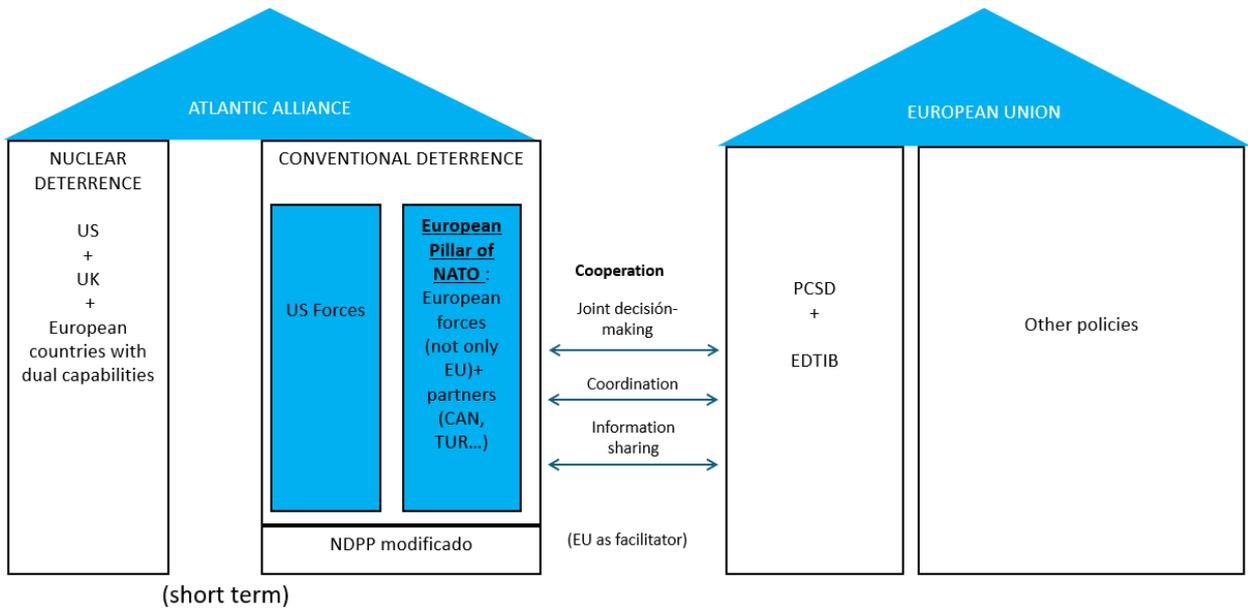


Figure 3. European pillars and cooperation.

Own elaboration

In the long term, Biscop even leaves open the possibility of completing the pillar with a European nuclear component, on which he does not elaborate in detail. In any case, this would involve strengthening the French *force de frappe*— already proposed by Macron⁵¹— along with potential European⁵² co-financing and greater integration of Paris into allied nuclear planning, in coordination with the United Kingdom (as reflected in the joint Northwood declaration of July 2025)⁵². This would effectively extend the French nuclear umbrella to the rest of Europe, reviving a debate that periodically resurfaces over Europe’s strategic equilibrium.

However, the implementation of these proposals would still face resistance from the US and, above all, from Türkiye, which remains reluctant to institutionalise NATO–EU

⁵¹ MACRON, E. *Europe Speech*. Elysée, 2024. <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2024/04/24/europe-speech>

⁵² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/northwood-declaration-10-july-2025-uk-france-joint-nuclear-statement>

cooperation beyond political declarations by leaders. As long as this cooperation remains largely informal, it will be difficult to embed it within the Alliance's regulatory pillar, it will have limited impact on bureaucratic procedures — in Koops' terms — and it will carry little weight in allied decision-making processes.

The Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine as a laboratory for the European pillar

The so-called Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine, driven mainly by France and the United Kingdom, has been presented as a flexible format for sustaining military support to Kyiv beyond the strict frameworks of NATO and the EU, both during the conflict — in coordination with the 'capability coalitions'⁵³ created within the framework of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group — and once a ceasefire or peace agreement has been reached. In practice, it functions as a laboratory in which some European allies are experimenting with forms of political coordination, capability generation and risk-sharing that point towards what could become a future European pillar, whether within the allied framework or in more autonomous configurations.

If desired — by France and the United Kingdom — or if politically feasible — that is, without vetoes from other actors such as the US or Türkiye — the Coalition of the Willing could have been incorporated into existing institutional frameworks. On the allied side, this would have involved reactivating and updating the cooperation mechanisms provided for under Berlin Plus; on the EU side, if it were understood as the embryo of a broader European pillar, it could have been incorporated into the CSDP via Article 44 TEU, provided that the states concerned and the Council so decided. However, neither Paris nor London has prioritised these avenues, probably because they are no longer perceived as serving their national interests.

This coalition embodies several tensions. On the one hand, it strengthens Europe's capacity for initiative by bringing together a core group of states willing to assume greater responsibilities for the defence of the continent; on the other, it risks crystallising a small

⁵³ MAKSAK, H. "Capability coalitions: from addressing Ukraine's immediate needs to a long-term vision of regional cooperation," *Future Europe Journal*, 5. 2024, pp. 45-50. [Capability Coalitions: From Addressing Ukraine's Immediate Needs to a Long-Term Vision of Regional Cooperation - Future Europe Journal](#) and KARLSRUD, C. "Capability coalitions: from addressing Ukraine's immediate needs to shaping European defence", *NUPI Policy Brief*. 2025. https://www.nupi.no/content/pdf_preview/31158/file/NUPI_Policy_Brief_26_2025_Karlsrud_Reykers.pdf

group operating in parallel to the formal mechanisms of NATO and the EU, with ambiguous effects on allied cohesion and on the Union's collective voice.

In terms of institutional design, this *ad hoc* format straddles the three components of the European pillar identified by Tardy — national defence policies, the CSDP/EDTIB and informal multilateral frameworks — as well as the logic of a complete European force proposed by Biscop. The coalition does not yet create a permanent European structure or chain of command, but it does test, under real wartime conditions, a greater convergence of decisions, capabilities and strategic narratives among a group of key European allies, while remaining open to other potential contributors outside both international organisations.

For European states outside the core group, the coalition poses a difficult dilemma. Full integration into the format can be seen as a prerequisite for shaping the practical configuration of the European pillar and for avoiding a two-speed Europe of defence; remaining on the periphery preserves a degree of political autonomy, but reinforces the tendency for the pillar to be configured *de facto* by a restricted group of countries not necessarily aligned with the priorities of the EU as a whole. Spain's announcement in early January 2026 of its willingness to participate in the coalition⁵⁴ should be interpreted precisely in the light of this dilemma.

Proposals have emerged in the debate to give this core group of states a political structure within NATO in the form of a 'Eurogroup'⁵⁵ reduced to five countries — France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and Poland — which would act as the main political voice of the European pillar, operating in the allied committees before decisions are taken to the North Atlantic Council. Biscop even suggests expanding this core group of five into a broader political format, incorporating the NATO Secretary General and the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission, thus forming a kind of 'European war cabinet' to which Canada and Türkiye could be added⁵⁶.

Beyond their potential appeal as a formula for agile coordination among the main contributors, these schemes pose legal and institutional problems, as they go beyond the

⁵⁴ [La Moncloa. 06/01/2026. Pedro Sánchez advocates for a good peace agreement for Ukraine that ensures its future and the security of Europe \[President/Activity\]](#)

⁵⁵ TARDY. Ibid. 2025b. p. 8.

⁵⁶ BISCOP. Ibid. 2025, p. 4.

scope of both the EU and NATO treaties. The proposal is to consolidate a European pillar defined by a small — and partly self-appointed — group of countries, rather than by the formal decision-making processes of the allies and the Union. On 8 January, Mr. Borrell stated on Spanish television that consideration should be given to creating a defence treaty outside the framework of the TEU, as the EU was originally created for peace⁵⁷. Undoubtedly, moving beyond what is a ‘security community’⁵⁸ to an ‘alliance’⁵⁹ may prove complicated.

What is being suggested is an entity akin to a new, very small, Europeanised allied council, without the US, including the United Kingdom and four EU countries, among which Spain is not envisaged. Leaving out Spain — a major contributor to CSDP missions and the EU’s fourth-largest economy in absolute terms — may push it to align more closely with Türkiye in political and industrial efforts related to security and defence. The former would concern opposition to a potentially non-inclusive political implementation of the future European pillar of the Alliance; the latter would involve encouraging Madrid to cooperate more with Ankara on specific industrial initiatives, pooling demand in certain projects rather than doing so primarily with other EU partners⁶⁰.

On the other hand, although Spain’s commitments on future defence investment at the 2025 Hague Summit lagged behind those of other allies at the level of policy formulation, devoting 2.1% of GDP to defence in 2025 is not far, in percentage terms, from the actual investment of countries such as France (2.05%) or Italy (2.01%), according to allied data⁶¹. The future of Spanish defence investment up to 2035 will depend on multiple factors, including the orientation of the governments that succeed the current one, as Alberto Bueno and Soler i Lecha point out⁶².

⁵⁷ [Borrell: "Europe must be an actor with its own defensive capabilities"](#)

⁵⁸ DEUTSCH, K. W. et al. *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organisation in the Light of Historical Experience*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1957.

⁵⁹ WALT, S. M. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1987 and SNYDER, G. H. *Alliance Politics*. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1997.

⁶⁰ BUENO, A. and SOLER I LECHA, E. "Despite the EU: Spain's Security and Defence Cooperation with Türkiye", *CATS Network Papers*, 18. Berlin, Centre for Applied Türkiye Studies (CATS), Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 2025. https://www.cats-network.eu/assets/cats/CATS_Network_Paper_Briefs/CATS_Network_Paper_No.18_17.06.2025.pdf, pp. 36–37.

⁶¹ NATO DIPLOMACY DIVISION. *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2025)*. 2025. <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/finance/def-exp-2025-en.pdf>

⁶² BUENO, A. and SOLER I LECHA, E. *Ibid.* 2025, p. 12.

In this context, the issue is not so much whether there should be a core group of particularly committed countries, but how to prevent that core from turning into an informal directorate that undermines the legitimacy of the European defence project currently under construction. As long as countries such as Germany and Poland maintain a nationally focused, NATO-centric stance and remain reluctant explicitly to rethink the balance between the Alliance and the EU in favour of the latter, the alternative is to conceive the European component as a primarily functional and normative pillar, articulated through the NDPP and EU instruments, so that coalitions of the willing and informal groupings are embedded within a broader framework of shared rules and political oversight, rather than substituting for it.

Capability development, an opportunity to raise the EU's voice in NATO

Capability planning and the defence and space industry are among the main areas of NATO–EU cooperation highlighted in joint reports and are essential elements for bringing to fruition any European pillar with real substance. After decades of European coordination attempts — from the Eurogroup (1968) and the Independent European Programme Group (1976) to the Western European Armaments Group of the WEU⁶³— the disappearance of the latter left the EU without a clearly recognised voice of its own in allied planning.

Today, NATO identifies and quantifies the military capabilities critical for deterrence and collective defence through the NDPP, assigning targets to each ally and extending this planning to some partners⁶⁴ through the Partnership for Peace Planning and Review Process (PARP). For its part, the EU has been assembling a mosaic of instruments (Headline Goal Process, CDP, PESCO, CARD, EDF, EDIP) that do not yet amount to a single, coherent process capable of generating firm commitments to address critical shortfalls, despite the progress achieved in industrial programmes, R&D and joint procurement since 2022.

⁶³ BISCOP, S. "The Summit of Our Ambition? European Defence between Brussels and Wales," *Security Policy Brief*, March (55), 6. Egmont Institute, 2014, p. 2.
<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2014/03/SPB55-Summit-of-our-Ambition1.pdf?type=pdf>

⁶⁴ Austria, Ireland and Malta, but not Cyprus.

Cooperation on defence capabilities has evolved towards a certain functional specialisation of tasks between NATO and the EU. The former defines which capabilities are required, and within what timeframes, to fulfil the mission of deterrence and collective defence⁶⁵, while the latter seeks to aggregate demand in European Defence Projects of Common Interest (EDPCI) and to prioritise the procurement of European equipment, with the aim of consolidating a defence industrial base and a single market in this field, although its implementation continues to face significant economic and political resistance⁶⁶.

Official reports on NATO–EU cooperation stress that this division of labour will only be sustainable if complementarity between the NDPP and the Union’s instruments is strengthened. To this should be added the requirement that the EU acquire a more structured presence in allied forums where capability objectives and their implementation are discussed. Several analysts, including Biscop, have argued that the initiatives of the Commission and the European Defence Agency (EDA) should be steered even more closely and explicitly by the NDPP and that a formal mechanism should be established for the exchange of classified information and coordination on capabilities⁶⁷.

The EDIP Regulation (PE-CONS 52/25) provides a legal framework for closer programming and procurement coordination at EU level, which could be operationalised through a small “EU Capability Coordination Cell” linking EEAS (SECDEFPOL/EUMS), EDA and DG DEFIS. This cell would systematically map Allies’ NDPP targets, identify where EDIP, EDF and PESCO projects can serve those targets, and in particular design European Defence Projects of Common Interest (EDPCI) proposals so that each one corresponds to a clear cluster of NATO Capability Codes. EDPCI would then be notified by participating Member States as collective European contributions when reporting on the implementation of their NDPP targets, ensuring that EU-funded capability packages are transparently aligned with Allied priorities without requiring a separate EU seat in NATO.

⁶⁵ https://hearings.elections.europa.eu/documents/kubilius/kubilius_verbatimreporthearing-original.pdf Video available at: [Confirmation hearing of Andrius KUBILIUS, Commissioner-designate, Defence and Space - Multimedia Centre](#)

⁶⁶ CASTILLA, J. C. and FONFRÍA, A. *Trick or treat: European defence ambitions and the reality of the US-EU trade agreement*. IEEE, 2025. [IEEE. Trick or treat: European defence ambitions and the reality of the US-EU trade agreement - CESEDEN](#)

⁶⁷ BISCOP, S. *How the EU can support Europe's NATO*. Foundation for European Progressive Studies, 2025. <https://feps-europe.eu/how-the-eu-can-support-europes-nato/>

Another option would be for a group of European allies to prepare *non-papers* within NATO proposing specific arrangements for the aforementioned “EU Capability Coordination Cell” to participate as an observer in the committees linked to the NDPP and in the NATO–EU Capability Group, without altering the intergovernmental nature of the Alliance. In practice, this would mean establishing a form of observer status with a voice but no vote, allowing the EU’s industrial and joint-procurement dimension to be systematically factored into allied capability planning without changing the existing institutional balance.

Conclusions

The redefinition of transatlantic relations after the war in Ukraine, the return of Donald Trump and the 2025 US National Security Strategy make it necessary to clarify what is meant by the ‘European pillar of NATO’ and how to give it political and operational substance. At present, the concept remains vague and diffuse. It functions more as a convenient label to justify increases in spending and capabilities than as a concrete architecture, with the risk of masking a process of partial replacement of the US component without an explicit debate on the implications for the Alliance itself and for the EU.

In this context, the European pillar only acquires strategic meaning if it is conceived primarily as a functional pillar —within the NATO and EU frameworks, without excluding possible adjustments — focused on conventional deterrence and defence, and underpinned by greater political coherence among European allies and a more structured European voice in the Alliance’s decision-making bodies and processes.

Rather than a rupture, this would mean moving towards a clearer and more stable division of roles within the allied regulatory framework, strengthening complementarity between NATO and the EU and deepening the Europeanisation of the Alliance. Any eventual specifically European nuclear dimension lies in a more long-term horizon and would be premature as long as that political basis has not been consolidated in the conventional realm.

If NATO and the EU continue to exist into the next decade and a substantial reduction or withdrawal of US conventional forces from Europe were to materialise, the European pillar

would cease to be a purely programmatic notion and would become a condition for the viability of the Alliance itself. In this scenario, NATO would tend *de facto* to organise itself around two functional pillars: a European one, primarily responsible for the conventional defence of the continent, and a US one, focused on nuclear assurance and high-value strategic capabilities that Europeans would have to develop rapidly in order to achieve conventional autonomy. This makes it necessary to anticipate, already now, the orderly integration of EU instruments into allied planning and capability-generation processes.

Strengthening the European pillar does not necessarily require creating new, parallel architectures, but rather making better use of existing frameworks and organising the European contribution more effectively. This demands, first and foremost, greater political convergence among European allies in the North Atlantic Council and in allied committees, articulating prior positions that enable them to act as a coherent group without undermining NATO's intergovernmental character. At the same time, it would be necessary to institutionalise the European Union's presence in these bodies, even if only in a non-decision-making observer capacity, with a voice but no vote.

Secondly, it requires linking NATO's Defence Planning Process (NDPP) more closely to the EU's main instruments in the field of capabilities and industry (CDP, PESCO, CARD, EDF, EDIP), so that the priorities set in Brussels are translated into force packages and industrial projects that simultaneously reinforce the Alliance and underpin European operational autonomy.

Thirdly, it calls for the pragmatic integration of the United Kingdom — an indispensable actor for any non-fragmented European pillar — and careful management of Türkiye's position, so as to prevent the evolution of European defence from crystallising into an exclusionary pillar.

The window of opportunity opened by NATO's identity crisis, combined with Washington's strategic shift, can be used to move from rhetoric about the European pillar to verifiable commitments on capabilities, governance and responsibility-sharing. If Europeans do not seize this moment to translate discourse into concrete decisions and stable mechanisms for political coordination, the likelihood that other powers — primarily the US, Russia and China — will *de facto* shape the future security architecture in Europe will increase.

