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**The new European Security Strategy.
The opportunity to address the
“Defence dimension” in the EU**

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Abstract.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022) and the new transatlantic relationship, in which the US demands that its European allies demonstrate greater commitment and take on more responsibility for their own conventional defence—have transformed the European geopolitical landscape and forced the European Union to rethink its own defence dimension.

More than four years after the start of the war in Ukraine, the EU has focused primarily on assessing the new landscape and discussing possible courses of action, but so far it has taken little concrete action on its defence dossier, limiting itself essentially to initiatives (mainly led by the Commission) to promote the development of military capabilities and strengthen a European defence industry, whilst key elements, are not the main focus. It is necessary to develop a plan to comprehensively address the EU’s “defence dimension”.

The new revision of the “European Security Strategy”, is expected to be presented to the Council in the coming weeks, offers an opportunity to address the much-needed “defence dimension” for the first time since the failed European Defence Community (EDC).

NATO is working hard to strengthen its European pillar. The new EU Strategy presents itself as an opportunity to contribute to that strengthening, and could also chart the course for a possible implementation of Article 42.7, perhaps under the old formula, already discussed in the 1990s, of “separable but not separated.”

Keywords:

Defence dimension, European Union, NATO, collective defence, European pillar, transatlantic partnership.

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INTRODUCTION

Last January, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, during the College of Commissioners’ visit to Cyprus on the occasion of the Council’s six-month presidency, surprised everyone by announcing¹ that the EU was going to draw up a new European Security Strategy (ESS). A statement that was surprising to say the least, given that the Commission has no real powers² in security and defence or in foreign policy, which is the framework for the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in accordance with the Treaties.

Two months later, High Representative Kaja Kallas stated that the Strategy would address security in a comprehensive manner, linking defence, energy, supply chains and other policies, whilst stressing the need for Member States to be involved in shaping the new document and emphasising that this exercise should be based on a common threat perception.

It is undeniable that the global strategic landscape has evolved significantly over the last decade, and it is perhaps in Europe where this has been felt most keenly. In just over fifteen years, we have moved from a unipolar world, the ‘*Pax Americana*’, to a multipolar world, with two main poles – the US and China – and middle powers such as Russia, Iran and North Korea, all seeking to revise the ‘rules-based order’ that has prevailed for years.

Russia’s annexation of Crimea (2014) began to shatter Europe’s dream of the ‘end of history’, but it was not until the invasion of Ukraine (2022) that Europe finally woke up. Added to this is the fact that the arrival of the second Trump administration has forced Europe to take a hard look at itself when it comes to defence matters. The United States wants to change the framework of cooperation: it no longer wishes to subsidise the defence of wealthy nations that behave like protectorates, but instead seeks a relationship between partners, alliances based on shared responsibility³. This forces Europeans to take their own conventional defence more seriously and become less dependent on Washington.

¹ Statement by President Von der Leyen alongside President Christodoulides on the occasion of the College’s visit to the Cypriot Presidency. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_26_110

Note: All hyperlinks in this article are active as of 3 June 2026.

² Article 24 of the Treaty of Lisbon states that the CFSP shall be implemented by the High Representative and by the Member States, in accordance with the Treaties, as well as the roles of the Parliament and the Commission in this area.

³ Remarks by Pete Hegseth, *US Secretary of War*, at the 23rd *Asia Security Summit, the Shangri-La Dialogue*. <https://www.iiss.org/events/shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2026/plenary-sessions/first-plenary/>

HOW HAS EUROPE APPROACHED ITS SECURITY AND DEFENCE SO FAR?

The circumstances leading to the creation of both NATO (1949) and the EU (initially the European Economic Community [EEC], in 1958) help us to understand the evolution of security and defence in Europe.

Both organisations have coexisted since the 1950s in a manner that could be described as appropriate and complementary, albeit with some friction since the launch of the CSDP (1999).

The EU as a provider of security

The then EEC, now the EU, was essentially founded with the aim of preventing internal aggression and eradicating war between European countries – what we might call ‘civil wars in Europe’ – as had been the case for almost 500 years, with the Second World War being the most extreme example.

Although the attempt to create a European Defence Community (EDC) in the 1950s was a failure, the objective was achieved through the creation of the EEC and the ECSC (European Coal and Steel Community), fostering unity among countries through economic interdependence, in a sort of indirect approach to peaceful coexistence. More than 80 years without internal conflict attest to these efforts, making the EU a true success story, which was recognised with the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012.

However, and despite being unable to establish its own defence capability against external aggression, the EU managed to launch the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in 1999, understood as an operational capacity to act through civilian missions and operations in our neighbourhood.

Due to a lack of agreement among Member States, primarily the United Kingdom⁴, it was launched with significant limitations: it can only act outside the territory of the Union (a CSDP mission cannot be deployed within the EU); it is an integral part of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and therefore does not really have a distinct dimension of its own; contributions of resources to operations and missions are essentially provided by the

⁴ ROMERO, A. *25 years of the Saint-Malo Declaration, cornerstone of the CSDP*. Analysis Paper, IEEE 82/2023. 29/11/2023. Available at: <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/25-años-de-la-declaración-de-saint-malo-piedra-angular-de-la-política-común-de-seguridad-y-defensa>

Member States on a voluntary basis (there are no binding commitments); and decisions are subject to the unanimity rule in the Council, the sole institution competent in this policy area. Added to this is the fact that, at that time, the EU and NATO were competing over crisis management (the so-called out-of-area operations within the Alliance). The reality is that defence in the traditional sense was not addressed; there was no need: we lived in a unipolar world and, if necessary, we always had NATO.

Despite these restrictions, more than 40 civilian and military missions and operations have been launched since 2003, with a significant impact on the various areas of deployment⁵. Although the CSDP currently only carries out crisis management operations, the treaties allow it to address defence issues, should the Council so decide unanimously (Art. 42).

NATO as the guarantor of Europe’s (and the Euro-Atlantic area’s) territorial defence

Furthermore, NATO was established to defend European countries (and the US) from external aggression, and its original aim of curbing the spread of Soviet communism in Eastern Europe was the catalyst. The Alliance is another success story, where deterrence has done its job and nearly 80 years of peace have been achieved, without external aggression, even though the Cold War was a period of high geopolitical tension.

Division of roles between the EU and NATO

Despite certain tensions between the two organisations, the EU and NATO have divided their roles: NATO has been responsible for deterrence, for preventing external aggression, whilst the EU has maintained internal stability, preventing internal armed conflicts.

This situation is being affected by the aforementioned geopolitical scenario marked by the return of war to Europe, to which we must add the new stance of the US, which, in a more assertive manner, is demanding greater commitment to NATO from its European allies.

Washington, a key and indispensable ally within NATO, which has prioritised the security and protection of Europe for decades, is shifting its focus to other regions where it has more pressing interests, such as the Indo-Pacific or the Western Hemisphere itself⁶, forcing Europeans to come to terms with the situation and restructure the European security and defence architecture.

⁵ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/missions-and-operations_en

⁶ As reflected in the aforementioned National Security Strategy (November 2025).

Despite doomsday predictions about the US breaking its commitment to Europe within NATO, the real requirement is for Europeans to take on greater responsibility for the conventional defence of the European area.

Whilst the EU maintains its intrinsic role of preventing internal aggression amongst Europeans, it will have to address its defence against external aggression more actively.

In this new scenario, the new European Security Strategy (ESS) presents an opportunity to define this challenge and, for the first time, address defence from the Union’s perspective.

THE EVOLUTION OF EUROPEAN SECURITY STRATEGIES

Before analysing the opportunity and the possible content of the new European Security Strategy (ESS), it is worth recalling and considering the circumstances, key elements and historical moment that led to the drafting of the previous ones.

The 2003 European Security Strategy. The Solana document

Against the aforementioned unipolar backdrop of the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, the EU adopted its first ESS (December 2003), a key milestone in the Union’s development as a geopolitical actor, at that time with an essentially regional focus.

It was a document in keeping with the strategic context of the time, which identified terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, failed states and organised crime as the main threats to European security, and in which competition between major powers or high-intensity conflicts were not considered.

The main objective was to project stability and security in our neighbourhood through crisis management actions (missions and operations), within the framework of an international order underpinned by effective multilateralism⁷.

This Strategy was in keeping with the times and, as well as providing impetus for the development of the fledgling CSDP⁸, it helped to heal the rifts between various EU Member States following the US and international coalition’s intervention in Iraq in the spring of 2003.

⁷ The aim was to develop a stronger international society, properly functioning international institutions and a rules-based international order.

⁸ At that time it was called the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), which was renamed the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in the provisions of the Treaty of Lisbon.

This first Strategy clearly reflects the fact that the CSDP, in accordance with the Treaties, is an integral part of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and not a separate policy. The document does not address the territorial defence of the Member States and focuses on the security dimension of foreign policy, namely crisis management. Defence, in the traditional sense, is not even mentioned (it was not necessary: we already had NATO).

This first Strategy is the work of Javier Solana (and his cabinet), then Secretary-General of the Council and High Representative of the Council for the CFSP, who at that time was not Vice-President⁹ of the Commission (a role he assumed in 2009 with the Treaty of Lisbon).

Global Security Strategy (2016). The Mogherini Strategy

Following a report of limited scope¹⁰ on the implementation of the ESS agreed during the French Presidency of the Council (2008), the GSS (Global Strategy for the EU’s Foreign and Security Policy) was presented in 2016¹¹.

The strategic context had evolved: we had moved from the aforementioned unipolar moment to a new scenario in which Russia had annexed Crimea and China was establishing itself as a major power with ambitions to challenge the US for global hegemony, or at least to share it.

The world was transitioning from a unipolar to a multipolar world¹²; competition between great powers is returning, with China and the US emerging as the main, but not the only, poles (Russia...).

The broad outlines of the EGS are quite similar to those of the 2003 EES: threats are reviewed and the level of ambition is raised, with the aim of the EU becoming a global (rather than regional) provider of security. The defence dimension remains absent, although it is

⁹ Javier Solana is the Council's High Representative for the CFSP, a role created by the Treaty of Amsterdam. It was not until the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon in December 2009 (Article 18) that the High Representative's powers were expanded to include the role of Vice-President of the Commission (previously the responsibility of the Commissioner for External Relations), with the aim of ensuring coherence in the Union's external action.

¹⁰ The lack of consensus on a thorough review, which was the French Presidency's proposal, meant that the outcome was a largely inconsequential implementation report <https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ari15-2009-arteaga-estrategia-europea-seguridad.pdf> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/30823/qc7809568enc.pdf>

¹¹ *A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf

¹² The world is indeed moving towards a multipolar system, with various poles (centres) of power, embodied in middle powers such as Turkey, Iran and North Korea, major powers such as the US and China, and with Russia lying halfway between the two. A world that we might describe as one of 'bipolar multilateralism'.

emphasised that the territorial defence of EU Member States that are NATO allies falls within the remit of that organisation.

As for its drafting, it was drawn up by the High Representative (Federica Mogherini) and her team, with input from various European *think tanks* (primarily from Poland and Spain). It was not a document previously agreed with the Member States, which meant that the Council merely welcomed it¹³, rather than approving or endorsing it, conveying a political message of limited commitment to the document on the part of the countries. A significant event, the victory of Brexit in the referendum, just a few days before its presentation, had a negative impact on the new Strategy.

Strategic Compass (2022). Josep Borrell

It is worth mentioning the document known as *the Strategic Compass*, which, whilst not strictly a strategy, serves as a continuation of the EGS in the form of an action plan¹⁴.

However, as it was approved just one month after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it emerged in a context that had already changed in relation to its content, meaning that its relevance and timeliness are, to say the least, debatable. It was created for a world that no longer existed.

In general, it can be said that, whilst these are three relevant documents, they have been essentially declaratory, lacking in practical implementation and yielding very limited results, mainly due to a lack of commitment and consensus among the Member States, which are more focused on their national interests in foreign and security policy than on potential European interests.

This stance is not without a certain logic within an institutional framework (established by the Treaty of Lisbon), where both foreign policy (including security projection) and defence (which is not addressed in any of the documents) are intergovernmental policies and, therefore, the exclusive responsibility of the Council, that is to say, of the Member States. It seems reasonable to assume that whoever provides the means to implement a strategy should play an active role in its formulation, which, given the background, has not been the case.

¹³ Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21645/28-euco-conclusions.pdf> (paragraph 20)

¹⁴ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/strategic-compass/>

Therefore, the fact that it was the President of the Commission who took the lead on this review, possibly due to a lack of leadership from the Council itself, does not seem the most appropriate course of action.

It is reasonable to conclude that the drafting of these strategies by the elites in Brussels has meant that, although the countries—the Council—have formally accepted them, they have not committed to them nor have they been particularly active in implementing them.

The new Strategy, which is due to be published shortly, and all the more so if it addresses in any way the defence dimension in the face of external aggression, requires the active participation of the armed forces in its drafting; this is a necessary condition for them to accept it and commit to its content, to make it actionable, and to ensure it does not remain merely a well-crafted but purely declaratory document. In any case, given the different security and defence cultures of the various countries, as well as their particular interests, it promises not to be an easy task.

NEW STRATEGY. AN OPPORTUNITY TO ADDRESS DEFENCE

The new Strategy is an opportunity to address the defence dimension, which has been conspicuously absent from previous documents.

As well as being an opportunity, it is in fact a necessity, as the EU’s future as a global player is intrinsically linked to its having its own military and defence capabilities, in a geopolitical landscape where the power of force is becoming increasingly significant.

Necessity

It is an undeniable reality that the global geopolitical landscape has changed drastically over the last two decades, and the EU and its institutions must acknowledge the scale of this global shift and act accordingly.

We are aware that the ‘world of yesterday’ is not coming back, and it is necessary—for reasons of opportunity, relevance and a desire to play a certain role in the new global order (albeit one that is likely to be quite limited)—to adapt the EU’s strategic documents to the new situation. The current *Global Security Strategy* is written for a world that no longer exists.

A new Strategy is essential to set the right course, to enable us to navigate the turbulent waters of the global order, which is still in the process of change.

Furthermore, it is an opportunity to address and combine not only the traditional components of security (internal, economic, external, etc.), but also to include the defence dimension in the equation. Discussing defence in the EU, a taboo subject for years, is no longer an option: it is a real, almost existential necessity.

This does not mean that a new security architecture or an autonomous defence dimension needs to be designed, but rather that defence must be approached in a realistic and pragmatic manner, and that efforts should be made, in some way, to institutionalise it as another EU policy within the current regulatory framework.

After years of ‘Alice-in-¹⁵Wonderland-style thinking’, the Union has awakened from its ‘end of history’ dream, and it seems to have realised that action must be taken. We have a clear understanding of the situation (the Draghi report¹⁶, among several others, is a clear example), and the new Strategy can and must be an important step in adapting the Union to the new geopolitical landscape.

In addition to ‘traditional’ security, defence must also be included

The first thing that needs to be defined in the new ESS is its scope, and this will be determined by the identification of the EU’s priorities in this area, which, in addition to the classic elements of traditional security, must include the military, and not only for external crisis management operations (Petersberg tasks)¹⁷, as is currently the case, but also to address potential attacks on the Union’s territory.

In addition to the challenges and threats such as terrorism, organised crime, cyberattacks, uncontrolled immigration, disinformation, hybrid actions, etc., included in previous strategies, those relating to the territorial integrity of the EU must be added, that is, external

¹⁵ ‘Alician thinking’ refers to a political philosophy that advocates and pursues typically utopian goals, without explaining how they will be achieved. The term takes its name from the attitude of the character Alice in the book **Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland**. https://www.abc.es/espana/catalunya/abci-pensamiento-alicia-200702210300-1631594428391_noticia.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bing.com%2F Professor BAQUÉS-QUESADA, Josep, makes explicit reference to this in: *The Construction of a Common Foreign and Security Policy in Europe. Why is it so problematic?* Catarata, Madrid, 2023, pp. 16–17.

¹⁶ https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/draghi-report_en#paragraph_47059
https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2320887/contexto_y_repercusion_del_informe_draghi_2025_dieeo21.pdf/6c167240-9f79-9759-a3dd-032162268a69?t=1742373663141

¹⁷ Set out in Article 43 of the Treaty of Lisbon.

aggression by other states. This is not a matter of disregarding the current NATO framework for defending the EU’s territory (for 23 of the 27 Member States), but rather of articulating the Union’s role and defining how to use its instruments and capabilities to complement the Alliance itself.

The new strategy must therefore be consistent with and complementary to other EU strategic documents, such as the recently adopted strategies on internal security (2025)¹⁸, on *preparedness* to prevent and respond to emerging threats and crises (2025)¹⁹, on economic security (2023 and 2025)²⁰, or documents such as the *White Paper on European Defence* (2025)²¹, but it must be broader than the previous ones and, in addition to crisis management, it must address what has for years been ‘the elephant in the room’, the dimension of ‘territorial defence’ in the EU, and do so in a pragmatic, realistic manner and, above all, by seeking the active commitment of the Member States.

The playing field and the only realistic and practicable option in the short term.

The provisions relating to security and defence under the current Treaty of Lisbon (TdL) are drafted for a scenario where multilateralism and a rules-based order were the main protagonists, and where Member States retain (through the Council) the competences and all decision-making powers in this field.

Initiatives such as attempting to amend the Treaties, changing the unanimity rule in decision-making in some way, seeking workarounds to try to make progress on these issues, or even on common defence, do not seem relevant, mainly because they are practically impossible to achieve in the short or medium term.

Europe does not need more declarations, more diagnoses or more unworkable proposals, but rather pragmatic and realistic solutions that are suited to the current landscape, which is shaped by the new geopolitical situation (the war in Ukraine and greater demands from the US on Europeans within NATO) and by the treaties in force.

¹⁸ https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/commission-presents-european-internal-security-strategy-2025-04-01_en

¹⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_856

²⁰ The EU Economic Security Strategy was adopted in 2003 and updated in 2025. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52023JC0020> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52025JC0977>

²¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_793

In fact, the response has already begun within NATO (the 5% target at the Hague Summit is a clear example), and the desired strengthening of the European pillar is already underway. On the EU side, the response has been slower, as, apart from a few initiatives in the financial and industrial sectors led by the Commission, it has taken little action.

The new ESS presents an opportunity to develop the EU’s defence dimension, possibly within the framework of NATO’s European pillar, and to do so in a pragmatic yet flexible manner. The aim is to define a plan that is compatible with and complementary to NATO²², so that the Union can assume its responsibilities in the field of security and defence in a manner commensurate with its economic, political, diplomatic, technological and cultural weight on the international stage.

The aim would be for this reinforced European pillar of NATO to be organised from within the EU to give it a degree of autonomous capacity, so that the relationship between Europeans and Americans evolves into a partnership of equals, leaving behind the protectorate-style relationship of the last three decades.

Attempting to develop a European defence framework today without the NATO framework would be closer to a declarative utopia than a realistic project, not only because of the time required to build a defence architecture of our own, but also because of the current lack of political will and the enormous difficulty, if not impossibility, of getting the 27 Member States to agree.

If we set aside the noise of the various statements, it can be said that, in a manner that is more implicit than explicit, there is a ‘certain’ consensus among both European authorities²³ and national governments to move forward with strengthening the European pillar within NATO as the priority and only viable path in the short term. The case of Germany is particularly noteworthy, as reflected in its recently approved *Military Strategy*²⁴, which emphasises the need for Europe and Germany in particular) to assume greater responsibility within NATO²⁵.

²² Taking into account and seeking to overcome the limitations arising from the Turkey-Cyprus disputes, which severely affect NATO-EU relations, which are the other major elephant in the room.

²³ <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-leaders-warn-europe-must-become-defense-giant-us-role-wanes-nato-andrius-kubilius/>

²⁴ Following the adoption in 2023 of its first *National Security Strategy* since the Second World War. Available at: <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-EN.pdf>. In 2026, it adopted its first Military Strategy: <https://www.bmvg.de/de/presse/strategie-zur-landes-und-buendnisverteidigung-6093690>

²⁵ <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-military-strategy-bundeswehr-boris-pistorius/>

The European pillar is presented as a pragmatic response to the current situation; it is not a question of creating a European army within NATO, either now or in the future. In fact, a European army would imply political-military integration, a single chain of command and shared sovereignty in defence matters which, within the framework of the treaties currently in force, is unrealistic and could only be achieved in the very long term and at an enormous political cost²⁶.

It should be borne in mind that this option is by no means new, as it is essentially a revival of the ESDI (*European Security and Defence Initiative*) of the 1990s, which, under the slogan “separable but not separated”, sought to strengthen NATO’s European pillar by granting it a degree of autonomy, albeit within the NATO framework. It essentially failed due to political differences, which remain the key factor, but the current worrying situation is more conducive to reaching a certain consensus (at least as a short-term initiative).

It is argued in various forums that the Union already has its own Article 5, Article 42.7 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), under which, in the event of an attack on a Member State, the others must provide aid and assistance with all the means at their disposal. The fundamental problem is that the EU lacks its own structures to deal with military aggression, meaning that aid and assistance would have to be provided essentially on a bilateral basis, with all the limitations that this entails. Strengthening NATO’s European pillar would, to some extent, be a way of ‘operationalising’ Article 42.7—currently lacking in command structures and resources—so that a European crisis could be addressed with Europeans playing the leading role, using NATO’s structures and resources.

To a certain extent, it can be said that, in debates on this subject, most speak the same language, but with a different accent; it would mean empowering the EU and Europe to assume the primary responsibility for their conventional defence, with the US participating in a more limited capacity than hitherto, but providing critical support.

Regarding the possible breakdown of the transatlantic bond, or the US’s decoupling from NATO, there is a great deal of background noise, fuelled both by provocative and ‘unconventional’ statements from Washington and by fatalistic and even alarmist rhetoric from some European authorities.

²⁶ MURGIA, N. ‘The European Pillar of NATO in the era of US *Disengagement*’, *Istituto Affari Internazionali*. 13 May 2026. Available at: <https://www.iai.it/en/publications/c41/european-pillar-nato-era-us-disengagement>

It seems realistic to assume that the transatlantic bond remains strong, simply because it is in the interests of all parties—both the Americans²⁷ —as reflected in the US *National Security Strategy*²⁸ (US NSS 2025) and *National Defence Strategy*²⁹ (US NDS 2026), as well as in certain documents from the European Parliament itself³⁰.

It is a fact that the intensity of the alliance is waning, as Washington seeks a more equitable burden-sharing arrangement, aiming for a more balanced distribution of military efforts. Added to this is the fact that Europe is no longer the top priority (in favour of the Western Hemisphere and the Indo-Pacific).

This new situation demands greater European commitment to NATO, but, in principle, it should not affect its strength or resilience. The US has held up a mirror to us and demanded that we start acting more like partners, like allies, rather than as if we were a protectorate.

What should the new European Security Strategy contain?

The new Strategy should address the new reality and include the defence dimension, and, whilst it may leave the door open to future options, it should address the current situation and, therefore, the strengthening of the European pillar within NATO, where the Union is called upon to be a leading player, by virtue of both its capabilities and its ambition.

A common defence is currently unfeasible, mainly due to the lack of political will among the 27; we shall see how things progress and what can be done in the future.

Right now, the focus is on building collectively and consolidating what already exists, strengthening the aforementioned European pillar³¹. Added to this is the need for a Strategy that is more action-oriented than its predecessors, which were guilty of being overly declarative.

²⁷ The US has an interest in a stable and prosperous (and therefore secure) Europe, as its economic well-being depends to a large extent on Europe. Almost half of global GDP comes from the combined output of the US and Europe, which are each other's main trading partners. 48 of the 50 US states export more to Europe than to China, and globally the US exports 3.5 times more to Europe than to China. Over 50% of foreign investment in the US comes from Europe (totalling around \$3.5 trillion). Added to this is the fact that Europe allows the US to project its influence more easily on a global scale (in regions such as the Caucasus, the Middle East, the Maghreb, Russia, the Arctic, etc.) by using its bases; and the permanent presence of American troops in Europe is more effective and efficient than having them on a rotational basis. <https://www.hudson.org/security-alliances/seven-key-points-us-forces-europe-luke-coffey>

²⁸ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

²⁹ <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>

³⁰ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2026/785720/EPRS_BRI\(2026\)785720_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2026/785720/EPRS_BRI(2026)785720_EN.pdf)

³¹ BERGMANN, M. 'Europe needs an Army. Only collective defence can protect the continent', *Foreign Affairs*. 9 February 2026. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/europe/europe-needs-army>

As for the three essential elements of any strategy—ends, ways and means—these must be defined clearly and with realistic ambition.

Firstly, with regard to the objectives (*ends*), as well as the threats, these must be in line with the new strategic environment and, although many ideas identified in previous strategies will be repeated, those relating to the territorial integrity of the Union must be included: the “elephant in the room” that we have ignored for many years and which the US resolved through NATO, but which the current situation compels us to address.

It is therefore a matter of identifying and assessing the full range of threats, as well as defining realistic and achievable objectives which, in the field of defence, should be very similar to those identified by NATO, with possible nuances on the part of the Union.

A priority must be to establish how to coordinate the various components of security (internal, economic, external, preparedness and resilience, etc.) reflected in the various strategies and documents mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. This scope is broader than in NATO and is a difficult exercise, particularly as it falls under the responsibility of different actors (Commission, Council, agencies, armed forces, etc.).

The aim is to explore how to implement a sort of “whole-of-government approach” (a comprehensive approach to security and defence), bearing in mind that we have a range of very powerful tools at our disposal, but the dual structure of the Commission (at EU level) and the Council (intergovernmental) makes such coordination difficult.

Normally, the parties are very protective of their powers and are not always open to working as a team, even though the role of the High Representative was created for this very purpose (although he is granted little executive power).

Secondly, regarding the ‘ways’, in the defence dimension we refer to command and control structures, planning and procedures. It does not seem effective to create new ones at EU level (at least for now), given that NATO’s already exist. The strategy should build on what already exists and advocate for the EU to adopt NATO’s structures and processes as its own (which is essentially true, at least for 23 of the 27).

Seeking ways to revitalise the Berlin Plus Agreements (whilst being mindful of the enormous difficulty arising from the positions of Turkey and Cyprus), as well as taking into account the ongoing changes in NATO’s command structure (where Europeans will play a greater role

in the *Joint Force Commands*) should encourage this increased European responsibility within NATO, where, in some way, the EU, with the support of the other non-EU European allies, must seek an inclusive approach to this European pillar (not just the EU's) within NATO.

It makes no sense, and is moreover ineffective and inefficient, to create an EU capability planning process distinct from the NDPP³². In fact, the Union's current CDP (Capability Development Plan) is increasingly aligning with NATO.

The current political-military structure within the EU's defence sphere warrants a final consideration in this section. In the new landscape, it is necessary to consider a more prominent role for the EU Council in its defence ministers' format, like the Atlantic Council. It does not seem reasonable for defence matters, in their most traditional sense, to be dealt with in the General Affairs Council (GAC), under the authority of the foreign ministers.

Although the Treaty of Lisbon, in its current wording, constrains rather than facilitates progress on defence matters, the creation of an EU Council in defence format is feasible, and was already attempted during the Spanish Presidency of the Council in 2010, albeit without much success. It may be time to revive the initiative, and the new strategy could provide the framework for addressing this structural change.

As for the third element of the strategy, *means* and capabilities, this is where the EU, and particularly the Commission, should play a more prominent role.

We start from the premise that, in collective defence, the means are provided by the Member States, which are their sole owners.

Fragmentation and duplication, resulting from the sum of the capabilities of 27 armies, lead to significant inefficiencies and inefficiencies. To address this problem, the Commission's initiatives already underway to support the European defence industry and the cooperative development, at European level, of military capabilities (in line with the recommendations of the Draghi report) must be driven forward by the Strategy itself.

³² NATO Defence Planning Process. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/introduction-to-nato/nato-defence-planning-process>.

The *ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030* plan³³ appears to be the appropriate response to the problem, although perhaps somewhat belated and insufficient in its depth³⁴.

In addition to the obstacles in financial instruments, where there is no clear political determination, there are industrial obstacles, in a context where we Europeans have invested mainly in American systems and in which we could face supply shortages. Industrial autonomy, as well as viable financial instruments (including those to be included in the next Multiannual Financial Framework 2028–2034), would be key aspects to include in this section.

In any case, we must not forget that both military capabilities and, to a large extent, the defence industry (pursuant to Article 346 of the TFEU) fall within the competence and responsibility of the Member States. However, the Commission, and in particular the Commissioner for Defence and Space, despite its limited powers in the defence industry, has an important role to play in the process, in terms of providing impetus and coordination.

The Strategy should pay particular attention to how to collectively develop those strategic capabilities (currently provided by the US) which no single European country possesses individually. These would be capabilities that would likely need to be developed collectively, and which should also be used and managed collectively, initially within the framework of NATO.

In any case, it seems necessary to consider the option of doing so at European level (within NATO’s European pillar), either using Alliance structures or through dedicated structures that would be integrated into the Alliance and would need to be developed.

We are talking about a case similar to the AWACS in NATO, which are owned and managed by the Alliance itself. The aim is to define the command and control structure for capabilities such as missile defence at European level or the drone wall, which must be unified.

Possible next steps in the “defence dimension”

Although this document focuses on analysing the possible “territorial defence” dimension that the new Strategy should include, the Strategy will be much broader and will address other dimensions of security (mentioned in previous paragraphs).

³³ [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)

³⁴ https://www.larazon.es/internacional/ocaso-paraguas-americano_202605316a1b5f1a91bae05c35e743c6.html

Although defence may be limited in scope, it should set out clear guidelines to be followed and, possibly, leave the door open for it to develop into a sort of “European Defence Strategy (EDS)”, in which the details would be addressed in greater depth and where the Council, in its capacity as defence ministers, could play a more prominent role³⁵.

This would be like the US NDS mentioned above, serving as the “defence” component of the NSS, or even as is the case with NATO and its *Strategic Concept* and (classified) *Military Strategy*.

Leadership in the drafting of the new Strategy. Who is at the helm?

The EU’s institutional structure is complex, particularly in the field of security and defence, where powers lie exclusively with the Council (defence, external security, etc.). Whilst the High Representative, in his capacity as Vice-President of the Commission, plays an important role as coordinator, friction between the two institutions, particularly in the defence sphere, is notable.

The Commission President’s initiative to lead the review of the ESS, with the support of the High Representative, seems, at first glance, somewhat inappropriate, even if it is to be subsequently presented to the Council.

The current situation is that President von der Leyen’s stance on defence matters is particularly proactive, even though she has no actual powers in this area; this is compounded by the creation of the post of Defence Commissioner, with no tangible powers in defence, which causes not only conflict but also some confusion over who is responsible for what. Josep Borrell, the former High Representative, advocates an ‘institutional reset’ to end the chaos caused by a Commission determined to usurp the diplomatic powers of the Member States in order to act illegally as a dangerous “shadow Pentagon”. He recognises only partial powers in the defence industry, since, after all, this is an industry³⁶.

Although the treaties are clear regarding competences—in the areas of foreign policy and defence, which fall exclusively within the Council’s remit—one can understand, though not justify, the Commission’s desire to take centre stage given the Council’s clear absence of leadership and the serious leadership crisis it faces, as pointed out by authoritative voices

³⁵ Allowing for the differences, and by way of example, in a manner similar (though not identical) to the US with its *National Security Strategy* (NSS) and subsequent *National Defence Strategy* (NDS), or as Germany has recently done.

³⁶ <https://agendapublica.es/noticia/20805/josep-borrell-union-europea-no-fue-concebida-mundo-hoy>

such as Ambassador García-Berdoy³⁷. Political will is needed, as Borrell recently stated³⁸

The current worrying geopolitical scenario is not the appropriate setting for ego clashes and turf wars amongst the Brussels elite, when there is a real need to address security and, in particular, defence in a serious and pragmatic manner.

The natural course of action would have been for the High Representative, together with a body from her European External Action Service (EEAS), or even from the Council’s General Secretariat itself (such as the Friends of the Presidency Group used in previous initiatives), to be responsible for drafting the new Strategy, and, above all, with the active participation and leading role of the Member States, unlike in previous strategies.

The risk of doing so under the Commission’s leadership, and with limited involvement of the Member States, is that it will end up being a document that is more declaratory than executive, and that the real commitment of the countries (which are the ones that make the final decisions) will not be secured. We risk situations such as that which occurred with the *European Security Strategy and the Maritime Strategy*³⁹, where the Commission took the lead but lacked the authority to design a governance structure, making it practically impossible for the strategy to be implemented.

Given the current situation, in which the Commission, together with the High Representative, will present its proposed strategy in the coming weeks in the form of a joint communication to the Council, the Council must, from that moment onwards, take the lead in the process, involving the Member States and, where appropriate, steering the drafting of follow-up documents, such as an action plan or even a European Defence Strategy for the EU.

³⁷ <https://agendapublica.es/noticia/20282/dos-referentes-espanoles-bruselas-fuerzas-politicas-europeas-deben-preguntarse-si-pueden-permitirse-debilitar-comision>

³⁸ https://www.telecinco.es/noticias/espana/20260529/josep-borrell-ejercitos-conjuntos-europeos-crisis-seguridad-voluntad-politica_18_019305848.html

³⁹ This situation is examined in *the European Maritime Security Strategy. We continue to sail at a slow pace*. IEEE Analysis Paper 26/2023, 12 April 2023. Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA26_2023_ABEROM_Estrategia.pdf

IN CONCLUSION

In previous papers⁴⁰, we argued for the need for a defence plan for Europe, to set out a course of action—one that is more or less ambitious, but above all realistic. The new ESS presents a clear opportunity to address, for the first time, the EU’s defence dimension, setting out the broad outlines of such a plan, which could subsequently be developed through a European Defence Strategy or a derived action plan.

More than four years have passed since the start of the war (Russian invasion) in Ukraine and almost a year and a half since the current US administration took office. Time is running out and, apart from a few Commission initiatives focused on the defence industry and its funding, little else has been done, apart from discussing, diagnosing, analysing and making proposals that have yet to get off the ground.

It is vital for the future of the Union to start taking firm steps, consolidating the European pillar within NATO, which will strengthen the European dimension of defence, without prejudice to the path that may be taken in the future.

It can be said that this European pillar within NATO will form the foundations of a future European defence, whether collective (initially) or common (in the long term).

To this end, it is necessary to build on a solid foundation and, given the current level of political consensus, this is the most realistic, pragmatic and effective way to move forward. Although the Treaty of Lisbon constrains the development of the EU’s defence dimension, it does not prevent progress within the NATO framework, which is currently the only viable option.

It is important to give defence due consideration and integrate it into the new Strategy, to facilitate steady progress towards a Europe that is more responsible and capable in this area.

The new Strategy must be less declaratory and more action-oriented than its predecessors and will require a greater commitment from Member States. As Ambassador Dastis reminds

⁴⁰ ROMERO, A. *Reflections on defence in the EU (II). A plan, determination, leadership and... capabilities are needed.* IEEE Analysis Paper 68/2025 of 29/10/2025. Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/reflexiones_sobre_defensa_en_la_ue_2025_dieeee68

us⁴¹, let us not forget that Brussels is made up of the Member States, and that Brussels is not an external entity imposed on the capitals⁴². It is therefore these Member States, through the Council, who must steer the development of the defence dimension and, consequently, take ownership of the new Strategy. The Commission must continue to act as a supporter and facilitator, not only in terms of financial instruments, but particularly in consolidating a European defence industry.

From a pragmatic perspective, initiatives such as the European Security Council, possible reforms to the Lisbon Treaty (including drafting a new additional treaty specifically on defence), voluntary groups to take the lead with others joining in (including third parties such as the UK⁴³), proposals aimed at common objectives and even towards a European army, and other ideas currently on the table do not appear sufficiently mature to be implemented; in any case, they would not be incompatible with strengthening the European pillar within NATO, which will always form part of the foundations of any such initiative.

The important thing is to act now, and for the new Strategy to address the defence dimension clearly, promoting tangible progress.

The war in Ukraine and the territorial threat to EU countries began over four years ago now, and apart from a few limited-scope initiatives by the Commission in defence industry, *Brussels Schuman* is drowning in analyses, discussions and proposals, without taking decisive action, whilst *Brussels Evere*⁴⁴ seeks to maintain the Alliance’s cohesion and works to strengthen NATO’s European pillar.

Both institutions, and in particular the 23 countries that are members of both, are in the same boat. The only realistic solution at present, and in the short term, is for the two organisations to work as a team; the alternative is a vacuum, as full strategic autonomy or the much-vaunted common European army are utopian ideals that would not see the light of day for at least a decade, in the best-case scenario.

⁴¹ Alfonso Dastis is a Spanish diplomat who, amongst other posts, served as Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2016 to 2018, and as Spain’s Permanent Representative to the EU from 2011 to 2016.

⁴² Interview with Alfonso Dastis in *El Mundo*, 24 April 2026. Available at: <https://www.elmundo.es/opinion/luces-para-la-constitucion/2026/04/24/69ea4532e4d4d8ed078b4586.html>

⁴³ <https://www.britainworld.org.uk/p/memorandum-25-2026>

⁴⁴ In Brussels parlance, ‘*Schuman*’ is used when referring to EU institutions, and ‘*Evere*’ for NATO institutions, in reference to the districts where the main institutional buildings of each of the two organisations are located.

We do not have much time, and the new Strategy should reflect this. We must act swiftly and decisively in the face of the new geopolitical situation and strengthening the European pillar of the Alliance is the only real option within our power, as well as ensuring that the European Union finally addresses the defence dimension, initially as a complement to the NATO framework.

We must be aware that the current fragmentation is simply a reflection of deep political and strategic divisions among European states⁴⁵, and the aim is to reduce it gradually. Let us lay the foundations for a “defence dimension” within the EU, based on criteria of ownership and practicality, and, in the future, ambitions will be adjusted accordingly.

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⁴⁵ <https://www.britainworld.org.uk/p/memorandum-25-2026>