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THE EUROPEAN UNION'S DECISION-MAKING IN DEFENCE:
STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS AND PROSPECTS FOR REFORM
IN THE CONTEXT OF A DECLINING US COMMITMENT

The Political System Of The European Union
Foreign And Defence Policy In Europe

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ABSTRACT

English version

The international security environment has undergone significant transformations in recent years, challenging the traditional foundations of European security and defence. The long-standing reliance of European states on the United States and NATO has provided an effective security framework for decades, but growing uncertainty regarding the future of American engagement, combined with the deterioration of the European security environment following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, has intensified the debate on the European Union's capacity to assume greater responsibility for its own security. Against this background, this thesis examines to what extent current European initiatives and defence cooperation can provide the foundations for greater EU strategic autonomy, and in which operational areas such cooperation appears most realistic.

The analysis first traced the historical evolution of the transatlantic relationship and the development of European security and defence cooperation, examining the emergence of the "European Pillar" within NATO, the evolution of the Common Security and Defence policy (CSDP), the development of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), and the changing relationship between the European Union and the United States. Particular attention is devoted to the effects of the gradual evolution of US strategic priorities, Brexit and the war in Ukraine on European defence.

The thesis then identifies the main structural constraints limiting the development of a stronger European defence capacity. These include the intergovernmental nature of decision-making, unanimity and nation vetoes, divergent strategic cultures and threat perceptions, delays in responding to high-urgency situations, fragmentation of the European defence industry, continued dependence on external capabilities and the difficulties of achieving deeper military integration. The analysis of Singapore's defence model further highlights the importance of strategic coherence, institutional coordination, long-term planning and the capacity to translate political decisions into effective and timely operational capabilities.

Finally, the thesis considers possible future trajectories for European security. It argues that strategic autonomy should not be understood as self-sufficiency or as a complete

separation from the United States, but rather as the ability of the European Union to act when external support becomes uncertain. The thesis therefore proposes a concept of “selective strategic autonomy” whereby European efforts should concentrate on capabilities combining high strategic importance, significant external dependencies and realistic potential for European development. At the same time, continued operations with the US and the diversification of partnerships towards Indo-Pacific actors and middle-powers can contribute to reducing excessive dependence on any single external actor. The thesis concludes that the central challenge for European strategic autonomy is not the elimination of interdependence, but the reduction of strategically vulnerable forms of dependence. Ultimately, a greater European security requires not the replacement of the United States, but a stronger capacity for collective action and greater responsibility for the Union’s security.

Versione in italiano

Negli ultimi anni il contesto internazionale della sicurezza ha subito profonde trasformazioni, mettendo in discussione i tradizionali presupposti della sicurezza e della difesa europea. La lunga dipendenza degli stati europei dagli Stati Uniti e della NATO ha garantito per decenni un quadro di sicurezza efficace; tuttavia, la crescente incertezza riguardo al futuro impegno statunitense, combinata con il peggioramento del contesto di sicurezza europeo a seguito dell’invasione su larga scala dell’Ucraina da parte della Russia nel 2022, ha intensificato il dibattito sulla capacità dell’Unione Europea di assumere maggiori responsabilità in materia di sicurezza. In questo contesto, la presente tesi esamina in quale misura le attuali iniziative europee e la cooperazione nel settore della difesa possano costituire le basi per una maggiore autonomia strategica dell’Unione Europea e in quali ambiti operativi tale cooperazione risulti maggiormente realistica.

L’analisi ripercorre innanzitutto l’evoluzione storica della relazione transatlantica e lo sviluppo della cooperazione europea nel settore della sicurezza e della difesa, esaminando l’emergere del “pilastro europeo” all’interno della NATO, l’evoluzione della politica di Sicurezza e della Difesa Comune (PSDC), lo sviluppo della cooperazione strutturata permanente (PESCO) e il progressivo mutamento delle relazioni tra l’Unione Europea e

gli Stati Uniti. Particolare attenzione è dedicata agli effetti della graduale evoluzione delle priorità strategiche statunitensi, della Brexit e della guerra in Ucraina sulla difesa europea. La tesi individua quindi i principali vincoli strutturali che limitano lo sviluppo di una più solida capacità di difesa europea. Tra questi rientrano la natura intergovernativa dei processi decisionali, il requisito dell'unanimità e il diritto di veto degli Stati Membri, le diverse culture strategiche e percezioni delle minacce, i ritardi nel rispondere a situazioni caratterizzate da un elevato livello di urgenza, la frammentazione dell'industria europea della difesa, la persistenza dipendenza da capacità esterne e le difficoltà legate al conseguimento di una più profonda integrazione militare. L'analisi del modello di difesa di Singapore evidenzia inoltre l'importanza della coerenza strategica, del coordinamento istituzionale, della pianificazione di lungo periodo e della capacità di tradurre le decisioni politiche in capacità operative efficaci e tempestive.

Infine, la tesi esamina possibili scenari futuri per la sicurezza europea, sostenendo che l'autonomia strategica non debba essere intesa come autosufficienza o come completa separazione dagli Stati Uniti, bensì come la capacità dell'Unione Europea di agire anche in caso di una minore certezza di un sostegno esterno. In questa prospettiva, la tesi propone il concetto di "autonomia strategica selettiva", secondo cui gli sforzi europei dovrebbero concentrarsi sulle capacità che combinano elevata rilevanza strategica, significative dipendenze esterne e un concreto potenziale di sviluppo a livello europeo. Al contempo, la prosecuzione della cooperazione con gli Stati Uniti e la diversificazione delle partnership verso gli attori dell'Indo-Pacifico e le "middle powers" possono contribuire a ridurre un'eccessiva dipendenza da un singolo soggetto esterno.

La tesi conclude sostenendo che la sfida centrale per l'autonomia strategica europea non consiste nell'eliminazione dell'interdipendenza, bensì nella riduzione delle forme di dipendenza che presentano una particolare vulnerabilità dal punto di vista strategico. In ultima analisi, il rafforzamento della sicurezza europea non richiede la sostituzione degli Stati Uniti, ma una maggiore capacità di azione collettiva e una più ampia responsabilità europea per la sicurezza dell'Unione.

FIRST CHAPTER

The evolution of Transatlantic relations and its implication on European Defence

1. The origins of Euro-Atlantic cooperation in the post-war period

1.1 – The new geopolitical order post-1945

The transatlantic relationship between the Europe and the United States has deep roots in history, starting from the late 15th century, an era defined by maritime exploration and geopolitical shifts. From the European “discovery” of the Americas in 1492 through the various waves of migration and colonization in the centuries that followed, the Old and the New Worlds have been linked together, establishing the first permanent conduits of trade, culture and diplomacy. What began as a series of colonial encounters gradually evolved over the centuries into a complex web of strategic alliances.

In the centuries that followed, power shifted dramatically across the Atlantic. While the European Empires faced a gradual decline and the unravelling of their colonial systems, the United States firmly expanded its geopolitical and economic influence. This power transition reached its peak in the mid-20th century¹. By the end of the First World War, the European countries found themselves on the brink of collapse, making it clear that without American intervention and a subsequent stabilization effort, the continent’s recovery and security would have been deeply compromised. Yet, in the 1920s and 1930s, America retreated from Europe, after taking the decision of not being part of the League of Nations².

Subsequently, the Second World War reshaped the geopolitical architecture of the transatlantic relationship, yielding two paradoxical outcomes.

On the one hand, the conflict severely weakened the economic, military and infrastructural capacities of European states, leaving the continent fractured and vulnerable. On the other hand, it irreversibly integrated the United States into the

¹ Jackson S., *Prologue to the Marshall Plan: The Origins of the American Commitment for a European Recovery Program*, Journal of American History (1979).

² Kennedy, D. M., *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*, New York: Oxford University Press 1980).

continental security apparatus, transforming Washington into a “European power”³. The asymmetrical nature of this partnership became immediately apparent, with the United States emerging as the senior partner. This hegemony was underpinned by the mobilization of massive American material, financial, and human resources, which had not only turned the tide of the war in the Allies' favour but also positioned the U.S. as the sole guarantor of Western stability⁴.

Unlikely the isolationist position in the aftermath of the First World War, the post-1945 era witnessed a deeply American commitment to European affairs⁵. This shift was driven in large part by a shared belief on both sides of the Atlantic that the defeat of Nazi Germany had not produced a long-term solution for Western Europe's security. Instead, the vacuum left by Germany's defeat, coupled especially with the rising ideological and military expansionism of the Soviet Union, needed a robust, long-term American presence to safeguard Western Europe against emerging Cold War threats⁶.

The previous well-known global politics, governed by a fragile balance of power among several European empires, came to an end: the total devastation of World War II permanently shattered the capabilities of traditional powers like Great Britain and France, creating a geopolitical vacuum. This vacuum was rapidly filled by two ideological and military superpowers with diametrically opposed visions for the post-war world⁷.

The escalation of Soviet threats to the West had already accelerated US movement toward military enlargement with Europe⁸. Events such as the Berlin Blockade, in which the Soviet Union cut off all access to West Berlin in order to drive the Western Allies out of the city, and the 1948 coup in Prague, in which the Czechoslovak Communist Party, backed by Moscow, took power by overthrowing the last democratic government in Eastern Europe, caused great alarm in the White House. The key concept was embodied in the term *containment*: it referred to the fact that the United States was prepared to recognize that the survival of Western democracies threatened by Communist external

³ Hobsbawm, E. J., *The short century. 1914-1991*, Milano: Rizzoli (1995).

⁴ Jussi M. Hanhimäki, Benedikt Schoenborn and Barbara Zanchetta, *Transatlantic Relations since 1945: An Introduction*, Routledge of the Taylor & Francis Group (2012).

⁵ Jackson S., *Prologue to the Marshall Plan: The Origins of the American Commitment for a European Recovery Program*, Journal of American History (1979).

⁶ Jussi M. Hanhimäki, Benedikt Schoenborn and Barbara Zanchetta, *Transatlantic Relations since 1945: An Introduction*, Routledge of the Taylor & Francis Group (2012).

⁷ Kennan, George F., *The Sources of Soviet Conduct*, Foreign Affairs (1947).

⁸ Ibid.

aggression or internal subversion, was vital to American security itself⁹. This strategy was crystallized in March 1947 with the formulation of the Truman Doctrine. Given the devastation of most of Europe and the British withdrawal from Greece and Turkey due to economic exhaustion, President Harry S. Truman declared that the United States were ready to “support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures”¹⁰. Stressing the interrelatedness of the democratic world, it emphasised that such subordination did concern the United States, that world peace was necessary for American security¹¹. The Truman Doctrine marked the opening of a more aggressive phase of American foreign policy, giving it a new purpose¹².

However, the Washington administration recognize that military containment alone was not sufficient to assure Europeans, so that it decided to operationalize this doctrine through economic means via the European Recovery Program, universally known as the Marshall Plan¹³. While a plan for economic aid was open to all European states, including the Soviet Union, the Marshall Plan was clearly politically as well as economically motivated. In fact, the strategic objective was twofold: first, to catalyse rapid economic reconstruction, thereby stabilizing democratic institutions against internal communist subversion; and second, to integrate Western Europe into a cohesive, capitalist bloc tethered inextricably to the American economics¹⁴. In addition, American Government wanted to avoid the strengthening of European Communist parties.

The policymakers in the Truman administration were convinced that a “dynamic economy” at home required American trade and investment abroad, which in turn required the reconstruction of major trading partners in Europe and their reintegration into a multilateral system of world trade¹⁵. In the end, believing the United States had hidden reasons, the Soviet Union and its supporters rejected the offer¹⁶.

⁹ Lawrence S. Kaplan, *Origins of NATO: 1948-1949*, Emory International Law Review (2019).

¹⁰ Truman, H. S., *Special Message to the Congress on Greece and Turkey*. Washington, D.C. (1947, 12 March).

¹¹ Leffler, M. P., *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War*, Stanford University Press (1992).

¹² Derek W. Urwin, *The Community of Europe: a history of European integration since 1945*, 2. Ed. Longman (1995).

¹³ See the online reference archive at <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/marshall-plan>.

¹⁴ Derek W. Urwin, *The Community of Europe: a history of European integration since 1945*, 2. Ed. Longman (1995).

¹⁵ Hogan, Michael J., *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain, and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947-1952*, Cambridge University Press (1987).

¹⁶ Jussi M. Hanhimäki, Benedikt Schoenborn and Barbara Zanchetta, *Transatlantic Relations since 1945: An Introduction*, Routledge of the Taylor & Francis Group (2012).

In sum, strategic interests paralleled those of an economic and political nature, transforming the Marshall Plan in a crucial instrument to replace the old European state system with what they saw as a more viable framework for achieving their policy objectives on the Continent. This strategy would be applied by using the same American principles of federalism to create an integrated European economy similar to the one that existed in the United States¹⁷. This idea was not completely new, Victor Hugo already in the XIX proposed the utopian idea of the creation of the “United States of Europe” (*États-Unis d'Europe*)¹⁸. However, it is to stress that while the idea of Hugo it represented an ethical ideal, preceding the modern project of European integration by more than a century, the US’s intentions were of an economic and strategic nature, with the intention to deepen American hegemony¹⁹.

Additionally, the European had already organized a number of unification movements, some of which called for immediate political federation, other for a loose confederation of semiautonomous states, still others for a gradualist approach that would begin with technical cooperation and economic integration in selected lines of industry and agriculture²⁰. It was the war itself which was the catalyst for a new surge of interest in European unity, leading to negative assessments of the prewar political situation and economic practices²¹. Differently from the past, the idea of unity appeared again, but this time it was argued that the idea of independent states as the basis of political organization was no longer valid. Instead, it was believed that states should walk together and gradually unify their policies to create a single political community across Europe²².

In response to growing congressional interest in the subject, a paper discussing European unification as a method of controlling postwar Germany started to circulate inside the American administration. Such proposal at first received only sporadic consideration in Washington, where some policymakers were worried that a regional bloc might undercut

¹⁷ Hogan, Michael J., *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain, and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947-1952*, Cambridge University Press (1987).

¹⁸ Metzidakis, Angelo, *Victor Hugo and the Idea of the United States of Europe*, Nineteenth-Century French Studies (1994).

¹⁹ Klaus Schwabe, *The Cold War and European integration, 1947–63*, Diplomacy and Statecraft (2001).

²⁰ Lipgens, Walter, *European Federation in the Political Thought of Resistance Movements during World War II*, Central European History (1968).

²¹ Derek W. Urwin, *The Community of Europe: a history of European integration since 1945*, 2. Ed. Longman (1995).

²² Derek W. Urwin, *The Community of Europe: a history of European integration since 1945*, 2. Ed. Longman (1995).

their plan for a worldwide system of multilateral trade²³. In any case, the situation changed in 1948 with the release of the funds for Western Europe. Furthermore, America decided that while it did not wish to impose its own directives upon how the money should be spent, the Marshall Aid would not come as a series of separate bilateral arrangements, but that the recipient state should coordinate their economic activities and planning to achieve the maximum benefit from the programme.

This was the origin of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), that in addition to represent a crucial tool for the monetary coordination among European states in the years following the second post-war, it also marked an important step in the European integration process. In fact, even if it did not mark any advance towards any kind of union beyond a sort of “custom union” into a structured framework and because of the nature of its tasks, OEEC necessarily demanded some shared permanent institutional organs to enable it to perform its function correctly²⁴. Consequently, the management of American aid under the OEEC transitional framework directly anticipated the supranational logic that would later culminate in the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and, ultimately, the modern European Union.

1.2 – First attempts of European security cooperation and the establishing of NATO

While the United States immediately identified the Soviet Union as a powerful and potentially enemy, Western European nations also sought to organize independently in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War to counter potential Soviet expansion. Driven by growing anxieties over Soviet geopolitical ambitions, these European states proposed several collaborative initiatives that, although modest compared to modern integration frameworks, transcended simple economic aid agreements. The most significant of these early efforts was the 1947 Treaty of Dunkirk between Great Britain and France. Initiated by the British government, this pact has been interpreted by many

²³ Milward, Alan S., *The Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1945-51*. University of California Press (1984).

²⁴ Hogan, Michael J., *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain, and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947-1952*, Cambridge University Press (1987).

historians as a nascent attempt to coordinate Western European defence, or even as an early precursor to European integration²⁵.

Officially, the Anglo-French alliance was framed as a mutual defence pact against a potential resurgence of German aggression, reflecting lingering post-war anxieties regarding Germany's future. Yet, it also served as the cornerstone for post-war Franco-British rapprochement. Signed on March 4, 1947, the Treaty of Dunkirk primarily guaranteed British military support in the event of renewed German hostility toward France²⁶. However, the British Ambassador to France, Duff Cooper, insisted that the alliance “would form a potent magnet for others who are now looking round rather wildly in search for security and salvation”²⁷.

Despite its formal anti-German framing, historical analysis reveals that the treaty was driven by more immediate, multi-layered strategic objectives²⁸. For London, offering a treaty to Paris was a calculated move to stabilize French domestic politics and secure its geopolitical alignment. Specifically, the British government aimed to undermine the political influence of the French Communist Party (PCF) and prevent France's foreign policy from drifting into the Soviet sphere of influence²⁹. Ultimately, however, the Treaty of Dunkirk possessed inherent structural limitations that prevented it from becoming the definitive foundation for Western European defence. Not only did Great Britain and France hold deeply divergent visions regarding the economic and political future of Germany, but the bilateral nature of the agreement was fundamentally ill-equipped to address a rapidly evolving, systemic threat³⁰. A two-nation pact could not adequately secure a continent whose primary security challenge was shifting decisively eastward, a realization that would soon necessitate the broader, multilateral frameworks of the Brussels Treaty³¹.

²⁵ Sean Greenwood, *Return to Dunkirk: The origins of the Anglo-French Treaty of March 1947*, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 49-65 (1983).

²⁶ Derek W. Urwin, *The Community of Europe: a history of European integration since 1945*, 2. Ed. Longman (1995).

²⁷ Sean Greenwood, *Return to Dunkirk: The origins of the Anglo-French Treaty of March 1947*, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 49-65 (1983).

²⁸ Marc Trachtenberg, *The German Threat as a Pretext for Defence against Russia*, Princeton University Press (1999).

²⁹ Sean Greenwood, *Return to Dunkirk: The origins of the Anglo-French Treaty of March 1947*, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 49-65 (1983).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Marco D'Agostini, *L'evoluzione delle competenze delle istituzioni europee in materia di sicurezza e difesa*, (2015).

The Soviet threat was growing ever more dangerously and it did not take long for European countries to realise how extremely vulnerable they were. This feeling was fuelled partly due to a series of events that culminated in the coup in Czechoslovakia in February 1948 and the severe tensions in Germany, which would later lead to the Berlin Blockade of the same year³². In an attempt to stabilize the situation and to try to involve Americans in European affairs, British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, made the effort to create an ambitious diplomatic strategy. In fact, Bevin realised that, despite the Marshall Plan, the United States was still reluctant to abandon its isolationist approach and sign formal, binding military alliances in peacetime³³. According to him and to British diplomats, European state had to demonstrate their willingness to be auto-sufficient also under a defensive point of view. So that, they proposed the creation of a defensive union that aimed to include even more countries.

On the 17 March 1948, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, as well as Great Britain and France signed the Brussels Treaty³⁴, from which the Western Union was created³⁵. In terms of content, the updated Treaty, as well as extending co-operation between member states to the social, economic and cultural spheres, introduced two significant innovations: the establishment of a Political Council comprising the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and a Military Committee responsible for strategic planning and the co-ordination of the armed forces; and a new crucial clause, inserted in article IV, which remains to this day a fundamental element in the construction of European defence, providing for mutual assistance between Member States in the event of an armed aggression “by all means in their disposal, military and otherwise”³⁶.

Despite the new changes introduced by the Treaty of Brussels, the aftermath of the war was still very much felt and prevented European states from organising a military defence capable of supporting the ambitious objectives set out in the Treaty. With their defence industry still reeling, the Belux countries possessed no credible deterrent against the Red Army. Added to this was Europe’s dependence on aid from the Marshall Plan, which was

³² Derek W. Urwin, *The Community of Europe: a history of European integration since 1945*, 2. Ed. Longman (1995).

³³ John Baylis, *The Diplomacy of Pragmatism Britain and the Formation of NATO, 1942–49*, Palgrave Macmillan London (1993).

³⁴ NATO Official Website <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/1948/03/17/the-brussels-treaty>.

³⁵ See more at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Western-European-Union>.

³⁶ NATO Official Website <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/1948/03/17/the-brussels-treaty>.

already underway; whilst this aid was essential for reconstruction, it made it impossible to undertake independent rearmament. Aware of this major weakness, shortly after the sign of the Treaty of Brussels, British leaders together with the French one started to make strategic pressure on the US, without a military guarantee from the United States, Western Europe might have collapsed under the push of Moscow³⁷.

Through the exploitation of the geopolitical alarm caused by the coup in Prague and the fears of an imminent conflict in Germany, the leaders succeeded in drawing Truman's administration attention to the unfolding events in Europe³⁸. There were some remaining obstacles for the involvement of the US. The primary concern was of an internal nature: not only the traditional isolationism of America strongly influenced policymakers' attitude toward the proposal of a possible military collaboration, but also the US Senate's fear of losing its exclusive constitutional power to declare war (Article I, Section 8 of the US Constitution³⁹)⁴⁰. The solution of this deadlock was the Vandenberg Resolution (S. Res. 239)⁴¹, passed on 11 June 1948. Although not binding, the Resolution represents a declaration of intent that did not circumvent the Constitution, but stated that any future military alliance would respect American "constitutional processes". In practice, it reassured the Senate that the US would not be automatically dragged into war without the consent of Congress, but it officially opened the legal door to an Atlantic alliance.

Shortly after the adoption of the Resolution, a series of highly confidential diplomatic manoeuvres took place. These secret meetings, known collectively as the *Washington Exploratory Talks on Security*⁴², were held between July 1948 and March 1949 and saw the participation of the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. Away from the scrutiny of both the press and the broader public, the leaders of these countries tried to pursue two critical objectives: first, to prevent a premature escalation of geopolitical tensions with the Soviet Union during the critical months of the Berlin Blockade, started in June 1948; second, to allow diplomats

³⁷ John Baylis, *The Diplomacy of Pragmatism Britain and the Formation of NATO, 1942–49*, Palgrave Macmillan London (1993).

³⁸ Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/nato>.

³⁹ Constitution of the United States <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/article-1/>.

⁴⁰ ⁴⁰ Kaplan, Lawrence S., *The United States and NATO: The Formative Years*, University Press of Kentucky (1984).

⁴¹ U.S. Senate Resolution 239, "The Vandenberg Resolution", 80th Congress, 2nd Session (11 June 1948) <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d106>

⁴² US Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d112>.

and policymakers to investigate national differences and diverging interests without the pressures of domestic political opposition⁴³. It was within the framework of these secret deliberations that the foundational architecture of the future North Atlantic Treaty was meticulously drafted.

Among the most debated issues, the participating states discussed the geographical scope of a possible alliance, that is, which other countries to include in the agreements. Furthermore, countries such as Canada insisted that the Alliance should not be merely a military pact, but should also include provisions on political and economic cooperation, aimed at promoting peaceful and stable international relations among its members⁴⁴.

Another important point that was discussed concerned the precise legal obligations of the mutual defence clause that would later culminate in Article V⁴⁵. This article is considered the cornerstone of the collective defence principle and affirms that an attack against one signing member is to be considered an attack against all, but each member shall assist the party under attack by taking “such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area”. It was precisely this specification that convinced the United States to take part of this agreement, preserving American constitutional sovereignty while providing a strong deterrent.

In the end, the classified documents produced in this two-year period did not merely outline a temporary strategic alignment, but rather established the institutional and legal blueprint for the contemporary transatlantic security architecture. The negotiations were concluded with the formal signing of the North Atlantic Treaty⁴⁶ on 4 April 1949 in Washington, marking the official birth of NATO⁴⁷.

⁴³ Kaplan, Lawrence S., *The United States and NATO: The Formative Years*, University Press of Kentucky (1984).

⁴⁴ Escott Reid, *Time of Fear and Hope: The Making of the North Atlantic Treaty*, McClelland & Stewart (1977).

⁴⁵ NATO Official Website, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/introduction-to-nato/collective-defence-and-article-5>.

⁴⁶ NATO Official Website, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/1949/04/04/the-north-atlantic-treaty>.

⁴⁷ NATO Official Website, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/nato-history/a-short-history-of-nato>.

2. NATO-EU relation: strategic autonomy, burden-sharing and transatlantic complementarity

2.1 – From the European Pillar to the Permanent Structured Cooperation

Since its inception in 1949, the Atlantic Alliance has been structurally defined by its transatlantic duality. The political geography of the organization emerged with a clear asymmetry, showing the US, alongside Canada, as the primary security provider against a constellation of European allies who acted as the main beneficiaries of American protection. As analysed in point 1 of the chapter, historically speaking, NATO was firstly characterized by the predominancy of US's leadership. From the very first decades of the Cold War, however, the political need to develop a stronger "European component" became more and more apparent. The reason for that was twofold: while on the one hand there was the urgency to meet Washington's demands for a fairer sharing of the burden, on the other hand, European countries began to feel a stronger need to assume greater political responsibility for the security of their own continent⁴⁸.

Starting from the 1980s⁴⁹, scholars and policymakers started to talk about the *European Pillar*, a definition used to describe the European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation as a cohesive bloc capable of balancing and complementing the strategic and military leadership of the United States⁵⁰. This concept was not intended to refer to a separate military entity or an alternative command structure, but rather a political and strategic concept that aim to represent the coordination and collective contribution by European allies to the Alliance's capabilities, budget and missions⁵¹.

The development of the European Union as a security and defence actor has been described by scholars as a non-linear process of maturation, that occurs in different phases⁵². The end of the Cold War marked a significant turning point in this process. The

⁴⁸ Heinrich-Boll-Stiftung, *The European pillar in NATO: from hollow to concrete*, (2026).

⁴⁹ The definition firstly appeared in the *Rome Declaration* by the WEU Foreign and Defence Ministers (1984). https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2003/7/11/c44c134c-aca3-45d1-9e0b-04d4d9974ddf/publishable_en.pdf#:~:text=Caption%3A%20At%20an%20extraordinary%20session%20held%20in%20Rome,Member%20States%20in%20the%20field%20of%20security%20policy.

⁵⁰ See the work of Christian Freudlsperger and Frank Schimmelfennig, *The Europeanisation of NATO*, Journal of Common Market Studies (JCMS) (2026).

⁵¹ Thierry Tardy, *Unpacking the European Pillar in NATO*, Issue 5 Section 1: European Defence in New Geopolitics (2024).

⁵² See the works of Eva Michaels and Monica Sus, *Not Coming of Age? Unpacking the European Union's quest for strategic autonomy in security and defence*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group (2024); Sven Biscop, *European Strategy in the 21st Century: New Future for Old Power*, Routledge (2019); Jolyon Howorth, *Security and Defence Policy in the European Union*, Palgrave Macmillan (2014).

dissolution of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the bipolar confrontation that had shaped European Union for decades, questions were raised about the future role of The United States in European security and about the ability of the Members to assume greater responsibility for their own defence. At the same time, the conflicts that erupted in the Western Balkans during the 1990s demonstrated that the end of the Cold War had not eliminated security challenges in the continent⁵³. The wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and, later, in Kosovo exposed the limited capacity of EU states to respond collectively to crises in their neighbourhood and highlighted their continued reliance on US military capabilities and NATO structures⁵⁴.

These developments coincided with the creation of the European Union in 1992, with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty⁵⁵ that introduced the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)⁵⁶, establishing a framework for Member States to coordinate their actions in the field of foreign and security policy. However, unlike the supranational areas of European integration, the CFSP remained mostly intergovernmental, reflecting the Members's reluctance to transfer part of their sovereignty of defence matters to the Union. In fact, the Maastricht Treaty divided the European structure according to three different pillars⁵⁷: the European Communities, a common foreign and security policy, and cooperation between EU governments on justice and home affairs. Therefore, inserting CFSP under the second pillar, it allowed Member States to continue to retain primary responsibility for their military capabilities.

The experience of the Balkans conflicts revealed the gap between the EU's growing political ambition to present itself as a "security provider" and its limited capacity to act autonomous in the defence field without relying of NATO and, in particular, on the United States's capabilities⁵⁸. The difficulties of the European States in managing the conflicts

⁵³ See more at <https://www.balkanhistory.org/balkan-wars-1990s.html>.

⁵⁴ Paul Latawski and Martin A. Smith, *The EU's military dimension: a child of the Kosovo crisis?*, Oxford Academics (2003).

⁵⁵ European Parliament Official Website, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/maastricht-treaty>.

⁵⁶ European Commission Official Website, https://commission.europa.eu/funding-and-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/common-foreign-and-security-policy_en#:~:text=The%20Common%20Foreign%20and%20Security%20Policy%20%28CFSP%29%20contributes,and%20respect%20for%20human%20rights%20and%20fundamental%20freedoms.

⁵⁷ See the division of the three pillars at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3Axy0026&utm>.

⁵⁸ Thierry Tardy, *The European Union and UN Peace Operations: What Global–Regional Peace and Security Partnership?*, Springer Nature (2018). See at https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-99106-1_12.

around their border strengthened the debates over the need for a more coherent European Security, based on common shared principles among its Members.

The first steps in this regard were prompted by Anglo-French agreement at the 1998 Saint-Malo Summit. The French government of the time believed in the idea that the EU “must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, to respond to international crises”⁵⁹. This implied an ideational shift, specifically for the other crucial power of the continent, the United Kingdom, that for most part of the 1990s reaffirmed that an autonomous role for the EU in international security would have been “virtually unthinkable”⁶⁰. It was precisely this need that in 2009, with the entered in force of the Treaty of Lisbon⁶¹, gave rise to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)⁶², a key element of the Union’s comprehensive approach that today enable Europeans to play a leading role in conflict prevention, crisis management and international peacekeeping. Thanks to the development of CSDP, the EU has gradually sought to give the “European Pillar” institutional substance, positioning itself as the political and economic arm of European security.

As some academic analysis suggest, the factors that most influence the development of European defence and security policies stem from shifts in the balance of power within, or in the immediate proximity of, the territories of the Member States. This is demonstrated also by the establishment of the CSDP, that has not been driven only by external military threats or strategic efficiency, but rather by internal European crisis and questions of European identity⁶³.

This is what happened also in the development of PESCO⁶⁴. Following Russia’s seizure of the Crimea in 2014, the countless terrorist attacks on European soil perpetrated by

⁵⁹ Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac, *Joint Declaration issued at the British-French Summit*, (Saint-Malo, 4 December 1998). https://www.cvce.eu/obj/franco_british_st_malo_declaration_4_december_1998-en-f3cd16fb-fc37-4d52-936f-c8e9bc80f24f.html.

⁶⁰ Eva Michaels and Monica Sus, *Not Coming of Age? Unpacking the European Union’s quest for strategic autonomy in security and defence*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Groups (2024).

⁶¹ European Parliament Official Website, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/treaty-of-lisbon>.

⁶² European Union External Action Official Website, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/common-security-and-defence-policy_en.

⁶³ John Helfferich, *Trapped in the Grey Zone: NATO-CSDP Relations in a New Era of European Security Governance*, Springer Nature International Politics (2024).

⁶⁴ See the works of Daniel Fiott, Antonio Missiroli and Thierry Tardy, *Permanent Structured Cooperation: What’s in a Name?*, EU Institute for Security Studies; Alessandro Marroni, Nicoletta Pirozzi and Paola Sartori, *PESCO: An Ace in the Hand for European Defence*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

various Islamist groups, the migration crisis, the shifts in US foreign and defence policy and the UK's decision to leave the EU, the European Union has found itself confronted with numerous security and political challenges. The response to these challenges began in the summer of 2016, with the publication of the *EU Global Strategy*, an important document which has led to the launch of a series of initiatives⁶⁵. Among these, of particular importance was the establishment of a Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), a Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) and a European Defence Fund (EDF)⁶⁶. At the same time, EU member state governments were driven to action by a growing imperative to build a Europe capable of credibility in the defence of its citizens. Echoing the emphasis on “increasing the protection of Europe” outlined in the EU Global Strategy, in 2017 several governments decided to revisit the documents that laid the foundations for the CSDP and European integration, examining in greater depth certain key points set out primarily in Articles 42(6) and 46 of the TEU (Treaty on European Union⁶⁷) and Protocol 10 of the Treaty of Lisbon⁶⁸ where the possibility of establishing a joint defence capability had already been raised. So, on the 11 December 2017, the Council of the European Union took the formal decision to establish the *Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)*⁶⁹, a treaty-based framework within the European Union launched to deepen defence cooperation among the participating twenty-six member states⁷⁰.

The PESCO framework includes two components: binding commitments and specific projects. Binding commitments are pledges made by states in the field of defence cooperation; for instance, members regularly increase their defence budgets, making strategically deployable units available to meet the EU's stated level of ambition, or participate in the development of major joint European equipment programmes within

⁶⁵ Alessandro Marroni, Nicoletta Pirozzi and Paola Sartori, *PESCO: An Ace in the Hand for European Defence*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

⁶⁶ Thierry Tordy, *Does European Defence really matter?*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group (2018).

⁶⁷ Treaty on European Union (TEU), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF.

⁶⁸ EUR-Lex Official Website, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/the-treaty-of-lisbon.html>.

⁶⁹ The current member states of PESCO are 26, all the members of the European Union, with the exception of the Republic of Malta.

⁷⁰ Daniel Fiott, Antonio Missiroli and Thierry Tardy, *Permanent Structured Cooperation: What's in a name?*, ISSUE Chaillot Paper n°142 (2017).

the remit of the European Defence Agency (EDA)⁷¹. In parallel, a number of specific projects is proposed by the same PESCO members.

2.2 – The strategic relationship between NATO and the European Union

Given that two-thirds of NATO allies are simultaneously members of the European Union, the structural overlap between the two organisations present a complex interplay of systemic synergies and strategic tensions. At the core of this institutional nexus lies the delicate equilibrium between the pursuit of European strategic autonomy and the commitment to transatlantic complementarity⁷². The contrast between the different strategic vision of the key players is based primarily on issues surrounding this precise principle of complementarity, which underpins the relationship between the two organisations.

The United States' approach has historically been characterised by calls for greater burden-sharing on the part of its European allies, who are urged to take responsibility for stability in the neighbouring regions. This request has regained particular importance after the election of President Donald Trump, when the sharing financial and military burdens has become an essential condition for US support to European security⁷³. On the contrary, the Franco-German approach promotes the strengthening of European defence capabilities⁷⁴, strongly supporting the concept of “strategic autonomy”, as suggested by the studies of Daniel Fiott⁷⁵. France, particularly under President Macron, insisted more than once on the importance of a genuine autonomous intervention capability through initiatives such as the European Intervention Initiative (EII)⁷⁶, designed to enable Europeans to manage regional crises where the United States or NATO do not intend to intervene. In addition, the other superpower of Europe, Germany, agrees that Europe needs to take on a more active and independent role, and fully supports defence

⁷¹ Daniel Fiott, Antonio Missiroli and Thierry Tardy, *Permanent Structured Cooperation: What's in a name?*, ISSUE Chaillot Paper n°142 (2017).

⁷² John Helfferich, *Trapped in the Grey Zone: NATO-CSDP Relations in a New Era of European Security Governance*, Springer Nature International Politics (2024).

⁷³ More than once President Donald Trump has asked its NATO allies to adopt a more robust position regarding their military budget, as seen in Donald Trump, Remarks by President Trump at NATO Summit, Brussels, 12 July 2018.

⁷⁴ Burak Tangör, *NATO-EU Strategic partnership: Where is it Heading?*, Perceptions Volume XXVI (2021).

⁷⁵ See for instance Daniel Fiott, *Strategic Autonomy: Towards 'European Sovereignty' in Defence?*, EUISS Policy Brief (2018).

⁷⁶ The European Intervention Initiative (EII/EI2), <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8432/>, House of Commons Library (online source).

integration and funding mechanisms such as Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund⁷⁷. Between the two organizations there is not a real hierarchical relationship; rather there is a functional and operational division of roles, more or less defined on the basis of the field studied. While NATO acts primarily as a traditional defence actor, responsible for collective defence, for the nuclear umbrella and through its hard power capacity, the European Union is described more as a comprehensive security actor, drawing on a wide range of civilian and soft power tools. The EU's tendency to undertake civilian missions, while placing less emphasis on military operations, has been one of the aspects of CSDP missions most criticised by experts in the field prior 2022. Indeed, the frequent deployment of European resources in operations relating solely to conflict prevention, border management and the rule of law runs counter to the very original idea of equipping the Union with a certain degree of coercive capacity⁷⁸. In more recent years, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has accelerated the realisation that it was no longer enough for the EU to be capable of preventing conflict, managing borders and building institutions, but that it also needed to develop capabilities enabling it to contribute to deterrence, territorial defence and high-intensity warfare.

This need for European military strengthening has also been emphasised for years by Washington and the discussions related to it have become even more relevant in the context of the changing transatlantic relationship. This political pressure has materialised during the speech of US Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth in June 2026, where he has described the emerging model of "NATO 3.0" as a return to a stronger military alliance in which European Members would take greater responsibility for the conventional defence of Europe, while the US would remain a partner rather than the primary provider of the Union's security⁷⁹.

Historically, the development of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) was never intended to duplicate NATO's established command structures or displace its role as the primary guarantor of collective defence in Europe. Instead, European defence initiatives were conceived to cultivate robust, sovereign capabilities that would simultaneously reinforce the European pillar within the Alliance. However,

⁷⁷ Burak Tangör, *NATO-EU Strategic partnership: Where is it Heading?*, Perceptions Volume XXVI (2021).

⁷⁸ Thierry Tordy, *Does European Defence really matter?*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group (2018).

⁷⁹ US Department of War Official Website, <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4521330/war-department-review-to-ensure-nato-30-becomes-europe-led-defense-alliance/>.

operationalising this "division of labour" remains politically sensitive. While advocates argue that enhanced European strategic autonomy strengthens NATO by fostering a more capable and self-reliant European posture, critics caution against the potential fragmentation of resources, duplicate planning procedures, and political friction⁸⁰. Indeed, there are some tangible benefits that the European Union brings to the Alliance. While in the past, agreements between the EU and NATO provided for the 'loan' of the Alliance's assets to carry out missions, today the reverse is also true. The European Union's frameworks, in fact, allow Member States to provide logistical resources that the Alliance would not otherwise have at its disposal, including a high degree of military mobility. The creation of the *Military Schengen Area* mechanism is now a vital tool, drawing on the legal authority and funding of European states to adapt railways, bridges, airspace and European customs laws to enable NATO troops to move rapidly eastwards. This has proved crucial, particularly in light of Russia's demonstrated aggressiveness⁸¹.

Still, some scholars describe NATO-CSDP relations as being trapped in a "grey zone". The two institutions overlap and sometimes duplicate each other's activities, creating strategic ambiguity⁸². This is one of the main reasons why some experts define a complete European autonomy as "unlikely" at least in the near future, while highlighting how the main focus will be on how to better manage this institutional overlap rather than eliminate it.

3. Recent developments in EU-US relations and American gradual detachment

3.1 – The roots of the new US isolationism and unilateralism posture

As mentioned in the previous sub-chapters, since the end of the Second World War, the United States has partly abandoned its traditional isolationist stance, adopting a more open approach to international affairs. Their new external grand strategy was

⁸⁰ Luca Ratti, *NATO and CSDP after Ukraine War: the End of European Strategic Autonomy?*, CJERS (2023).

⁸¹ Nicole Koeing, *The EU and NATO: A Partnership with a Glass Ceiling*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (2018).

⁸² John Helferich, *Trapped in the Grey Zone: NATO-CSDP Relations in a New Era of European Security Governance*, Springer Nature International Politics (2024).

characterized by the idea of achieving a stable international system with the US at the centre. Some scholars referred to this idea primarily in economic terms, while others conceived of it in terms of values and not only concerned a better trade environment⁸³. Still, they shared all the same base idea: the creation of a global liberal order was a vital US interest in this new geopolitical balance of the post-war era.

With the end of the Cold War and with its main threat no longer existing, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the NATO alliance could have dissolved, but its members chose instead to maintain and expand it. The hope was that a world dominated by the victorious superpower, and especially the US, would have led to a more democratic and peaceful stability⁸⁴. One of the key reasons is also due to the fact that, at the time, no one would have had the ability to challenge the primacy of the United States. The US, therefore, found itself in a particularly advantageous position in the early 1990s, enjoying both greater wealth and development, without having to bear the consequences of the wars directly on its own territory, and moral prestige, appearing not only as a victorious power but also as one that was magnanimous towards the countries that agreed to be its allies⁸⁵.

In the decades that followed, probably driven by this positive momentum within the international system and in order to maintain its status, the US decided to embrace a grand strategy of “liberal hegemony”. Some scholars, such as Stephen M. Walt, described in a critical way American behaviour as “worldwide policeman”, implying that the ambitious US’s doctrine rested on the belief that the country should use its unprecedented power to spread democracy, expand military alliances, and integrate the world into an open, rules-based international order, effectively assuming the role of the world’s indispensable policeman⁸⁶. Following this idea, in the subsequent decades, the United States decided to take part in some ambitious military campaigns, particularly in the Middle East. However, this stance did not go as planned and turned out to be, for most part, a costly failure, particularly in terms of domestic support. The prolonged military interventions in places like Iraq and Libya caused widespread resentment, civil instability, anti-American

⁸³ Walter Russell Mead, *The Jacksonian Revolt: American populism and the Liberal Order*, JSTOR Collection Foreign Affairs (2017).

⁸⁴ Haass, Richard, *The World: A Brief Introduction*, Penguin Press (2020).

⁸⁵ G. John Ikenberry, *The End of Liberal International Order?*, Journal International Affairs (Vol.94, 2018).

⁸⁶ Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*, MacMillan (2018).

sentiment, and a massive expenditure of blood and treasure, all while failing to prevent the resurgence of great-power rivalries, namely China and Russia⁸⁷. The high economic and human costs of these conflicts, together with their limited and often controversial outcomes, contributed to growing scepticism among the American public towards further military engagement abroad. As a result, the unquestioned influence of globalist approaches on US foreign policy began to weaken, while more nationalist and less globally oriented perspectives gained increasing prominence, giving importance to the “America First” posture⁸⁸.

Consequently, while internally American electorate demanded a focus on core national interests and externally this moment coincided with the aggressive return of geopolitical competitors, US’s grand strategy was forced to pivot away from ideological intention to convert non-liberal states and to adopt a more pragmatic, defensive orientation⁸⁹.

Another critical domain shaping the United States ‘evolving strategic posture is the political economy of international trade. Historically, American liberal hegemony was underpinned by a commitment to “managed” open world economy, a paradigm whose conceptual roots can be traced back to the New Deal era⁹⁰. Throughout the difficult periods surrounding the two World Wars, policymakers operated under the foundational premise that domestic social and economic security were inextricably linked to national security⁹¹.

In recent years, however Washington’s approach toward the very same partners it has dealt with over the past decades has undergone a profound transformation. While the US traditionally gave great importance to the promotion of multilateral trade liberalisation and institutional governance through bodies like the World Trade Organization (WTO), contemporary American economic strategy is characterized by high level of protectionism, and a renewed, intense geo-economic friction with the economies of the countries around the world.

⁸⁷ Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*, MacMillan (2018).

⁸⁸ G. John Ikenberry, *The End of Liberal International Order?*, Journal International Affairs (Vol.94, 2018).

⁸⁹ G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy*, Yale University Press (2020).

⁹⁰ The New Deal, introduced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt between 1933 and 1938, was a series of economic and social reforms designed to contrast the consequences of the Great Depression in the US.

⁹¹ G. John Ikenberry, *The End of Liberal International Order?*, Journal International Affairs (Vol.94, 2018).

This new protectionist turn is marked by a shift from broad multilateral free trade agreements to unilateral tariff regimes and aggressive industrial policies. Although this is a process that began years ago, under Donald Trump's presidency it has become an established practice. Furthermore, the preference for bilateral agreements over multilateral ones is one of the typical traits of populist leaders who, having little faith in liberal practices and certain aversion to international institutions, prefer to strike deals and agreements directly between heads of state, without resorting to further intermediaries (such as global trade organisations)⁹².

Clearly, the post-war allies did not welcome the US administration's decision, and this new tariff-based approach has made them even more unsure whether they can rely on the United States during a time of crisis and are uneasy with its unilateralism⁹³.

3.2 – The current points of friction in EU-US relations

When we talk about an “alliance”, we refer to a collection of countries that have come together to promote what they see as their common security interest. This term is often used as a synonym for a friendly country, but the definition provided clearly goes beyond a simply “close partnership”, implying that all alliances enshrine a formal commitment or obligation to provide military support if any member of the alliance is attacked or faces the immediate likelihood of being attacked⁹⁴. However, establishing and especially maintaining a stable balance between the alliances is not an easy task.

A crucial problem that can arise concerns the inequality between what members of an alliance bring to it. “Burden sharing” is never equal and can be a major source of tension⁹⁵. The issue of the sharing of costs and responsibilities is one of the most heated and topical debates concerning the North Atlantic Treaty Organization⁹⁶. Although President Donald Trump is the US leader most closely associated with this issue, due to his more direct approach and the authoritarian tone repeatedly adopted towards allies in his speeches, the need for a greater European contribution to defence, including financial support, has in

⁹² Daniel F. Wajner, Sandra Destradi and Michael Zürn, *The effects of global populism: assessing the populist impact on international affairs*, Oxford University Press (2024).

⁹³ Haass, Richard, *The World: A Brief Introduction*, Penguin Press (2020).

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ G. John Ikenberry, *The End of Liberal International Order?*, *Journal International Affairs* (Vol.94, 2018).

⁹⁶ See a recent article about burden sharing between the allies at <https://formiche.net/2026/07/burden-sharing-shifting-summit-nato-ankara/#content>.

fact been a recurring theme across all US administration in the last decades. In a famous remark in Hannover Conference in 2016, President Barack Obama underlined that achieving global security requires the contribution of every single member state and that European countries should not simply rely on American protection, but they should be the first to play a direct part for their own security⁹⁷.

American frustration over the perceived lack of contribution from its allies, who have struggled to meet the 2% GDP target for NATO military spending⁹⁸, has led the United States to gradually distance itself politically from the Alliance. This shift of focus has raised more than one concern, especially regarding the future security and defence of Europe. In fact, doubts about US reliability have multiplied under Trump administration, in particular regarding the commitments under article V, regarding which the President left open the possibility that he would not uphold the provisions of the article in relation to those countries that were unable, or had no intention, of meeting the targets set by the Alliance⁹⁹.

Moreover, Washington's increasingly sovereigntist nationalism stance has led America to distance itself even from the international structures and organisations of which it was once a primary member¹⁰⁰. Although US has been the leading architect of the international liberal order of the post Second World War period, American foreign policy has often expressed a strong scepticism towards supranational bodies, when perceived as potential constraints to national sovereignty or strategic interests. American doubts have led the United States to limit International Courts' jurisdiction on its own citizens, for instance, the US Government does not recognize the *International Criminal Court*, after the cancellation of the signature of the Rome Statute by Bush administration in 2002¹⁰¹.

⁹⁷ See President Obama Remarks in Hannover, Germany https://archive.org/details/CSPAN_20160426_000000_President_Obama_Remarks_in_Hannover_Germany.

⁹⁸ As cited in the article, the German Economic Research Institute (IFO) underlined that to reach the 2% goal, European states required an additional annual funding of 56 billion euros, which, at the time, was a request that the member of the Union found incredibly difficult to achieve. <https://www.theworldmonitor.com/european-nations-struggle-to-meet-natos-2-gdp-target/>.

⁹⁹ New York Times Official Website <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/21/us/politics/donald-trump-issues.html>.

¹⁰⁰ See the works of Stacie E. Goddard and Abraham Newman, *Further Back to the Future: Neo-Royalism, the Trump Administration, and the Emerging International System*, Cambridge University Press (2025) and Susan D. Hyde and Elizabeth N. Saunders, *The Unconstrained Future of World Order: The Assault on Democratic Constraint and Implications for US Global Leadership*, Cambridge University Press (2025).

¹⁰¹ Human Rights Watch Organization Official Website, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2002/05/06/united-states-unsigning-treaty-war-crimes->

Furthermore, in 2017 the US decided to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, a legally binding international treaty on climate change, under the first Trump administration, to rejoin it later on with President Biden and eventually abandon it again with the second Trump's presidency¹⁰². This witnesses the new American stance regarding international affairs: when it comes to issues that do not strictly concern US domestic policy, Washington currently prefers to step back.

4. The European “wake up call”: from the strategic outsourcing to the search of military independence

The transatlantic relationship has always been central to security and defence policy. The complex, and sometimes confused, interactions between the two sides of the Atlantic over European defence arrangements have demonstrated remarkable continuity, starting from the post-1945 discussions around the parallel formations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. For several decades the world has been dominated by a western liberal order, organized by economic openness, multilateral institutions, security cooperation and democratic solidarity. Today, this liberal international order is in crisis and for the first time since 1930s, the US has elected a president who is openly hostile to liberal internationalism¹⁰³.

For decades the reliance on the NATO security framework has been a very effective solution for European member states. Furthermore, it has also been extremely convenient for them because it allowed to rebuild themselves in the after war, without incurring in substantial expenses for their defence. However, today's contest has changed significantly and this military delegation risks to become a dangerous vulnerability.

The European defence architecture, traditionally subordinated under American leadership, finds itself having to deal with a deeply changed geopolitical landscape. On the one hand, EU states are facing the resurgence of high-intensity threats along their borders that requires them to have the resources necessary for an effective response; on

court#:~:text=In%20an%20unprecedented%20diplomatic%20maneuver%2C%20Under%20Secretary%20of,treaty%20to%20create%20a%20permanent%20war%20crimes%20tribunal.

¹⁰² Jonathan D. Haskett, *U.S. Withdrawal from the Paris Agreement: Process and Potential Effects*, Congressional Research Service (2025).

¹⁰³ G. John Ikenberry, *The End of Liberal International Order?*, *Journal International Affairs* (Vol.94, 2018).

the other hand, Washington's strategic focus is progressively shifting away from its allies to pursue its own interest. Apparently, America's renewed interest is focused largely on the Indo-Pacific theatre, which the United States has identified as the true epicentre of global competition¹⁰⁴.

This gradual divergence in priorities has highlighted the important limits of EU's dependence on external defence: the security guarantees offered by the NATO system, while formally continuing to exist, is inevitably conditioned by shifting foreign policy needs and domestic US dynamics. Consequently, what once was a rational outsourcing of defence costs now represents a strategic vulnerability¹⁰⁵. Without the development of an effective autonomous industrial and operational capability, the consequences would be costly for the European Union, that would be unable to protect its core interests where they do not align with the global priorities of its transatlantic ally.

Discussions regarding European strategic autonomy had already broadened in 2016, partly in the wake of the Brexit referendum that led to the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union. The European necessity to adopt a more robust posture regarding its defence, however, generated also some doubts. In fact, the United States, while actively encouraging the European Union to develop serious military capacity, also feared that such capacity might lead to Europe balancing against America. Also, the same Union wanted to try to avoid taking its independence too far and triggering US abandonment¹⁰⁶.

In any case, even though ten years have passed, the core issue of Europe's dependence on the US "umbrella" persists and continues to be subject of much debate among leaders and policymakers. One of the most recent remarks by US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth suggested that European states should be autonomous in their conventional defence, while still ensuring them the protection given by American nuclear umbrella¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰⁴ President Donald Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, p. 19 (2025). See the document at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

¹⁰⁵ Thierry Tardy, *The narrow but inescapable path of the European pillar of NATO*, Jacques Delors Institute (2025).

¹⁰⁶ Jolyon Howorth, *EU-NATO Cooperation and Strategic Autonomy: Logical Contradiction or Ariadne's Thread?*, KFG Working Paper Series, No. 90 Kolleg-Forschergruppe (KFG) (2018).

¹⁰⁷ US department of War Official Website, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4539593/remarks-by-secretary-of-war-pete-hegseth-at-the-2026-nato-defense-ministerial-i/>.

The debates have further deepened after the President Donald Trump's dismissive remarks regarding US security guarantees and his frequent references to the allies' behaviour as that of "free-riders". The Obama administration was the first to refer to its alliances in those terms, when in 2016 during an interview he openly accused some historically alliances, particularly France and the UK, of not comply with their obligations under the Alliance¹⁰⁸. The term refers to an individual or entity that benefits from a public or collective good or service without contributing to the costs of its production or maintenance¹⁰⁹. The American economist Mancur Olson talked about this specific dynamic in his famous book *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (1965), and his theories have been frequently applied also to explain nations' behaviour in alliances. In particular, applied to the case of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, it has helped scholars to better understand why some nations tend not to contribute voluntarily to the "common good": they are aware that the good (in this case defence) will be provided in any case thanks to the efforts of others, so those actors choose not to pay and simply enjoy the benefits for free. So, also due to the imbalance of power in an alliance, studies have shown that this "free-riding attitude" appears as a systematic tendency especially among middle powers, that tends to contribute less to the collective benefit of the public goods than how much they receive from it¹¹⁰.

American frustration and its resentment against its European allies have gradually caused a detachment in between Atlantic shores. Meantime, the threats at the eastern border of the Union have not calm down but, on the contrary, have dramatically increased with the apex in 2022, when Russia launched a large-scale invasion into Ukrainian territory, marking an escalation of the conflict that began in 2014.

Taken together, these two significant systemic factors have forced the European members to completely redraw their military policies. This "wake up call" has been painful: EU has had to come to terms with the shift from a world based on rules, treaties and the global economy, to one based on hard power, a skill that the Union still must master.

¹⁰⁸ Read the interview at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

¹⁰⁹ Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, Harvard University Press (1965).

¹¹⁰ Benjamin Zyla, *NATO Burden Sharing: A New Research Agenda*, University of Ottawa (2016).

5. Brexit and its implications for European Security: the ambiguous position of the United Kingdom

5.1 – The rise of Euroscepticism and the Brexit referendum

Over the last decade, global politics has been increasingly characterized by a surge in populism¹¹¹. While the study of populist movement has a rich history in the social sciences, the formation of governments led by populist figures in both Northern and Southern hemispheres represent a relatively recent development¹¹².

This nationalist wave has notably impacted Europe. In Western countries especially, initiatives by the European Union to consolidate its institutional power have often coincided with an increase the electoral consensus of populist parties, as a react against further integration. For instance, in France, Jean-Marie Le Pen benefited from the referendum against the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005; in Germany the Alternative für Deutschland initially gained popularity as a response against the EU's currency union; in Greece, Syriza would have not been possible without the Troika; Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party (UKIP) thrived as long as the EU could be pitted as an enemy for the British people¹¹³.

Regarding UK, Nigel Farage, with his UK Independence Party, has played a key role in the Eurosceptic campaign that pushed the country towards an increased isolationism, inevitably leading to the Brexit event, the exit of the UK from the European Union, as a consequence of the referendum of 2016.

The United Kingdom has always had an ambivalent relationship with European integration. Starting from the 1970s, after its accession to the European Economic Community (1973), a part of British public opinion and of the political establishment viewed the EU as a constraint to national sovereignty¹¹⁴. Further on, in the 1990s and 2000s, parties and movements such as UKIP (UK Independence Party) pushed strongly for an exit, arguing that Brussels had too much power over British laws and that London

¹¹¹ See data at Worldmetrics Official Website <https://worldmetrics.org/populism-statistics/>.

¹¹² Fabrizio Coticchia and Jason W. Davidson, *The Limits of Radical Parties in Coalition Foreign Policy: Italy, Hijacking and the Extremity Hypothesis*, Oxford University Press (2018).

¹¹³ Fabrizio Coticchia and Jason W. Davidson, *The Limits of Radical Parties in Coalition Foreign Policy: Italy, Hijacking and the Extremity Hypothesis*, Oxford University Press (2018).

¹¹⁴ George Stephen, *Britain and the European Community: The Politics of Semi-Detachment*, Oxford University Press (1992).

should have been able to take certain decisions, particularly in the areas of economy and migration, with greater autonomy¹¹⁵.

The 2008 financial crisis and the increase in intra-EU immigration fuelled the debate, with the idea that the UK could ‘take back control’ of its borders and trade policies. Prime Minister David Cameron, in an effort to quell divisions within the Conservative Party and respond to political pressure¹¹⁶, promised a referendum. On 23 June 2016, 51.9% of voters voted to leave the EU¹¹⁷.

The UK’s departure split European reactions: while many Eurosceptic parties welcomed this decision with enthusiasm, even calling for a similar referendum in their own countries, such as the extreme-right Dutch party Geert Wilders¹¹⁸, on the other hand almost all EU governments and the European Institutions showed concern about the result of the referendum. Although accepting the democratic decision of the British citizens, the EU institutions highlighted the importance to preserve the Union and started working to make cohesion a vital priority. Thus, the period following the referendum quickly led to new institutional developments, triggering greater EU integration and cooperation¹¹⁹.

One of the main concerns regarded the European security and defence implications. Some experts classified Brexit event has an “existential crisis” perceived by European members. Such crisis gave unprecedented priority to security and defence concerns, invoking a greater military role for the EU, either through CSDP, industrial policies and other tools¹²⁰.

With the Brexit referendum, one of the two only military powers that can project military capabilities abroad left the EU, feeding fears that this process would have weakened the EU’s security and defence posture. In fact, the UK had been the EU’s most powerful

¹¹⁵ BBC News Official Website <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-21614073>.

¹¹⁶ Stephen George, *An Awkward Partner: Britain in the European Community*, Oxford University Press (1998).

¹¹⁷ UK Parliament, House of Commons Library <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7639/>.

¹¹⁸ The New York Times Official Website, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/live/eu-referendum/geert-wilders/>.

¹¹⁹ Jolyon Howorth, *EU Defence Cooperation after Brexit: What Role for the UK in the Future EU Defence Arrangements?*, *European View* 16, no. 2 (2017).

¹²⁰ Catherine Hoeffler, Stéphanie c. Hofmann and Frédéric Mérand, *The polycrisis and EU security and defence competences*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group (2024).

military and alone accounted for about a quarter of all European military expenses¹²¹. With Brexit, the EU also lost a net contributor to its budget. The fear of being inevitably weakened by the UK's decision has pushed European governments to seek ways to reorganise and strengthen their defence and military strategies, in order to recover quickly from the loss of one of the key players in this field. Brexit fostered the idea that Europeans should be more self-sufficient, even among the strongest NATO supporters such as the Netherlands¹²².

Historically, the United Kingdom and the United States have maintained a deeply entrenched “special relationship”, rooted in shared cultural heritage and historical ties. However, contemporary geopolitical shifts have severely strained this traditional alignment. Following its departure from the European Union, the UK severed formal ties with its closest continental allies, and, in addition, the return of a Trump administration characterized by transactional isolationism and unilateral foreign policy has left the UK uniquely vulnerable. In the event of a definitive geopolitical break between the US and continental Europe, London would face a critical strategic trilemma. One of the potential pathways is the decision of the UK to choose to pursue comprehensive independence, striving for self-reliance by significantly increasing its domestic defence capabilities and establishing an autonomous role on the global stage. Another possibility is that the British government might be forced to make a binary geopolitical choice, firmly aligning its interests either within the American orbit or back toward the European security and economic architecture. Lastly, UK could attempt a delicate balancing, by maintaining pragmatic, ad-hoc security partnerships with Washington while simultaneously rebuilding diplomatic and economic ties with Brussels.

5.2 - The UK's ambivalent role in the CSDP project

UK played a pivotal role in the initial launch of CSDP missions in 1999, drafting many of their foundational documents and working papers. Within just a few years, however, the British stance proved to be ambivalent: even though, on the one hand, it was one of

¹²¹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) attested that until Brexit referendum, the United Kingdom alone represented the 24-25% of the military expenditure of the European Union. <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

¹²² Catherine Hoeffler, Stéphanie c. Hofmann and Frédéric Mérand, *The polycrisis and EU security and defence competences*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group (2024).

the key actors in the development of such operational framework, on the other hand Britain's main role over the last decades has been to set limits to any ambition of expansion of CSDP missions' role, which London has tended to see as a potential threat to NATO¹²³. Ironically, at the time of the historic Franco-Britain Summit in Saint Malo in 1998, Britain Prime Minister Tony Blair agreed to launch the CSDP because he was convinced that without a serious European military capacity, the US would have distance themselves from NATO. Yet, just right after CSDP's birth, London became increasingly concerned that strengthening the EU's autonomous defence capabilities could ultimately led, as the main consequence, to greater American disengagement¹²⁴.

Following London's perspective, outcomes for UK defence saw a significant reduction in terms of overall size, and their use, in the national or international arena, and specifically within the CSDP itself. For a long time, London had been reluctant towards wholesale engagement in key military operations, "preferring capacity-building projects based on civilian missions"¹²⁵. With the exclusion of London, since 2016 the European Union had the opportunity to reorganize itself and improve the security and defence field. Several key initiatives have taken place, including the establishment of a European Defence Fund, a European Defence Agency (EDA) and a European Peace Facility (EPF). In addition, thanks to the adoption of a Security and Defence Implementation Plan (SDIP), important strategic institutional tools such as the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) have allowed Member States to better coordinate their military field and to carry-out several important and coordinated military interventions¹²⁶.

According to some experts, however, the absence of the UK in the decision-making procedures will be a double-edged sword¹²⁷: the lack of opposition to further EU defence integration should present members with more flexibility to establish a serious EU

¹²³ Jolyon Howorth, *EU Defence Cooperation after Brexit: What Role for the UK in the Future EU Defence Arrangements?*, *European View* 16, no. 2 (2017).

¹²⁴ Sven Biscop, *The UK and European Defence: Leading or Leaving?*, *International Affairs* (2012).

¹²⁵ Hadfield A., *Britain against the world? Foreign and security policy in the "age of Brexit"*, London UCL Press (2018).

¹²⁶ Simon Sweeney, *EU security and defence cooperation in times of dissent: analysing PESCO, the European Defence Fund and the European Intervention Initiative (EI2) in the shadow of Brexit*, Taylor & Francis Group (2020).

¹²⁷ Centre for Britain and Europe (CBE), *Analysing Brexit's Impact on UK DEFENCE*, University of Surrey (2020).

defence force; on the other hand, the void left behind by the absence of UK will make this process more difficult under a financial and logistical point of view.

In addition, some scholars argued that the Brexit event would have not had such an impact to be considered detrimental for EU's security. For instance, Former Secretary of Defence, Gavin Williamson suggested that "90% of our industrial collaboration with other European countries on defence is actually on a bilateral basis, not through the European Union"¹²⁸. Views from UK think tanks such as the Royal United Service Institute (RUSI)¹²⁹ suggest that the original Withdrawal Agreement would "allow the UK to participate in future missions by agreement on a case-by-case basis. Given the UK's historic scepticism over the EU's military role, however, it remains to be seen how often it will take up such opportunities"¹³⁰.

5.3 – Recent developments: the EU-UK strategic rapprochement

In more recent times, relations between the European Union and the United Kingdom appear to be changing once again, in response to rising international tensions and the new balance of power with the United States.

On the 19th of May 2025, António Costa, President of the European Council, and Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, met with Keir Starmer, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, in London for the first EU-UK summit since the UK's withdrawal from the EU¹³¹. This meeting marked a historic relaunch of their bilateral relations, which was formalised in a package of three documents: a joint declaration¹³² on shared global priorities, a security and defence partnership¹³³, and a joint understanding¹³⁴, which renews the commitment to the full, faithful and timely implementation of existing.

¹²⁸ Jolyon Howorth, *EU Defence Cooperation after Brexit: What Role for the UK in the Future EU Defence Arrangements?*, *European View* 16, no. 2 (2017).

¹²⁹ RUSI Official Website <https://www.rusi.org/>.

¹³⁰ Centre for Britain and Europe (CBE), *Analysing Brexit's Impact on UK DEFENCE*, University of Surrey (2020).

¹³¹ European Council Official Website, *EU-UK summit, 19 May 2025*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2025/05/19/>.

¹³² See the document at https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/1ed1a1hi/eu-uk_joint-statement.pdf.

¹³³ See the document at https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/3w3hhlxz/eu-uk-summit_sdp.pdf.

¹³⁴ See the renewed agenda at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_25_1267.

During the meeting, the leaders identified some key shared area of collaboration, including the sector of security and defence. More specifically, the new partnership establishes a political framework for bilateral cooperation on counterterrorism, cybersecurity, crisis management and hybrid threats. It provides for biannual dialogues between diplomatic and military leaders, as well as thematic consultations on strategic areas of common interest¹³⁵.

The summit was an opportunity to demonstrate a common stance in working together for peace and security in Europe and to establish a new strategic partnership and although the agreed package does not alter the fundamental post-Brexit agreements (Withdrawal Agreement and TCA), it significantly extends their scope, laying the foundations for more ambitious, structured and long-term cooperation.

This current year, as the 10th anniversary of the referendum that took the United Kingdom out of the European Union approaches, the distance between London and Brussels is reducing. New triggering events such as the war in Ukraine, trade tensions with China and uncertainty over the sustainability of US defence commitments, have increasingly influenced global political dynamics, pushing for greater integration in the areas of defence, with positive signs coming from both sides of the Channel. Although significant, this reconciliation is not aimed at the United Kingdom's return to the Union, but rather a strategic partnership based on shared interests, particularly in the fields of security, defence and scientific research. Some concrete examples of this are demonstrated by UK's return as an associated country to the *Horizon Europe* scientific research programme¹³⁶ and by the Security and Defence Partnership (2025)¹³⁷, which aim to coordinate the management of cyber, maritime and regional crises.

Most recently Brussels and London are actively trying to reach an agreement that would consent a more productive cooperation in the defence field, allowing the United Kingdom to be part of SAFE. The Security Action for Europe is a relatively new EU's new financial instrument designed to provide financial support to Member States to speed up defence

¹³⁵ UK Parliament, House of Common Library, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10312/#:~:text=On%2019%20May%202025%2C%20the%20UK%20Government%20and,strengthened%20cooperation%20across%20a%20range%20of%20policy%20areas.>

¹³⁶ Horizon Official Website <https://horizoneurope.apre.it/>.

¹³⁷ UK's Government Official Website, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-eu-security-and-defence-partnership>.

readiness by allowing urgent and major investments in support of the European defence industry¹³⁸. The programme demonstrates that defence has become one of the key areas on which the new post-Brexit balance is being built and reaching a compromise would provide an excellent opportunity to gradually reintegrate British defence companies into the European supply chain.

With this new phase of negotiations, London and Brussels are seeking to overcome decades-long divisions and build a more pragmatic and sustainable partnership, striking a balance between trade, defence and strategic cooperation in an increasingly unstable international context.

¹³⁸ SAFE Official Website https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/safe-security-action-europe_en.

SECOND CHAPTER

The European Union between Strategic Ambitions and Structural Limits

1. Between strategic autonomy and fragmentation: national vetoes, decision-making traps, and divergent security cultures

1.1 – The paradox of the European Union’s strategic autonomy

As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, “autonomy” implies independence, self-government and the capacity for unconstrained action¹³⁹. When referred to the European case, however, this lexical definition highlights a fundamental paradox: while the European Union actively promotes the pursuit of “strategic autonomy”, it simultaneously reaffirms that its member states remain loyal to the idea that NATO represents the primary source of their defence and that the allies are dedicated to expanding their partnership. Reconciling this drive for strategic self-reliance with the commitment to deeper transatlantic integration exposes an important contradiction that has characterized European security policy for decades.

Christopher Hill, in analysing the European Community’s international identity, argued that both the internal ambition of increasing European cohesion and the growing demands of the international environment have progressively pushed the Union to assume what appeared to be the role of an emerging global power. However, Hill’s works also highlights a fundamental theoretical dualism that has long constrained the full realisation of this ambition. He explains this tension through two key concepts: “actorness”, that implies the capacity of an entity to act as an autonomous international actor, and the “presence”, that refers to the impact or influence, both direct and indirect, that an actor has within the international system. From this perspective, the European Union represents a particularly complex case. Although it has developed a significant global “presence”, its ability to exercise coherent “actorness” has historically been limited. The author explains that one of the key reasons that causes this restrict extent of action in the field of foreign and security policy is that EU’s decisions remain constrained by members’ domestic interests. In this sense, the Union’s international action cannot always be

¹³⁹ Jolyon Howorth, *EU-NATO Cooperation and Strategic Autonomy: Logical Contradiction or Ariadne’s Thread?*, KFG Working Paper Series, No. 90 Kolleg-Forschergruppe (KFG) (2018).

understood as the expression of a single, unified political will, but rather as the outcome of negotiations and compromises among its Member States¹⁴⁰.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, expectations for a more robust European role in the international system have steadily increased, particularly as the United States may no longer be willing or able to provide the same level of security guarantees to its European allies¹⁴¹. Yet, as Hill's concept of "capacity-expectations gap" illustrates, the expansion of Europe's international ambitions has not always been matched by the political and material capabilities that were necessary. Therefore, the EU currently does not have, so far, the military resources or the political structure to be able to respond to the demands which the Commission and certain Member States, most notably France, have virtually requested¹⁴², following the important geopolitical changes this thesis has previously mentioned.

The residual sovereignty of the European states, together with the lack of a single executive and the need for consensus or unanimity in taking decisions, create a dangerous obstacle in balancing what are the expectations of the EU and what it can actually achieve and implement¹⁴³. Without the Member States's willingness to share or delegate their military capabilities and their "high policy" powers, the Union will hardly be able to bridge this gap and the worst-case scenario could be a Europe at the mercy of external influences or even the next victim of future territorial invasions.

1.2 – The joint-decision trap: national interests and collective action in the EU

In political philosophy, establishing a government is generally seen as preferable than supporting anarchy because it enables people to pursue common objectives and respond collectively to challenges that individuals could not address on their own¹⁴⁴. This same approach can be applied also to states, where political integration is generally justified by the expectation that a larger political unit can mobilise greater resources and coordinate collective action more effectively than individual actors acting separately. However, this

¹⁴⁰ Christopher Hill, *The Capacity-Expectations Gap, or Conceptualizing Europe's International Role*, Journal of Common Market Studies (1993).

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Sven Biscop, *European Strategy in the 21st Century: New Future for Old Power*, Routledge (2021).

¹⁴³ Christopher Hill, *The Capacity-Expectations Gap, or Conceptualizing Europe's International Role*, Journal of Common Market Studies (1993).

¹⁴⁴ Fritz W. Scharpf, *The joint-decision trap: lessons from German Federalism and European Integration*, Royal Institute of Public Administration (1988).

argument is balanced by the principle of democratic legitimacy according to which increasing the number of actors involved in decision-making also creates a fundamental trade-off between collective effectiveness and the ability of political institutions to reflect the preferences of their members. From this perspective, the smaller the unit of states, the better is the opportunity to reflect your government's preferences more accurately, making collective decisions potentially more responsive¹⁴⁵.

This tension between effectiveness and democratic legitimacy becomes particularly relevant in the context of the European Union. While larger political units can provide greater resources and a wider capacity to address common challenges, they also require coordination among a larger number of actors with different interests and preferences¹⁴⁶. The fact that member governments are directly involved in central decisions and that, most of the time, there is the unanimity requirement, does not facilitate the decision-making process, creating what is called a "joint-decision trap"¹⁴⁷. This term refers to an institutional arrangement whose policy outcomes have an inherent tendency to maintain a "local optimum": if on the one hand Members States do not want to leave the union, as they would lose benefits such as the one of the single market, on the other hand they also reject the supremacy of a supranational sovereignty, making the decisions of the central government directly constrained by the immediate self-interests of the members. As a result, the states remain stuck with sub-optimal, slow and inefficient decisions.

What appears clear from the system described is the fact that, most of the time, the European Union tends to use a decision-making style characterised by "bargaining", through which Member States seek to defend their individual interests. On the contrary, scholars such as Fritz W. Scharpf highlighted with their studies that the Union should adopt a "problem-solving" approach to decision-making, unanimously recognizing the causes and severity of certain issues and drawing on shared values to tackle these problems together¹⁴⁸. The author argued that "problem solving" in its pure form is premised upon the existence of a common utility function and the irrelevance of individual self-interest and, while disagreement may be an entirely acceptable outcome

¹⁴⁵ Fritz W. Scharpf, *The joint-decision trap: lessons from German Federalism and European Integration*, Royal Institute of Public Administration (1988).

¹⁴⁶ Gerda Falkner, *The EU's Decision Traps: Comparing Policies*, Oxford University Press (2011).

¹⁴⁷ Fritz W. Scharpf, *The joint-decision trap: lessons from German Federalism and European Integration*, Royal Institute of Public Administration (1988).

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

in “bargaining”, it is not so in “problem solving”¹⁴⁹. He continued underlining that the risk is that, if the states decide not to follow a common pattern while taking a decision and simply care about their demands, when a vote is unanimous and no agreement is reached, no action is taken and the original status quo, which at that point will be inadequate, remains in force.

What would be necessary for the “problem-solving” style to emerge is an increased focus towards common interests, values or norms which are distinct from the individual self-interest of members. This significant change in the decision-making process is essential if genuinely interested in establishing the EU as a credible and reliable international actor, acting as a single entity and aiming to resolve problem outside, rather than within, its external borders¹⁵⁰.

1.3 – The issue of unanimity and veto power in the European Union decision-making system

In recent years, facing global crises, wars and economic challenges, the European Union has repeatedly found itself at a critical crossroad, having to decide whether to act quickly or remain paralyzed. At the core of this dilemma lies an historical institutional rule, the principle of unanimity and the Member States’ right of veto. The political controversy surrounding this issue has become increasingly explicit. While some European policymakers, such as Daniel Freund¹⁵¹, have called for an end to national vetoes in order to strengthen the Union’s capacity to act, others, like Gilles Lebreton¹⁵², continue to consider unanimity as an essential safeguard of national sovereignty.

This mechanism, initially created to protect the sovereignty of individual Member States and ensure that no one would be outvoted on crucial decisions, has now become one of the most critical aspects of the European decision-making system¹⁵³. In fact, the veto power, that can be used as a weapon of political blackmail, allows even a single country to

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p.35.

¹⁵⁰ Gerda Falkner, *The EU's Decision Traps: Comparing Policies*, Oxford University Press (2011).

¹⁵¹ See European parliament Official Website, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-12-14-ITM-012_EN.html?utm

¹⁵² See the EU-Lex Official Website, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/PT/TXT/?toc=OJ%3AC%3A2023%3A292%3AFULL&uri=uriserv%3AOJ.C_.2023.292.01.0220.01.POR&utm

¹⁵³ Nicoletta Pirozzi, *Shadows of Unanimity: Rethinking Decision-Making in EU Foreign and Security Policy*, IAI (2026).

paralyze the actions or decisions of all the remaining twenty-six, hindering the Union's response in times of greatest urgency. This divergence between EU Member States can place the Union in a situation where its main global strategic rivals, such as Russia or China, but even sometimes partners like the United States and the United Kingdom, could seek to capitalise on the EU's indecisiveness to pursue their own interests¹⁵⁴.

For a considerable period following the establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), a strong culture of consensus prevailed among the European Union Members. Even nowadays, a key objective of the CFSP is to enable the EU to present a unified stance on foreign and security matters, with the expectation that this cohesion would enhance its ability to establish and sustain a stable international security environment¹⁵⁵. For this reason, in order to avoid being classified as “troublemakers”, national governments generally avoided to oppose proposed decisions unless a fundamental “vital national interest” was explicitly at stake¹⁵⁶. This informal practice, considered by scholars as a reflex of “Europeanization”, implies that Member States prioritized internal EU coordination over fixing their position on the international system in an isolated way¹⁵⁷.

In recent decades, however, this consensus-oriented norm has been increasingly disrupted by the phenomenon of “norm contestation”. This practice occurs when a state actively undermines collective decision-making, either by vetoes a decision or threatens to veto without justification or without previous discussion¹⁵⁸.

Some studies demonstrate that norm contestation is frequently weaponized as a domestic political instrument. Rather than serving purely strategic geopolitical aims, it allows national actors to signal to their domestic electorates that national sovereignty is being fiercely defended against external pressure, effectively framing the EU as an antagonistic “Other”¹⁵⁹. Within this populist dynamic, foreign policy issues are manipulated to

¹⁵⁴ Cecilia Navarra and Lenka Jančová, *Qualified majority voting in common foreign and security policy: a cost of Non-Europe report*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) (2023).

¹⁵⁵ Irakli Machaidze, *Unanimity-Driven Foreign Policy and the EU's Limitations as an Effective Global Actor*, Central European University (2025).

¹⁵⁶ Nicoletta Pirozzi, *Shadows of Unanimity: Rethinking Decision-Making in EU Foreign and Security Policy*, IAI (2026).

¹⁵⁷ Cecilia Navarra and Lenka Jančová, *Qualified majority voting in common foreign and security policy: a cost of Non-Europe report*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) (2023).

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Oriol Costa, *The politicization of EU foreign policy: The member states, the European Parliament and national parliaments*, European Foreign Affairs Review (2022).

*“construct an antagonistic divide between national interests and values [...] and the institutions, norms and positions of a Europeanised foreign policy”*¹⁶⁰.

This behaviour is particularly prevalent among right-wing populist regimes, as demonstrated by the government of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, which has repeatedly manipulated foreign policy vetoes to pursue its domestic political interests¹⁶¹. For instance, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the Hungarian ex-Prime Minister blocked a multitude of packages of sanctions against the Russian Federation. Budapest’s opposition was overcome through a series of compromises, including allowing Hungary to continue receiving oil through the Druzhba pipeline, thereby creating an exception to the full embargo on the sanctions¹⁶². This exchange between Orbán and EU government represented a clear example of how countries can use their veto power for domestic political purposes and to negotiate national concessions, in this case to secure exemptions and waivers in the energy sector. In any case, this “bargaining chip” represented by the right of veto remains one of the most criticised aspects of the current rule of unanimity in CFSP decision making; this behaviour appears particularly evident when applied to sanctions¹⁶³.

A prominent example was the 2020 Cypriot delay in adopting sanctions during the Belarus democracy crisis. Following the falsified elections of August 2020, the European Parliament refused to recognize Alexander Lukashenko’s presidency, condemning the frequent human rights violations in Belarus¹⁶⁴. Although EU leaders collectively denounced the violence against protestors and demanded a formal investigation, the Union initially was unable to agree on targeted sanctions due to the veto of a single state, Cyprus. While the country was in favour of sanctioning Belarus, at the same time it pointed to its own parallel proposal for restrictive measures against Turkey, which had remained without response. This case was particularly helpful to highlight that the veto

¹⁶⁰ P. Müller, K. Pomorska, B. Tonra, *The domestic challenge to EU foreign policy-making: From Europeanisation to de Europeanisation?*, Journal of European Integration (2021).

¹⁶¹ Cecilia Navarra and Lenka Jančová, *Qualified majority voting in common foreign and security policy: a cost of Non-Europe report*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) (2023).

¹⁶² Nicoletta Pirozzi, *Shadow of Unanimity: Rethinking Decision-Making in EU Foreign and security Policy*, IAI (2026).

¹⁶³ Cecilia Navarra and Lenka Jančová, *Qualified majority voting in common foreign and security policy: a cost of Non-Europe report*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) (2023).

¹⁶⁴ European Council Official Website, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/it/policies/sanctions-against-belarus/timeline-eu-sanctions-against-belarus/>.

power entails also the risk of its use as a tool to trigger decisions at the EU level on unrelated issues¹⁶⁵.

As discussed, the informal consensus-seeking attitude, that previously increased the “cost” of the veto, nowadays seems to be exacerbated by the absence of requirements on justifying opposing positions¹⁶⁶. It may appear a paradox, since unanimity is meant to put all Member States on an equal footing, but the increased use of strategic vetoes harms the unity and the identification of Member States as a collective. The author Nicoletta Pirozzi argues that unanimity is not necessarily the cause of divisions among Members, rather, it simply makes more evident the pre-existing divisions¹⁶⁷.

Unanimity can significantly constrain the EU’s ability to respond quickly to international developments, particularly when Member States hold diverging priorities and threat perceptions. Delays in reaching consensus can therefore affect not only the Union’s capacity to respond to emerging crises, but also its credibility and recognition as a relevant international actor¹⁶⁸. The continuous delays may also generate a vicious-cycle mechanism: repeated deadlock in CFSP can reduce the perceived added value of EU-level foreign policy action, potentially encouraging Member States to rely increasingly on smaller coalitions or pursue national power politics.

1.4 – European different strategic cultures and the fragmentation of perceptions of threats

The frequent use of their veto power and the constant effort to protect their domestic objectives reveal a deep fragmentation of interests among member states, which can make it difficult to reconcile their individual needs with shared and unified values. Yet, this challenge is not new, and it has been persisted for a long time¹⁶⁹. The evolution of the European Union’s Common Foreign and Security Policy has historically clashed with a deeply heterogeneous nature of its member states. Although the integration process of the Union has gradually led to a normative convergence, the European Union still struggles

¹⁶⁵ Cecilia Navarra and Lenka Jančová, *Qualified majority voting in common foreign and security policy: a cost of Non-Europe report*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) (2023).

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Nicoletta Pirozzi, *Shadow of Unanimity: Rethinking Decision-Making in EU Foreign and security Policy*, IAI (2026).

¹⁶⁸ Cecilia Navarra and Lenka Jančová, *Qualified majority voting in common foreign and security policy: a cost of Non-Europe report*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) (2023).

¹⁶⁹ Omar Serrano, *The Domestic Sources of European Foreign Policy*, Amsterdam University Press (2020).

to articulate a unified strategic foreign policy vision¹⁷⁰. This complex issue does not derive only from the persistence of national sovereignty, but it also reflects two core fractures: the fragmentation of national security interests and the historically divergent strategic cultures¹⁷¹.

First, it is crucial to highlight that the security interests of the Member States are largely shaped by different geographical and economic factors, which lead to differing perceptions of threats along the EU's borders. For instance, countries on the eastern flank of the Union, in particular Poland and the three Baltic states, focus much of their attention and resources on their territorial defence¹⁷². This is obviously a consequence of their geographical proximity to the Russian Federation that, since the occupations of the previous century, has become a major source of concern.

Differently, nations part of the northern shore of the Mediterranean, such as Italy, Spain and Greece, feel the Russian threat less directly, so that their security challenges take on more a multidimensional character. In fact, their proximity to North Africa and the Middle East shifts the focus of strategic attention toward the management and control of migration flows and, more generally, toward maritime security¹⁷³. Located at the western end of the continent, these countries enjoy a wide “geographical cushion” from the Russian border and a concrete example that illustrates the different stance a country can afford to take based on its geographic location is demonstrated by the strong criticisms of Pedro Sánchez in relation to Putin's actions. In fact, Spanish leaders are free to issue extremely harsh rhetorical condemnations or take very assertive positions toward Russia, since they know that this does not expose their territory to the risk of direct military retaliation in the short term¹⁷⁴. On the other hand, although Poland takes a firm stance

¹⁷⁰ Omar Serrano, *The Domestic Sources of European Foreign Policy*, Amsterdam University Press (2020).

¹⁷¹ On strategic culture see the works of Bezen Balamir Coşkun, *Does “strategic culture” matter? Old Europe, new Europe and the Transatlantic security*, PERCEPTION Journal of International Affairs (2007); Christoph O. Meyer, *Nature, Emergence, and Limitations of an EU Strategic Culture*, Routledge handbook of Strategic Culture (2023); Niklas Helwig, Katariina Mustasilta, Hanna Ojanen et al., *Strategic Culture(s) in Europe: taking advantage of diversity in Security and defence*, Finnish Institute of International Affairs (2026).

¹⁷² Pauli Järvenpää, Claudia Major and Sven Sakkov, *European Strategic Autonomy: Operationalising a Buzzword*, International Centre for Defence and Security (2019).

¹⁷³ R. Alcaro, *Europe's Southern Imperative: Security and Instability in the Mediterranean*, Istituto Affari Internazionali, IAI (2019).

¹⁷⁴ See, for instance, <https://www.pensalibero.it/sanchez-putin-uccide-civili-innocenti-sua-spietatezza-ci-indigna/>, <https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2026/03/sanchez-a-trump-non-si-puo-giocare-alla-roulette-russa-con-il-destino-di-milioni-di-persone-bb345f7a-ef2d-4d00-aadf-e1a00066c2bc.html>, or <https://www.infobae.com/it/2022/03/17/sanchez-dice-che-putin-ha-invaso-lucraina-perche-considera-la-democrazia-una-minaccia-8/>.

toward Moscow, its operational decisions and official communications are guided by a rigorous risk assessment.

Finally, countries such as Hungary and Slovakia pursue more autonomous policies aimed at strengthening their national sovereignty, energy security, and decision-making autonomy, sometimes even at the expense of joint European actions¹⁷⁵.

As a consequence of the states' geographical position, the second important point of the argument is that the ways in which the Members respond to threats are shaped by distinct strategic cultures. In fact, historical experiences, together with cultural beliefs and institutional norms, represent some of the most influential elements that guide the use of military force and diplomacy of a country¹⁷⁶. Beliefs, feelings, fears, aims and ambitions are the invisible aspects of each strategic culture and comprise the core values that give a strategic culture its quality and characteristics. The foundational elements of each nation's military approach derive mainly from "formative experiences that have been internalized"¹⁷⁷. These different strategic cultures, characterized by elements that vary greatly depending on the country in question, also lead each Member to interpret differently the stance toward the new, greatest unknown, the United States.

The differences among European states regarding transatlantic relations have become more distinct with the end of the Cold War. As the main logic of maintaining transatlantic relations has lost its validity with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, some countries part of NATO started to reconsider the future of EU-US relationship. In particular in Western Europe, states such as France have openly questioned the necessity for strong transatlantic ties¹⁷⁸. Although the country and its citizens have always been characterized by a tendency to take clear political stances and to be driven in their decision by a strong sense of freedom and ideals, some scholars¹⁷⁹ point to the 1956 Suez Canal crisis as the turning point for in the development of France's more autonomous strategic posture towards the

¹⁷⁵ M. Leonard, S. Dennison, *Grand Illusion: The Foreign Policy of EU Member States*, European Council on Foreign Relations (2022).

¹⁷⁶ Vassilis Margaras, *Strategic Culture: A Reliable Tool of Analysis for EU Security Developments?*, conference paper presented at European Foreign Policy Conference (2004).

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Bezen Balamir Coşkun, *Does "strategic culture" matter? Old Europe, new Europe and the Transatlantic security*, PERCEPTION Journal of International Affairs (2007).

¹⁷⁹ See also the work of Alice Pannier, *From one exceptionalism to another: France's strategic relations with the United States and the United Kingdom in the post-Cold War era*, Taylor & Francis Groups (2016).

United States¹⁸⁰. Following the US demand that Paris and London withdraw their troops from Egypt, the French political and strategic elites began to express concern that Washington's interests would not always align with those of Europe and that, therefore, it was appropriate to aim for a gradual distancing from its ally. Although France's approach has gradually shifted, leading it to accept the need for an alliance with the United States following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, French political leaders have continued to emphasise the need for this distance¹⁸¹.

Other Member States, however, hold a completely opposite view. The Baltic States and Poland, in fact, see in the US and NATO not only the only true guarantor of their own survival, but also the best opportunity they can reach to counterbalance the "Franco-German" wing of the Union¹⁸². These countries, being relatively small and geographically terribly close to the Russian border, are aware that their national armies could never stop a large-scale attack on their own. As a consequence, their security rests entirely on the clause of mutual assistance in the event of an attack of Article V of the NATO Treaty. As the United States is NATO's primary military and hegemonic power, the Baltic states regard the American presence and support as the only real deterrence for Russia from taking hostile action¹⁸³.

Another factor that largely influences state's approach are domestic constraints. Italy and Germany provide two relevant examples. After the Second World War, both countries have historically been characterized by a degree of military restraint and by domestic and societal constraints on the use of force¹⁸⁴. However, their strategic culture have evolved differently since the end of the Cold War. In Italy, military engagement has progressively increased, particularly through participation in international missions, but it has generally been framed in terms of peacekeeping, multilateralism and international cooperation¹⁸⁵.

¹⁸⁰ Frédéric Pesme, *The Reluctant Atlanticist: France's Security and Defence Policy in a Transatlantic Context*, Taylor & Francis Group (2016).

¹⁸¹ Gesine Weber, *Zeitenwende à la française: Continuity and change in French foreign policy after Russia's invasion of Ukraine*, Sage Journals International Relations (2024).

¹⁸² Bezen Balamir Coşkun, *Does "strategic culture" matter? Old Europe, new Europe and the Transatlantic security*, PERCEPTION Journal of International Affairs (2007).

¹⁸³ Pauli Järvenpää, Claudia Major and Sven Sakkov, *European Strategic Autonomy: Operationalising a Buzzword*, International Centre for Defence and Security (2019).

¹⁸⁴ Fabrizio Coticchia, Matteo Dian and Francesco Niccolò Moro, *Reluctant Remilitarisation: Transforming the Armed Forces in Germany, Italy and Japan After the Cold War*, JSTOR (2023).

¹⁸⁵ Fabrizio Coticchia and Giampiero Giacomello, *Esiste una "via italiana" alla cultura di difesa?*, Biblioteca della Libertà (2008).

Germany, by contrast has also traditionally shown considerable military restraint, but its defence posture has undergone a more significant reassessment following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the *Zeitenwende*¹⁸⁶ ¹⁸⁷. These differences help explain why Member States may perceive the role of the US and the future of European defence in substantially different ways.

In conclusion, as long as the twenty-seven countries of the European Union assess their security priorities through such divergent geographical and historical lenses, it becomes increasingly difficult to translate European Strategic Autonomy from a political objective into a genuinely shared operational practice.

2. Timeliness and inadequacy of the decision-making process in high-urgency situations

2.1 – The problem of timeliness: EU decision making mechanism between low and high politics

As previously explained, the unanimity requirement is considered even by the European Parliament itself as the main obstacle to “effective and timely external EU action”. The timing factor itself is another characteristic considered essential in the political decision-making process and, although there are instances proving that timeliness does not necessarily lead to effectiveness in foreign policy, it is often perceived that acting fast might improve the credibility of the EU on the global stage¹⁸⁸.

It is important, however, to clarify one point: the timeliness of political action is considered essential particularly in highly urgent situations¹⁸⁹. It is a different matter, however, to examine the decision-making process in other sectors that Europe deals with. For instance, in the economic sector taking more time to assess the correct policy can, on

¹⁸⁶ The term refers to “epochal turning point” and it was used by Chancellor Olaf Scholz to represent a new German posture for the defence. Source https://www.treccani.it/magazine/atlanter/geopolitica/La_Zeitenwende_Germania.html.

¹⁸⁷ Fabrizio Coticchia, Matteo Dian and Francesco Niccolò Moro, *Reluctant Remilitarisation: Transforming the Armed Forces in Germany, Italy and Japan After the Cold War*, JSTOR (2023).

¹⁸⁸ Cecilia Navarra and Lenka Jančová, *Qualified majority voting in common foreign and security policy: a cost of Non-Europe report*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) (2023).

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

the contrary, be a strength¹⁹⁰. Therefore, to comprehend the structural inadequacy of the European Union in high-urgency scenarios, it is necessary to fully understand the differences between the two logics of European functioning: the ordinary policymaking, where slowness can even be useful, and the crisis and security policymaking, where slowness can instead prove fatal.

Traditionally, the original vision of “Europe” did not arise from the idea of creating a political union among states, but rather from the objective of establishing a European Economic Community (EEC), to ensure economic stability and prevent trade disputes among its members¹⁹¹. It is to mention that the federalists were the exception, since they supported from the beginning the idea of a more integrated Union, that could go beyond the mere economic sphere¹⁹².

Consequently, early models of decision-making processes were forged only with the idea of economic integration, a domain belonging to what Stanley Hoffmann defined as “low politics”¹⁹³. According to the author, the term “low politics” refers to socio-economic, technical and commercial issues within the European internal market. In contrast, he describes the term “high politics” as referring to all vital areas of national interest and sovereignty, such as foreign policy, defence and diplomacy.

In market, regulatory, and trade policies, decisions take time to strike the ideal balance among the twenty-seven Members. Following on from “The Joint-Decision Trap: national interests and collective action in the EU” (Chapter 2, point 1.2) of the thesis, the European decision-making process in the economic sphere can be defined as a process of “bargaining”, that has become even more complex with the enlargement of the Union, but unlike what was described earlier, this approach can often be effective in the economic sphere: in this field, the procedural delays serve to establish fair regulations case-by-case, ensure democratic legitimacy and produce stable economic norms. In contrast, differences among member states and the limits of integration emerge as soon as the

¹⁹⁰ See the speech of Mario Draghi for the Laurea Honoris Causa from the Università Cattolica, that mentioned “*taking time to assess evidence can improve economic policy decisions*”.

¹⁹¹ European Union Official Website, https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu_en.

¹⁹² See for instance the speech of Altiero Spinelli on August 27th 1947, at the first Union of European Federalists Congress, <https://www.thefederalist.eu/site/index.php/en/notes/2169-altiero-spinelli-speech-at-first-uef-congress>.

¹⁹³ Stanley Hoffmann, *Obstinate or Obsolete? The Fate of the Nation-State and the Case of Western Europe*, MIT Press (1966).

European project attempts to address issues of “high politics,” which are generally more complex and where countries seek to protect their sovereignty as much as possible, often slowing down the decisions.

The problem is that, when the EU has to deal with external security, the nature of the problem changes radically, since geopolitical crises and conflicts do not wait for European diplomacy to take its course. Therefore, applying the standard negotiation model (the economic one) to the field of defence has, in most cases, been shown not to lead to better “joint decision-making,” but rather to generate decision-making paralysis¹⁹⁴.

In recent years, the concept of “timeliness”, described as the EU’s decision-making system’s ability to act rapidly in the face of international or serious crises ¹⁹⁵, has taken on much greater significance, following the clashes that have broken out on the Union’s borders. Facing such urgent situations, it has been impossible to deny that the unanimity rule has systematically hampered the speed of decision-making. In fact, the reduced flexibility of the requirement to seek consensus amongst twenty-seven different countries, has led many political personalities to believe that the European Union is not an international actor capable of responding promptly to problems¹⁹⁶. International actors, whether allies or third countries, tend to judge the EU not on the basis of its intentions, but rather on its responsiveness¹⁹⁷. When the EU takes too long to make decisions, it loses its credibility, projecting an image of strategic weakness compared with autocratic or centralised powers that operates with fast chains of command, such as the US, China and Russia¹⁹⁸. As a consequence, faced with consistently slow responses, external partners cease to perceive the European Union as a single, coherent strategic actor and begin to regard it as a “diplomatic forum”¹⁹⁹. In fact, instead of projecting the image of a unified power, the EU’s foreign policy appears to be the result of a laborious and protracted process of compromise between Member States, in which each part has to make concessions. This structural slowness directly undermines the Union’s credibility. If third

¹⁹⁴ Fritz W. Scharpf, *The joint-decision trap: lessons from German Federalism and European Integration*, Royal Institute of Public Administration (1988).

¹⁹⁵ Heidi Maurer, *EU foreign policy decision-making: From unanimity to qualified majority voting?*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) (2023).

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Roy H. Ginsberg, *The European Union in International Politics: Baptism by Fire*, Bloomsbury Publishing PLC (2001).

¹⁹⁸ Asle Toje, *The consensus-expectation gap: Explain the European Union’s Ineffective Foreign Policy*, SAGE Publication Security Dialogue (2008).

¹⁹⁹ Roy H. Ginsberg, *The European Union in International Politics: Baptism by Fire*, Bloomsbury Publishing PLC (2001).

countries know that the Union takes time to reach an internal consensus, its capacity for deterrence or rapid negotiation is neutralised, pushing other actors to act unilaterally or to deal directly with individual Member States rather than with the European institutions²⁰⁰.

Another crucial point of the timeliness problem is the fact that the slowness of the decision-making process does not only represent a matter of internal inefficiency. On the contrary, scholars such as Mitchell A. Orenstein and Daniel Kelemen argue that it can create a “deadlock” that is particularly dangerous for the Union’s cohesion. According to their studies, in fact, geopolitical adversaries exploit this procedural weakness through “divide et impera”²⁰¹ strategies, for instance influencing the veto power choices of certain Members²⁰². The EU’s vulnerability to the unanimity rule and the protracted decision-making process expose the Union to coercive bargaining. This mechanism is used by third-party powers that exploit delays to put pressure on an individual Member State or to “buy” its veto, whether overt or covert, thereby paralysing the Union’s entire trade or strategic proposals²⁰³. More specifically, autocratic powers such as Russia and China use targeted instruments of economic and geopolitical influence, such as the dependence on gas or infrastructure investments, to turn specific Member States into “Trojan horses” inside the Union. The direct result of this tactic is the protracted delays or complete paralysis of European responses, most of the times preventing the adoption of countermeasures in response to sanctions or the adoption of unified positions on human rights²⁰⁴.

According to the JOINT Paper of 2021 of the JOINT Research Centre²⁰⁵, which highlights the fragmented nature of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in the current context of strategic competition, the slowness and the absence of a rapid response

²⁰⁰ Roy H. Ginsberg, *The European Union in International Politics: Baptism by Fire*, Bloomsbury Publishing PLC (2001).

²⁰¹ The expression highlights the political strategies of preventing the coalition of certain peoples, leaders or states from forming a coalition by turning them against one another in order to weaken their relationship and make it easier to dominate them. Treccani Dictionary Official Website <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/divide-et-impera/>.

²⁰² Mitchell A. Orenstein and Daniel Kelemen, *Trojan Horses in EU Foreign Policy*, JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies Vol.55 (2016).

²⁰³ Sophie Meunier, *Trading voices: The European Union in International Commercial Negotiations*, Princeton University Press (2005).

²⁰⁴ Mitchell A. Orenstein and Daniel Kelemen, *Trojan Horses in EU Foreign Policy*, JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies Vol.55 (2016).

²⁰⁵ European Commission Official Website https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/index_en?prefLang=it.

mechanism create “window of opportunity” and “dead times” which geopolitical adversaries exploit with hybrid threats, disinformation and asymmetric diplomatic pressure, neutralising the EU’s action even before it manages to reach an internal consensus²⁰⁶.

Ultimately, the distinction between “low politics” and “high politics” reveals a fundamental tension within the European integration process. While the consensus-driven bargaining and structural deliberation can be an important advantage in areas such as economic and market integration, the same decision-making dynamics can become more problematic when applied to foreign and security policies. In high-urgency scenarios, slowness actively erodes the Union’s external credibility, degrades its deterrent capacity, and converts its institutional architecture into a strong vulnerability.

This tension provides an important starting point for considering whether the existing decision-making procedures are adequate for the EU’s growing ambitions as an international security provider.

2.2 – Case study: decision making and the flexibility of the Italian chain of command

To fully understand the tangible impact of procedural complications during crises, it is useful to move from the theoretical analysis of supranational institutions such as the European Union, to the operational dynamics of an individual Member State. In fact, the conceptual tension between political deliberation and the need for timely action is not exclusive to the Union’s institutions, but is directly reflected in the organisation of defence within the single countries themselves. The case of the Italian military chain of command provides a clear example of how the speed of decision-making processes must adapt according to the context. In peacetime, the Italian command structure prioritises democratic control, the separation of powers among institutions, and longer response times. On the contrary, upon the outbreak of a conflict or a high-intensity crisis, this structure is designed to undergo a rapid structural transformation.

²⁰⁶ See the document at https://www.cidob.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/joint_rp_2%20Conceptualising%20the%20multi%20actor%20character%20of%20EU%20%28rope%29%27s%20Foreign%20Policy.pdf.

The following analysis examines how the Italian system manages the transition from a deliberative peacetime approach to a more vertical and centralised chain of command in times of emergency management. Consequently, focusing on this transition provides insight into how our state manages to shift from a “slower” approach to a strictly directive one, in order to speed up decision-making when the national security is directly threatened.

In peacetime, the Italian military architecture is designed around principles of democratic oversight, checks and balances and institutional consensus. The decision-making process is distributed across multiple constitutional actors: the President of the Republic retains supreme command as a neutral guarantor (Art. 87 Italian Constitution)²⁰⁷, the Parliament exercises legislative and budgetary control (specifically, under Law 145/2016 the Parliament has the power to discuss and eventually approve external decrees and missions)²⁰⁸ and the Ministry of Defence is responsible for setting the political and administrative direction.

This division of powers is important to preserve the “ponderation” of the political decision, that is one of the key elements of the political policies in democracies. However, similarly to the decision processes of the European Union, the day-to-day management of defence in Italy suffers from the same decision-making issues previously described in relation to the “timeliness” element. Scholars have demonstrated that Italian defence policy in routine scenarios is heavily constrained by political bargaining, coalition dynamics, and procedural friction²⁰⁹. In peacetime scenarios, decision-making processes rely heavily on the provision of “Legge Missioni” (Law 145/2016)²¹⁰, which mandates annual parliamentary authorizations while the Government is in charge with drafting a yearly report concerning both finished and ongoing missions, and indicating the objectives for the next year²¹¹. While this process is designed to guarantee democratic oversight and political consensus, this procedural mechanism inherently prioritizes

²⁰⁷ See the article at <https://www.senato.it/istituzione/la-costituzione/parte-ii/titolo-ii/articolo-87>.

²⁰⁸ See the Law 145/2016 at https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/stampa/serie_generale/originario.

²⁰⁹ Fabrizio Cotichia and Francesco N. Moro, *Peaceful legislatures? Parliaments and military interventions after the Cold War: Insights from Germany and Italy*, SAGE Publications International Relations Vol.34 (2020).

²¹⁰ In 2024, under the proposal of Italian Minister of Defence Crosetto, the law was modified to keep pace with new international developments. See more at <https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/01410752.pdf>.

²¹¹ aDI Official Website, <http://www.larassegna.isgi.cnr.it/en/docs/law-no-145-of-21-july-2016-provisions-relating-to-the-italian-participation-to-international-missions-entry-into-force-31-december-2016-except-for-article-20-entered-into-force-on-2-august-2016/>.

political deliberation over operational speed²¹². Consequently, response times are often subject to parliamentary calendar constraints, veto players within government coalitions, and budgetary bargaining²¹³.

Completely different is the procedure in times of crisis management or war, in which the legal framework foresees structural mechanisms designed to temporarily bypass the ordinary administrative friction. The Italian Constitution sets out guidelines and legal mechanism for emergency situations under article 78²¹⁴, which dictates that Parliament deliberates the state of war and confers the necessary executive powers upon the Government, in order to prioritize operational execution speed over standard parliamentary deliberation. This constitutional provision creates a fundamental strategic passage: a transition from a slower decision-making process, focused on ponderated and balanced choices, including between political parties, to a centralized command and control structure able to respond promptly to ongoing needs.

During peacetime, the Chief of Defence (CASMD) operates in coordination with the Government and the Chiefs of Staff of the individual Armed Forces (Army, Navy, Air Force and Carabinieri)²¹⁵. However, during conflict situations and high-intensity crisis, this equilibrium changes drastically, centralizing the operational command directly under the Chief of Defence and leaving the execution of the actions exclusively through the Joint Operations Headquarter (COVI)²¹⁶. This structural change allows for a greater concentration of powers and consequently make it easier to decide on the necessary strategies. By eliminating intermediate negotiations, the chain of command becomes genuinely joint, directive, and optimized for rapid response²¹⁷.

Consequently, while some Members' national framework, possess explicit legal triggers that allow the switch from peacetime governance to emergency command, the EU lacks an equivalent operational mechanism and remains bound by consensus-driven

²¹² Fabrizio Coticchia and Francesco N. Moro, *Peaceful legislatures? Parliaments and military interventions after the Cold War: Insights from Germany and Italy*, SAGE Publications International Relations Vol.34 (2020).

²¹³ Filippo Andreatta, *Italian Foreign Policy: Domestic Politics, International Requirements and the European Dimension*, Journal of European Integration (2008).

²¹⁴ See the article at <https://www.senato.it/istituzione/la-costituzione/parte-ii/titolo-i/sezione-ii/articolo-78>.

²¹⁵ Legislative Decree n. 66/2010, <https://www.difesa.it/assets/allegati/amministrazionetrasparente/onorcaduti/documents/dlgs15marzo2010codicediordinamentomilitare.pdf>.

²¹⁶ Ministry of Defence Official Website, COVI <https://www.difesa.it/smd/covi/index/28896.html>.

²¹⁷ Michele Nones, *La riorganizzazione dei vertici della Difesa*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) (2017).

procedures. European lack of a centralised executive mandate continues to limit its ability to act as a rapid responder in crisis management.

3. The structural limits of a common defence industry: between dependence on the US and internal competition

3.1 – The industrial dimension of European defence: EDTIB, EDIS and the limits of strategic autonomy

The concept of “strategic autonomy” has undergone a profound evolution. Originally understood as the political and military capacity to conduct crisis management operations independently, without influence or support from external actors, the concept is now an integral part of the European Union’s Grand Strategy and has been redefined in the light of the geopolitical and economic events of our century. Today, the fields of security and defence can no longer be separated from their industrial and economic spheres. Consequently, the issue of industrial development in the military sector has become a fundamental part of discussions concerning European strategic autonomy, raising a number of concerns.

In this context, the *European Defence Technological and Industrial Base* (EDTIB)²¹⁸ plays a central role, representing the continent’s collective manufacturing and industrial capabilities. As highlighted by the 2022 Strategic Compass²¹⁹ and by the European institutions themselves, the establishment of a *European Industrial Strategy* (EDIS)²²⁰, launched in 2024, would have proved a key instrument on the path towards achieving greater independence, including from allies such as the US and NATO. According to the Council of the European Union, the EDIS represents the cornerstone of the EU’s renewed commitment to strengthening its defence readiness and enhances Member States’ capabilities to address current and future threats, by boosting the competitiveness of the

²¹⁸ European Parliament Official Website, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_IDA\(2020\)603483](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_IDA(2020)603483).

²¹⁹ European Union External Action, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en.

²²⁰ See EDIS Joint Communication at https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/edis-joint-communication_en.

European Defence, Technology, Industry and Business sector and ensuring the timely availability and supply of defence products across the Union²²¹.

Many argue that the EDTIB should not be interpreted or understood merely as a “weapons factory”, but rather as a fundamental political pillar of the Union’s strategy²²². Moving beyond being an “abstract” concept or a mere ambition to become a fundamental instrument for the EU’s credibility, authors such as Daniel Fiott and Sven Biscop have, through their research, explained the importance of a unified European industry in the context of a common defence. In their papers, they explain how the lack of an integrated EDTIB would not only demonstrate to external countries that the EU is unable to coordinate internally in such an important sector, but, in practical terms, would also undermine the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) itself²²³. Indeed, without industrial technological sovereignty, the European Union would remain merely a “consumer of security”, primarily American, and never a “provider of security”, thereby re-establishing the fundamental link between strategic autonomy and industrial autonomy²²⁴. The author Biscop argues that the CSDP will, in fact, fail to reach its objectives as long as it will be dependent on the industrial fragmentation of individual Member States. To exercise genuine strategic autonomy, Europe must possess both the military capabilities and the capacity to produce and develop them independently, without being critically dependent on the supply chains of third powers.

In an era of rapid technological progress, no single European country has the financial capacities to compete on its own with the industrial giants of the United States or China. For this reason, the scholar points out that an integrated defence industry is not only a matter of national security, but also of global industrial competitiveness, ensuring that scientific and engineering expertise, as well as high value-added jobs, remain in Europe²²⁵.

²²¹ Council of The European Union Official Website, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/it/press/press-releases/2025/12/08/european-defence-industry-programme-council-gives-final-approval/>.

²²² Hélène Masson, Christian Mölling, Keith Hartley et al., *Defining the “European Defence Technological and Industrial Base”*: *Debates & Dilemmas*, Note de la FRS, Foundation for Strategic Research (2013).

²²³ Daniel Fiott, *Strategic Investment: Making geopolitical sense of the EU’s defence industrial policy*, Institute for Security Studies (ISS) Chaillot Paper 156 (2019).

²²⁴ Sven Biscop, *European Strategy in the 21st Century: new Future for Old Power*, Routledge Studies in European Security and Strategy (2018).

²²⁵ Ibid.

Generally speaking, the return of this issue to the forefront of the debate on the EU's Grand Strategy is due to three main disruptive factors: the return of high-intensity warfare to Europe's borders, that has highlighted the shortcomings in the operational stocks and production rates of national industries, the growing unpredictability of the US and its strategic re-orientation, especially towards the Indo-Pacific, and the important issue of "weaponised interdependence"²²⁶. This concept, initially theorised by Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, challenges the classical theory of globalisation, which asserts that growing economic interdependence and trade networks would reduce conflicts, distribute power and foster mutual peace and collaboration²²⁷. On the contrary, their work debunks this argument, explaining that globalisation has not created horizontal networks, but rather asymmetrical structures that allow a small number of actors to handle the majority of global flows of data, finance and goods. The vulnerability demonstrated by global value chains has shown how dependence on foreign technologies, raw materials and military components can be used as a lever for political coercion²²⁸.

This concept applies perfectly to the challenging task of establishing a common European defence industry. This interdependence, when used as a weapon, in fact helps explaining the significant constraints faced by Member States in the process of establishing a common industry, as they are subject to a dual structural pressure²²⁹. On the one hand, the European Union is heavily limited by its dependence on a third party, so on the purchase of American weapons. In fact, many advanced weapons systems used in Europe contain American technological components that are subject to the *International Traffic in Arms Regulations* (ITAR)²³⁰. Consequently, Washington can exercise its formal veto power over the export or use of such systems to third countries, thereby effectively exercising political pressure.

On the other hand, the Union also finds itself dealing with an internal problem. The main obstacle to the EDTIB lies, in fact, in the refusal of national governments to transfer

²²⁶ Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, *Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion*, Brookings Institution (2021).

²²⁷ Keohane, Robert O. & Nye, Joseph S., *Power and Interdependence revisited*. Longman Classics in Political Science (2011).

²²⁸ Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, *Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion*, Brookings Institution (2021).

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ United States Government Official Website, https://deccs.pmddtc.state.gov/deccs?id=ddtc_kb_article_page&sys_id=24d528fddbfc930044f9ff621f961987.

sovereignty over the defence sector to the EU²³¹. This is due to their different perspectives and strategic culture but, most importantly, because of their fear to lose national control on a sector that is becoming increasingly important. It is exactly this internal pressure, generated by the inability to overcome national industrial self-interest, one of the key elements that prevent the emergence of a common alternative in the industrial sector.

3.2 – The dilemma of dependence on the US: balancing immediate security with industrial autonomy

When discussing European strategic autonomy, it is inevitable to examine a structural issue that has never been resolved, namely the long-standing relationship of military and technological dependence on the United States. This transatlantic tie, which historical origins have already been explained in Chapter 1, highlights the deep division between the rhetoric of self-sufficiency and the actual decisions made by Member States regarding supplies²³².

Although the adoption of the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) and the strengthening of the EDTIB represent key steps towards freeing the continent from external supply chains, it remains currently impossible for the European Union to establish itself as an independent player in the defence industry. The immediate security needs of individual countries are gradually eroding the foundations for long-term European industrial sovereignty. Analysing this dilemma requires an examination of the complex structure of incentives and constraints that keeps Europe in a position of technological subordination to Washington.

In the previous chapter, specifically under point 3.2, it has already been explained the American discontent arising from repeated calls on NATO allies to meet military budget targets set by the US. This pressure became particularly pronounced under Donald Trump, who repeatedly called on European allies to increase defence spending and assume a greater share of burden for their own security. However, it is now necessary to

²³¹ According to different scholars, this logic follows the Theory of Liberal Intergovernmentalism of Andrew Moravcsik and Frank Schimmelfennig. See more at <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/62239/chapter-abstract/550703636?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

²³² See more at <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2026/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2025>. SIPRI reports document, with empirical data, how the share of arms imports by European states from the US has grown to exceed 50–60% of their total military purchases.

point out a profound paradox. In fact, while Washington encourages financial burden-sharing between European Members, at the same time it is pushing toward an investment model in which Europe spends its budgets on purchasing American weapons systems, such as F-35, HIMARS, Patriot ²³³. The so-called “buy American” phenomenon demonstrates how the US call to increase defence budgets translates, in practice, into a massive transfer of European public resources to American defence giants²³⁴.

This system guarantees the US a twofold advantage, enabling it to secure a substantial return on investment for the American defence industry while, in parallel preserving NATO’s operational and strategic leadership under Washington’s command. The problem is clear: a Europe that is, in fact, managing to spend more on the military sector but continues to buy “made in the US” products does not reduce its strategic dependence, but rather it reinforces it ²³⁵. This tension became particularly visible after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The quick deterioration of the European security environment created an urgent demand for military capabilities, and, in that complex context, this need prevailed over the longer-term objectives of developing a European industrial capacity. As a result, the post-2022 increase in European defence expenditure has not necessarily translated into a reduction in technological and industrial dependence on the United States, but, on the contrary, in several cases it has reinforced it through the accelerated acquisition of American-made systems²³⁶.

Furthermore, where it is unable to produce specific items independently, Europe’s dependence on certain American components or equipment leaves the Union vulnerable to Washington’s will. Indeed, if a joint European defence project requires critical components or software supplied by the US, Washington gains both an informal and a formal right of veto over European military and export decisions. According to the extraterritoriality clause of ITAR, the US regulatory framework governing the export of military technology, if a European weapons system, such as the Rafale fighter jets²³⁷,

²³³ Jacopo Barigazzi, Chris Lunday and Audrey Decker, *Article: Europe has the weapons, but still needs America to wage war*, Politico Europe (2026). See at <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-us-defense-plan-weapon-donald-trump/>.

²³⁴ Frédéric Mauro, *European Defence: The Challenges of Strategic Autonomy*, Policy Brief for IRIS and the European Parliament (2023).

²³⁵ Nathalie Tocci, *The Paradox of Europe’s Defense Moment*, Texas National Security Review (TNSR) (2023).

²³⁶ See more at <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2024/10/europes-defence-procurement-since-2022-a-reassessment>.

²³⁷ The Rafale is a twin-jet fighter aircraft able to operate from both an aircraft carrier and a shore base. See more at <https://www.dassault-aviation.com/en/defense/rafale/>.

contains even a single American component, Washington may veto its sale to third countries²³⁸. As a result, the strategic implications are particularly impactful. In fact, this veto power creates strong disincentives to joint European investment since, if a joint project depends on external technological components, Member States are reluctant to invest billions in capabilities, knowing that their commercial autonomy may be influenced by decisions taken by the White House²³⁹.

The risks associated with the integration of components subject to foreign restrictions and controls into European defence platforms or systems compromise Europe's economic and technological sovereignty²⁴⁰. What looms on the horizon for the EU are answers to questions about what defence technologies the Union should be autonomous in, and whether member states have the appetite to ensure strategic autonomy in European defence²⁴¹.

Furthermore, for many EU countries, particularly in the Eastern front, purchasing American armaments guarantees rapid delivery times, direct interoperability with NATO and an explicit guarantee of political protection from the United States. The tendency to adopt this behaviour, defined by some authors²⁴² as “bandwagoning”²⁴³, can be seen applied especially in Poland, the Baltics and Romania, where, facing with the Russian threat, these countries prefer to forge close ties with the US to maximise deterrence. This topic ties in with what has been explained regarding how different strategic cultures and the influence of a state's geographical position affect the “sides” they take. In fact, states in the Western front of the EU view dependence on the US as a constraint on sovereignty and are pushing for autonomy within the EDTIB to prioritize autonomy in the long run²⁴⁴.

²³⁸ University of Pittsburgh, Office of Research Security & Trade Compliance, <https://www.researchsecurity.pitt.edu/export-defense-articles-and-services-itar#:~:text=Therefore%2C%20registration%20is%20required%20even%20when%20the,or%20scientific%20purposes%2C%20including%20research%20and%20development>.

²³⁹ Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, *Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion*, Brookings Institution (2021).

²⁴⁰ Daniel Fiott, *Strategic Investment: Making geopolitical sense of the EU's defence industrial policy*, ISS Chaillot paper n.156 (2019).

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Lorenzo Cladi and Andrea Locatelli, *Bandwagoning, Not Balancing: Why Europe Confounds Realism*, Contemporary Security policy (2012). The authors refer to “institutionalized bandwagoning” to describe how European countries maintain their dependence on US for primary security, considering internal cooperation only as a secondary measure.

²⁴³ In international Relation Studies the term refers to “strategy employed by states that find themselves in a weak position”. Source <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bandwagoning>.

²⁴⁴ Frédéric Mauro, *European Defence: The Challenges of Strategic Autonomy*, Policy Brief for IRIS and the European Parliament (2023).

Lastly, it is important to mention the dangerous vicious circle that this dependence behaviour creates: if the European Union continues to allocate its defence funds to the purchase of foreign weapons and components, it simultaneously detracts resources from European research and development²⁴⁵. As a result, without a strong research sector, European industry loses its competitiveness, forcing governments to perpetuate the cycle of purchasing “off-the-shelf”²⁴⁶ equipment from the US even in the future²⁴⁷.

3.3 – Inside issues: the prevalence of Intergovernmentalism and market fragmentation

If reliance on US technology highlights the external side of the dilemma, the root cause of the European Union’s inability to build a competitive defence industry lies within its own governance structure. Indeed, EU’s subordination to Washington is strongly sustained by both the persistent dominance of intergovernmentalism and the resulting fragmentation of the European defence market.

As previously explained in this chapter, specifically under point 1.4, the differences of strategic priorities among Member States have a huge impact on the difficulties in the integration process. These effects are also shown in the problems regarding the development of a common industry since the structural fragmentation is primarily driven by different strategic cultures, also on the bases of each country’s geographical location. The misalignment in threat perception directly undermines collective military planning, making the organisation of common defence industry even more challenging²⁴⁸. In the absence of a unified strategic vision, national interests prevail, leading to market inefficient spending and a preference for national sovereignty over European cooperation²⁴⁹.

²⁴⁵ European Defence Agency (EDA) – *Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) Report 2023/2024*.

²⁴⁶ The term refers to products or components that are ready for immediate use. Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/off-the-shelf>.

²⁴⁷ Frédéric Mauro, *European Defence: The Challenges of Strategic Autonomy*, Policy Brief for IRIS and the European Parliament (2023).

²⁴⁸ Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks, *Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security If the United States Pulls Back*, MIT Press (2021).

²⁴⁹ Guntram B. Wolff, Armin Steinbach and Jeromin Zettelmeyer, *The Governance and Funding of European Rearmament*, Brugel (2025).

Consequently, national governments usually favour intergovernmental decision-making processes with protectionist tendencies, preferring to support national companies or the immediate purchase of foreign products already available on the market ²⁵⁰. Projects by major industries such as Leonardo Spa²⁵¹, Dassault Aviation²⁵² and Rheinmetall²⁵³ are therefore heavily funded by individual states, as they guarantee industrial benefits and immediate jobs for their national companies, at the expense of overall European efficiency²⁵⁴.

As demonstrated by several studies, such as the ones of Valerio Briani²⁵⁵ and Sven Biscop²⁵⁶, the existence of dozens of competing weapons systems produced by individual European states gives rise to particularly complex, but clear, problems. For instance, one of the consequences of this misguided strategy is the duplication of production of virtually identical components and the consequent waste of resources. Indeed, although total European military expenditure ranks second in the world after that of the United States, the return in terms of actual capabilities is greatly reduced because each state has to pay its own R&D (Research and Development) costs to develop systems equivalent to those of its neighbours.

Moreover, national companies produce small quantities of military equipment and weapon systems, intended primarily for their own national armed forces. Without pooling demand at a European level, unit costs for production and maintenance remain unsustainably high. The issue is that it is exactly this common pooling demand and the joint development of military capabilities that represent the only ways to avoid duplication and achieve economies of scale in Europe ²⁵⁷.

Without genuine market reform, EU's rising defence spending risks being absorbed by inefficiencies rather than delivering real capability gains. A functioning common defence market is therefore essential not only for competitiveness, but also for deterrence, resilience and strategic sovereignty in an increasingly volatile geopolitical

²⁵⁰ European Parliament Official Website, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2025\)775924](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2025)775924).

²⁵¹ Leonardo Spa Official Website, <https://www.leonardo.com/it/home>.

²⁵² Dassault Aviation Official Website, <https://www.dassault-aviation.com/en/>.

²⁵³ Rheinmetall Official Website, <https://www.rheinmetall.com/en/>.

²⁵⁴ Guntram B. Wolff, Armin Steinbach and Jeromin Zettelmeyer, *The Governance and Funding of European Rearmament*, Brugel (2025).

²⁵⁵ Valerio Briani, *The Costs of Non-Europe in the Defence Field*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

²⁵⁶ Sven Biscop, *European Defence and PESCO: Don't Waste the Chance*, EU IDEA (2020).

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

environment²⁵⁸. Thanks to this, firms from the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) would be able to expand across the Union and stimulate cross-border cooperation, mergers and new ventures, increasing the availability of EU-made defence products²⁵⁹.

3.4 – Case study: European rivalry between GCAP and FCAS projects

A prominent case-study illustrating the structural division among EU Members is the rivalry surrounding sixth-generation combat aircraft programmes. These particularly advanced projects involve the design of a genuine “aerial ecosystem”, that aims to go beyond being mere aircraft. This is due to the fact that sixth-generation fighter aircrafts integrate with a multitude of assets, involving the simultaneous collaboration of drones of various sizes, ground stations, satellites and resilient communication networks²⁶⁰. The idea behind the project stems from the need to develop ever more advanced capabilities to sustain hybrid conflicts, in which technological superiority is no longer measured solely by kinetic firepower, but by the seamless integration and operational effectiveness of this interconnected ecosystem²⁶¹.

Despite the clear imperative for operational synergy, European states failed to consolidate their efforts around a single, unified platform, opting instead to pursue two different competing projects, the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP)²⁶² and the Future Combat Air System (FCAS)²⁶³. The first one is led by Italy, the United Kingdom and Japan and it is currently ongoing under a trilateral industrial architecture established by a joint venture among the three Lead Systems Integrators: BAE Systems (UK), Leonardo (Italy) and JAIEC (Japan)²⁶⁴. The second project, which was developed by Germany, France and Spain, has been abandoned at the beginning of summer 2026, following

²⁵⁸ European Parliament Official Website, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2025\)775924](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2025)775924).

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ See more at <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2019/9/16/what-to-expect-from-sixth-gen-aircraft> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sixth-generation_fighter.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² See more at <https://www.leonardo.com/it/business/gcap>.

²⁶³ See more at <https://www.airbus.com/en/products-services/defence/future-combat-air-system-fcas>.

²⁶⁴ Alessandro Marrone, *The New Partnership among Italy, Japan and the UK on the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP)*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) (2025).

disputes involving the impossibility of reaching agreements concerning the leadership and control of the development programme^{265 266}.

Although this rivalry ultimately ended with the cancellation of the FCAS project, the episode highlights the persistent challenges of European defence integration. It represents yet another example of how European states are still unable to find common patterns, thereby perpetuating the paradox that sees the EU prepared to fund two parallel sixth-generation air combat systems rather than a single, joint one. As highlighted by Sven Biscop, such dual-track approach leads to unnecessary duplication of research and development expenditures, prevents the realization of economies of scale, and significantly inflates both production and life-cycle maintenance costs²⁶⁷.

In conclusion, this industrial divide undermines the EU's ability to achieve genuine strategic autonomy and reduces the global competitiveness of European companies compared with those in the US and China²⁶⁸. The past coexistence of GCAP and FCAS has demonstrated how intergovernmental governance model and national industrial protectionism continue to undermine a fully integrated European defence technological and industrial base.

4. The limits of establishing a “common European army”

4.1 – Institutional constraints and the limits of defence integration

From the collapse of the European Defence Community (EDC) in 1954²⁶⁹, to the recent crises on the Union's borders, the debate over the creation of a European army has resurfaced periodically, often presented as the natural culmination of the process of

²⁶⁵ The Guardians Official Website, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jun/08/france-and-germany-abandon-joint-project-to-build-european-fighter-jet>.

²⁶⁶ See more at <https://it.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/06/09/perche-e-fallito-lambizioso-progetto-franco-tedesco-dei-nuovi-caccia-fcas>.

²⁶⁷ Sven Biscop, *Fighting for Europe: European Defence after the Versailles Summit*, Security Policy Brief, Egmont (2022).

²⁶⁸ Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks, *Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security If the United States Pulls Back*, MIT Press (2021).

²⁶⁹ See more at Britannica Official Website, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/European-Defense-Community#:~:text=European%20Defense%20Community%20%28EDC%29%2C%20an%20abortive%20attempt%20by,avoiding%20the%20tendentious%20problem%20of%20West%20German%20rearmament>.

European integration²⁷⁰. However, the narrative of a common supranational defence system clashes once again with a complex structural reality, represented by defence as the most fiercely guarded pillar of Member States sovereignty. In fact, the field of security and defence is considered very differently by states in comparison to other political policies, such as the economic one or the agricultural one²⁷¹.

The fundamental principle of the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force is rooted in political and sociological theory, even before it is enshrined in the constitutional law of individual countries. Back in 1919, the German sociologist Marx Weber, in fact, affirmed that "*a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.*"²⁷² Consequently, since the concept of defence is considered as one of the foundational pillars of the concept of "nation-state", the creation of a common European army would require a transfer of sovereignty to the Union that the Members are not constitutionally or politically prepared nor willing to accept²⁷³. For instance, the Constitutions of many Member States, including the Italian and German one, require that the armed forces be accountable exclusively to national democratic bodies²⁷⁴. As a consequence, creating a genuine common defence army implies taking away from national parliaments the final say on the use of arms and the lives of their soldiers, transferring this power to the EU.

Furthermore, from a European institutional point, a provision regarding a clear legal basis for EU-led territorial defence remains absent. The Treaty on the European Union (TEU)²⁷⁵ offers limited guidelines for territorial defence. Article 42(2) TEU abstractly refers to the establishment of a "common defence", but its conditions are stringent, comparable to a

²⁷⁰ Carmen-Cristina Cîrlig, *European defence cooperation: State of play and thoughts on an EU army*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS).

²⁷¹ Carmen-Cristina Cîrlig, *European defence cooperation: State of play and thoughts on an EU army*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS).

²⁷² Marx Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, New York Oxford University Press (1946). See the source at https://dn790009.ca.archive.org/0/items/weber_max_1864_1920_politics_as_a_vocation/weber_max_1864_1920_politics_as_a_vocation.pdf.

²⁷³ Koen Meijer, *A European Army and Three Difficult Choices*, Verfassungsblog (2025).

²⁷⁴ In the Italian Constitution, under art. 78 it is said that "*The Chambers shall deliberate upon the state of war and confer the necessary powers on the Government.*" See https://www.cortecostituzionale.it/documenti/download/pdf/The_Constitution_of_the_Italian_Republic.pdf. In the German Constitution, a parallel principle can be found under art. 45b of the Grundgesetz (See at https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.html#:~:text=%281%29%20Every%20person%20shall%20have%20the%20right%20to,integrity.%20Freedom%20of%20the%20person%20shall%20be%20inviolable.) and in the judgment of the German Federal Constitutional Court that established "*Any armed deployment abroad requires the prior approval of the Bundestag*" (Case AWACS, 12 July 1994).

²⁷⁵ See the article at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2012/art_42/oj/eng.

simplified treaty amendment²⁷⁶. Moreover, Article 42(7) TEU includes a mutual defence clause, comparable to Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, but it is addressed to the Member States, not the EU itself²⁷⁷.

As previously explained, most of the EU states are already members of NATO and many allies prefer not to duplicate command structure, preferring instead entirely rely on the Alliance for their defence. This includes the possibility of a shared army, for which their main concern is represented by the possibility of creating a defensive alternative that could weaken the transatlantic bond with the United States, making their defence guarantee weaker²⁷⁸. Additionally, the issue of national industrial rivalries would also be reflected in the debate concerning a joint European army. Indeed, it would be difficult to strike a favourable balance between the various European companies that supply ammunition and equipment to soldiers²⁷⁹.

Another critical issue, moreover, would concern the lack of a genuinely integrated European command-and-control structure. While Member States already cooperate through NATO and EU frameworks, their armed forces ultimately remain under national chains of command²⁸⁰. A European army would therefore require the establishment of a common military command capable of translating political decisions into operational action and of coordinating forces from different national structures.

A further obstacle is the limited degree of common operational experience among European armed forces. Although militaries have acquired experience through the participation in multinational NATO and EU missions, this has not produced a permanently integrated force operating under a single European command²⁸¹. In addition, it is extremely difficult to standardise the differing military doctrines and command

²⁷⁶ Koen Meijer, *A European Army and Three Difficult Choices*, Verfassungsblog (2025).

²⁷⁷ See the article at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2012/art_42/oj/eng.

²⁷⁸ Sven Biscop, *PESCO: Good News for NATO from the EU*, Egmont Institute (2018).

²⁷⁹ Frédéric Mauro, *European Defence: The Challenges of Strategic Autonomy*, Policy Brief for IRIS and the European Parliament (2023).

²⁸⁰ Benjamin Martill and Carmen Gebhard, *Combined differentiation in European defense: tailoring Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) to strategic and political complexity*, Contemporary Security Policy (2023).

²⁸¹ Rafael Loss, Marta Prochwicz Jazowska and Jana Puglierin, *Making defence European again*, European Council of Foreign Relations (ECFR) (2026).

languages across the various countries without a strong, centralised command structure²⁸².

Without the prior establishment of a centralized structure able to organize the different operational layers, coordinating them between the Member States with a single foreign policy and a common decision-making authority, the merger of the armed forces remains without foundations. In the short and medium term, therefore, constitutional obstacles, differing perceptions of threats and national industrial rivalries make the creation of a single army an institutional utopia, relegating the EU to forms of mere intergovernmental cooperation.

Furthermore, a crucial problematic point would be the nature of the commitment to the “European Army”. If on the one hand a mandatory structure ensures uniformity and the true realization of the ideal of a “common defence department”, on the other hand mandatory imposition of such a measure would spark debates regarding the role of historical neutral states such as Ireland, Malta and Austria²⁸³. For this reason, according to other authors²⁸⁴, a more pragmatic option would be the creation of “coalitions of the willing”, where interested states collaborate on joint capabilities, similar to PESCO²⁸⁵.

Karlsrud and Rykers define this coalitions as “ad hoc coalitions”, since they are temporary forms of cooperation between states who face common specific security issues. They highlight the advantages of this type of collaboration, such as greater national control over forces, the ability to pursue national interests, and a reduction in bureaucratic delays and the constraints arising from the requirement for unanimity²⁸⁶.

These “coalitions of the willing” avoid lengthy treaty changes and allows ambitious states to advance cooperation, and it would also it makes it easier to involve non-Member States as the UK and Norway. While differentiated cooperation may enable more ambitious

²⁸² Benjamin Martill and Carmen Gebhard, *Combined differentiation in European defense: tailoring Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) to strategic and political complexity*, Contemporary Security Policy (2023).

²⁸³ Koen Meijer, *A European Army and Three Difficult Choices*, Verfassungsblog (2025).

²⁸⁴ See also the work of Stephan Klose, Elie Perot and Sevgi Temizisler, *Spot the Difference: Differentiated Co-operation and Differentiated Integration in the European Union*, Journal of Common Market Studies (2023).

²⁸⁵ Benjamin Martill and Carmen Gebhard, *Combined differentiation in European defense: tailoring Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) to strategic and political complexity*, Contemporary Security Policy (2023).

²⁸⁶ John Karlsrud and Yf Rykers, *Multinational Rapid response Mechanism*, Routledge & Francis group (2029).

Member States to advance defence integration, scholars have also warned that excessive differentiation may fragment European defence efforts and undermine the coherence of collective action²⁸⁷²⁸⁸. However, others sustain that the possibility of existence of a small number of coalitions would still be better than having the 27 separated armies²⁸⁹.

None of the operational issues listed above currently allow for the implementation of a truly unified defence structure, meaning that the idea of establishing a joint European Army remains, for the time being, merely a future fantasy.

4.2 – Case study: the German-Norwegian joint declaration

An important example of a “coalition of the willing” is the German-Norwegian joint submarine programme. With the signing of a Joint Declaration in 2017²⁹⁰, the two countries have laid the foundation for a long-term partnership, especially focused on maritime defence. According to the Declaration, the two partners will commit to developing, procuring, operating and maintaining a fleet of identical submarines, even if each will retain its own submarines and chain of command²⁹¹.

This cooperation demonstrates in practical terms how two states can develop a joint military capability without having to wait for full integration at the Eu level. Moreover, this case is particularly peculiar because Norway is not a member of the Union, although it is still a member of NATO. This implies that the project is a demonstration on how a form of minilateral cooperation can transcend the institutional boundaries of the EU. The author Bjørn Olav Knutsen highlights exactly this point: the cooperation contributes to both German and Norwegian defence capabilities, while remaining part of the broader framework of European and NATO cooperation²⁹².

²⁸⁷ Felix Biermann, *The Differentiation Paradox of European Integration: Why Going it Alone Produces Suboptimal Results*, *Journal of Common Market Studies* (2022).

²⁸⁸ See also the work of Göran von Sydow, Valentin Kreiling (eds), Calle Håkansson et al., *Who calls the shots? Institutional and political dynamics in European defence*, Sieps (2026). Source at <https://sieps.se/publikationer/2026/who-calls-the-shots-institutional-and-political-dynamics-in-european-defence/>.

²⁸⁹ Koen Meijer, *A European Army and Three Difficult Choices*, *Verfassungsblog* (2025).

²⁹⁰ See more at <https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/departementene/smk/nyheter2025/joint-declaration.pdf>.

²⁹¹ Norway Government Official Website, <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/whats-new/norway-and-germany-sign-a-new-defense-arrangement/id3149055/>.

²⁹² Bjørn Olav Knutsen, *German-Norwegian relations in security and defence: What kind of partnership*, Sage Journals (2021).

Furthermore, the project enables the two countries to achieve economies of scale and military synergies²⁹³. If applied to the European case, this cooperation shows that rather than attempting to harmonise the defence capabilities of all 27 Members, a smaller group of states with converging strategic interests can pool resources and develop specific capabilities together.

5. Case study: lessons from the Singaporean defence model

5.1 – From structural constraints to defence effectiveness

The structural limitations identified in the previous sub-chapters raise a broader question: if the creation of a fully integrated European defence structure remains constrained by national sovereignty, divergent strategic interests, fragmented capabilities and slow decision-making, how can states with limited resources nevertheless develop effective and responsive defence systems? In the following part it will be analysed the defence model of an important city-state, Singapore. Although the state is fundamentally different from the European Union in terms of political structure, territorial size and strategic environment, facing entirely different critical issues and threats, its defence model offers an interesting case through which it is possible to examine how institutional coordination, long-term planning and military integration can compensate for structural constraints.

Since its independence in 1965²⁹⁴, Singapore has faced significant strategic disadvantages arising from its small territorial size, lack of strategic depth and vulnerable geopolitical position. These constraints have encouraged the development of defence capabilities designed to compensate for the limitations inherent in its status as a small state.²⁹⁵ Its responses have not been based exclusively on increasing military expenditure, but also on the development of a highly coordinated defence architecture²⁹⁶, combining strategic

²⁹³ Bjørn Olav Knutsen, *German-Norwegian relations in security and defence: What kind of partnership*, Sage Journals (2021).

²⁹⁴ Singapore Government Agency Official Website, <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuiid=dc1efe7a-8159-40b2-9244-cdb078755013>.

²⁹⁵ Shang-su Wu, *The Defence Capabilities of Small States: Singapore and Taiwan's Responses to Strategic Desperation*, Palgrave Macmillan (2016).

²⁹⁶ See more at MINDEF Official Government Page, <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/about-us/organisation/>.

planning, civil-military coordination, technological innovation and the integration of military capabilities²⁹⁷.

The purpose of this section is not to suggest that the EU could or should replicate the Singaporean model. Their institutional and political differences are too broad for a similar stance. Instead, Singapore will be used as a comparative case in order to identify some organisational principles that may be relevant to the Union's case. Consequently, relevant political and structural Singaporean elements such as the importance of coherent strategic planning, the coordination of defence resources, the integration of military capabilities and the ability to translate political decisions into timely operational responses, can be considered an interesting source of inspiration for the European institutional fragmentation and decision-making constraints previously discussed in Chapter 2.

5.2 - Singapore's defence architecture: centralization and civil-military coordination

Singapore, a relatively small city-state in South-East Asia, has seen exponential growth in its economy, establishing itself today as one of the world's most competitive and resilient markets²⁹⁸. Before its independence from Malaysia, Singapore was mainly a commercial and port hub for trade between South-East Asia and the rest of the world, also thanks to the British presence that has contributed to the island's economic structure²⁹⁹. The situation changed in 1965, when, after violent racial riots in July and September 1964, the ruling parties of Singapore and Malaysia were separated³⁰⁰. The island found itself in a particularly difficult situation, with a very small territory, virtually no potential for agricultural production and a very limited domestic market³⁰¹. This severe economic vulnerability, which in the early years led to widespread poverty and underemployment amongst the population, prompted the government to adopt a strategy that was

²⁹⁷ Shang-su Wu, *The Defence Capabilities of Small States: Singapore and Taiwan's Responses to Strategic Desperation*, Palgrave Macmillan (2016).

²⁹⁸ Singapore Economic Development Board (EDB) Official Website, <https://www.edb.gov.sg/en/why-singapore/an-economic-powerhouse.html>.

²⁹⁹ Prema-Chandra Athukorala and Asanthe Ekanayake, *International Production and Industrial Transformation: The Singapore Story*, Wiley-The World Economy (2024).

³⁰⁰ Singapore Government Agency Official Website, <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuiid=dc1efe7a-8159-40b2-9244-cdb078755013>.

³⁰¹ Prema-Chandra Athukorala and Asanthe Ekanayake, *International Production and Industrial Transformation: The Singapore Story*, Wiley-The World Economy (2024).

particularly innovative for its time: rather than attempting to build a fully domestic industrial system straight away, Singapore decided to attract foreign multinational companies and to place foreign investment and export-oriented industrialisation at the centre of its development strategy³⁰².

Within a few years, the government strategy implemented by Singapore led to impressive results, placing the country amongst the very best in the world in terms of operational stability, economic competitiveness and as the world's major destination of foreign direct investment³⁰³. This result, however, was not solely the result of openness to the free market and a strong ability to attract foreign investment. Such a remarkable achievement was made possible by the careful planning and organisation of an institutional framework capable of keeping pace with such rapid development³⁰⁴. The country deliberately established the institutional, infrastructural and productive conditions necessary to ensure that these investments would contribute to the nation's development³⁰⁵.

A similar structural adjustment has also been implemented in other key areas of government, such as defence. Given its highly exposed geographical position, ideal for its commercial objectives, but at the same time more dangerous from a defence perspective, Singapore's military and defence structure has had to organise itself accordingly. This broader development of state capacity and technological capabilities also created favourable conditions for the subsequent development of increasingly sophisticated defence capabilities.

In the paper *Threats and civil–military relations: explaining Singapore's “trickle down” military innovation*, the author Evan A. Laksmana seeks to explain how Singapore, one of Asia's smallest states, lacking strategic depth, natural resources and a large population, has managed to develop one of the most sophisticated armed forces in the Indo-Pacific³⁰⁶. The academic explains that the country's success did not result solely from wealth and the large-scale purchase of innovative foreign weapons, but from the fact that Singapore

³⁰² Prema-Chandra Athukorala and Asanthe Ekanayake, *International Production and Industrial Transformation: The Singapore Story*, Wiley-The World Economy (2024).

³⁰³ Singapore Economic Development Board (EDB) Official Website, <https://www.edb.gov.sg/en/why-singapore/an-economic-powerhouse.html>.

³⁰⁴ Prema-Chandra Athukorala and Asanthe Ekanayake, *International Production and Industrial Transformation: The Singapore Story*, Wiley-The World Economy (2024).

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Evan A. Laksmana, *Threats and civil–military relations: explaining Singapore's “trickle down” military innovation*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group (2017).

has developed a distinctive military model through an organisational structure based on close interaction between civilian and military bodies.

Laksmana refers to an “evolutionary military innovation”, explaining that Singapore did not create its military model through a single major reform, but through a gradual and continuous process of adaptation. The Singaporean model works well thanks to its vertically integrated structure which, starting at the very top of the political leadership and strategic assessment, is able to formulate defence policies based on the country’s research and development capabilities, which are viewed as particularly important and are funded accordingly³⁰⁷. The strong link between the civilian and military spheres has enabled the country to avoid a situation in which the political and military spheres pursue different objectives. The government provides coherent and stable strategic direction, while the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF)³⁰⁸ are able to translate that direction into concrete military capabilities³⁰⁹.

Over time, this model has facilitated a continuous process of military innovation by ensuring consistency between political priorities, strategic assessments and military planning. In this respect, Singapore provides an interesting point of comparison with the European Union. While Singapore can translate a relatively unified political assessment into a coordinated defence strategy, the EU must reconcile the preferences and threat perceptions of twenty-seven Member States. The resulting fragmentation does not necessarily prevent individual Member States from developing advanced military capabilities, but it makes it considerably more difficult to translate national capabilities into a coherent collective defence strategy.

However, the effectiveness of Singapore’s defence model cannot be attributed solely to the centralisation of military decision-making. Its resilience also depends on the broader integration of defence with economic, technological and societal resources, which is reflected in Singapore’s wider concept of Total Defence³¹⁰.

³⁰⁷ See the founding plan for the Research, Innovation and Enterprise 2030 (RIE2030), <https://file.go.gov.sg/rie2030pressrelease.pdf>.

³⁰⁸ See more at <https://www.sgdi.gov.sg/ministries/mindef/departments/saf>.

³⁰⁹ Evan A. Laksmana, *Threats and civil–military relations: explaining Singapore’s “trickle down” military innovation*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group (2017).

³¹⁰ The term “Total Defence” is Singapore’s whole-of-society national defence concept, based on the premise that every aspect of society contributes to the collective defence of the state. See Government of Singapore Official Website, <https://www.scdf.gov.sg/home/community-and-volunteers/total-defence>.

5.3 – Singapore’s strategic responsiveness and integration of defence capabilities

A further element of the Singaporean defence model concerns its ability to translate strategic decisions into coordinated and operational military capabilities. The effectiveness of a defence system depends not only on the resources available, but also on the capacity to integrate them and respond rapidly to changing security requirements³¹¹. In Singapore, centralised decision-making and close coordination between political, military and technological actors facilitate this process, allowing strategic priorities to be more directly reflected in defence planning and capability development³¹².

This operational aspect provides a useful point of comparison with the European Union. As previously explained in the chapter, although European Member States possess substantial military, technological and financial resources, these capabilities remain largely organised at the national level and are often affected by different strategic priorities, procurement systems and operational requirements. As a result, the challenge for the EU is not simply to increase its defence capabilities, but to ensure that existing and newly developed capabilities can be coordinated and employed as part of a coherent strategic framework. The comparison with Singapore therefore highlights the importance of institutional coordination and strategic responsiveness as necessary conditions for transforming available resources into effective collective defence.

An interesting aspect of the Singaporean model is understanding how the state manages the relationship between deliberation and rapid response. In a speech delivered in 2015 at the 17th Asia-Pacific Programme for Senior Military Officers³¹³, the Second Minister for Defence, Lui Tuck Yew, explained precisely the issue of inter-institutional consultation and the speed of response within the Singaporean model³¹⁴. The Minister affirmed that, in dealing with a wider spectrum of operations, militaries need to build new capabilities and adapt to new roles. Therefore, a single-agency solution would fail, given that it is based on narrow expertise. Consequently, he continued explaining that what Singapore

³¹¹ Ron Matthew and Fitriani Bintang Timur, *Singapore’s ‘Total Defence’ Strategy*, Taylor and Francis Groups (2024).

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ See more at <https://rsis.edu.sg/outreach/asia-pacific-programme-for-senior-military-officers-appsmo/#:~:text=At%20the%20military-to-military%20level%2C%20the%20Asia-Pacific%20Programme%20for,and%20beyond%20to%20interact%20on%20a%20pan-regional%20scale>.

³¹⁴ See the speech at https://www.mindef.gov.sg/news-and-events/latest-releases/2015aug05-speeches-00845/?utm_.

needed was working through a broader network that is an integration of diverse insights, experience and expertise to solve the multi-faceted security problems that we face. This “whole-of-government approach” led to the development of a concept of security that does not rigidly separate the military dimension from the economic, technological and social dimensions³¹⁵³¹⁶.

However, Lui Tuck Yew, acknowledged that the “whole-of-government approach” required a great amount of consultation and that this could have become time-consuming and inefficient³¹⁷. Still, he affirmed that Singapore would seek to resolve the problem through a more specific operational structure, characterized by clearly defined roles and responsibilities, pre-determined decision-making procedures, information sharing and inter-agency structures.

The objective, therefore, is not to eliminate deliberation, but to prevent consultation from delaying operational implementation. Once strategic priorities have been established, clearly defined responsibilities and delegated authority allow relevant agencies and operational actors to act within an already established framework. This distinction is particularly relevant when compared with the European Union, where the absence of a similarly clear separation between collective political decision-making and operational implementation can contribute to delays, particularly in areas subject to unanimity³¹⁸. In this sense, Singapore seeks to separate the formulation of strategic objectives from their operational implementation: political authorities retain control over the overall direction of defence policy, while operational actors are provided with sufficient autonomy to respond to evolving circumstances without requiring the entire decision-making process to be reopened³¹⁹.

The integration of capabilities also extends to the technological and industrial dimension. Laksmana describes Singapore’s military innovation as an evolutionary process in which strategic requirements are progressively translated into technological, organisational and

³¹⁵ Ron Matthew and Fitriani Bintang Timur, *Singapore’s ‘Total Defence’ Strategy*, Taylor and Francis Groups (2024).

³¹⁶ See also the Six Pillars of Singapore’s Total Defence, <https://www.totaldefence.gov.sg/about/the-six-pillars-of-total-defence/>.

³¹⁷ See the speech at https://www.mindef.gov.sg/news-and-events/latest-releases/2015aug05-speeches-00845/?utm_.

³¹⁸ See Chapter 2 under point 2.1, where the problem of EU decision-making has been explained.

³¹⁹ See the speech at https://www.mindef.gov.sg/news-and-events/latest-releases/2015aug05-speeches-00845/?utm_.

operational adaptations³²⁰. Rather than treating defence procurement and military innovation as isolated processes, Singapore has developed close links between strategic assessment, research and development, technological capabilities and military planning. This allows emerging security requirements to be incorporated progressively into capability development rather than being addressed only once a crisis has already emerged³²¹.

This aspect is particularly relevant to the European case. The EU has increasingly attempted to strengthen the connection between research, industrial development and military capabilities through initiatives such as the European Defence Fund, PESCO and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD). Nevertheless, as discussed previously in the chapter, the implementation of these initiatives remains dependent on the willingness and priorities of individual Member States, limiting the extent to which technological development can be guided by a single strategic framework. In any case, the comparison between Singapore and the EU should be cautious, since Singapore's ability to coordinate defence policy in such a structured way derives largely from its status as a sovereign state. As a consequence, what can prove to be a valuable lesson for Europe does not lie in providing a model to be replicated, but in illustrating how institutional coherence can affect the relationship between available capabilities and the ability to employ them collectively³²².

5.4 - Comparative implications for the European Union

In sum, sections 5.2 and 5.3 help to explain what the European Union can learn from a smaller state that has developed mechanisms for coordinating defence despite limited resources and a complex security environment. The Singaporean model is interesting not because it represents a more “powerful” alternative than the EU, but because it has developed coordination, long-term planning, innovation and military integration to compensate for its structural limitations³²³.

³²⁰ Evan A. Laksmana, *Threats and civil–military relations: explaining Singapore’s “trickle down” military innovation*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group (2017).

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Ron Matthew and Fitriani Bintang Timur, *Singapore’s ‘Total Defence’ Strategy*, Taylor and Francis Groups (2024).

For obvious reasons, given that Singapore is a city-state, it is not possible for the Union to replicate its exact operational structure, but neither was that the aim of the comparison. What could be interesting, instead, is to investigate which elements or strategies could potentially be adapted to the European context and those that remain intrinsically linked to the characteristics of a sovereign state.

Among the elements that could serve as inspiration for establishing a more cohesive defence framework among Member States are, first of all, some specific organisational principles. For instance, European states do not necessarily need to merge their armed forces, but they could improve the coordination of common planning, the development of shared operational standards and also the assessment of the possibility of having their armed forces train in accordance with a common training programme. These objectives are already partly reflected in existing EU mechanism, through the Capability Development Plan (CDP)³²⁴, which represent a comprehensive planning method providing a picture of European military capabilities over time, and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), that supports Members providing them an overview and analysis of the EU defence landscape and proposing recommendations for collaborative opportunities. Consequently, the challenge for the EU is to progressively increase the degree of coordination among national defence systems.

In particular, the EU defence planning should move towards the outline of guidelines for a common threat assessment that would likely lead to a common capability planning and a consequent coordinated procurement decision. The EU has already recognized the importance of this process and has established specific tools to manage it. The Strategic Compass³²⁵ and the CDP seek to establish common strategic priorities and identify the capability required to address future security scenarios. Nevertheless, all these instruments remain largely dependent on Member States' willingness to align their national priorities and participate in cooperative projects. The 2024 CARD report itself emphasises that national defence efforts remain indispensable but are not sufficient on their own, and that greater cooperation is required to reduce fragmentation and maximise synergies.³²⁶

³²⁴ See more at <https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/all-activities/activities-search/capability-development-plan#:~:text=The%20CDP%20is%20a%20comprehensive%20planning%20method%20providing,plans%20when%20identifying%20priorities%20and%20opportunities%20for%20cooperation.>

³²⁵ See more at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en.

³²⁶ European Defence Agency, *Coordinated Annual Review on Defence – Report 2024*.

At the same time, the comparison highlighted the structural limits of transferring the Singaporean experience to Europe. Since it was described that the European Union is a supranational political system composed of sovereign Member States with different strategic cultures and threat perceptions, it is not possible to import the Singaporean institutional model that, on the contrary, is based on a single political authority, a unified defence establishment and a relatively concentrated strategic decision-making process.

The value of the Singaporean case, consequently, lies less in providing a model that can be replicated than in demonstrating how institutional coherence can improve the relationship between resources, planning and strategic responsiveness. In this sense, the objective of today's Europe should not necessarily be having a common European Army, but aiming to achieve a coordinated European defence architecture composed of interconnected national and minilateral capabilities. Such an approach would preserve Member States's sovereignty while still increasing interoperability and reducing unnecessary duplications. This would achievement would represent a fundamental step forward a more integrated union, capable of organize a coherent collective action.

THIRD CHAPTER

The Future of European Security and Defence: Strategic Autonomy, New Partnerships and Future Scenarios

1. Beyond Donald Trump: the future of EU-US security relations

1.1 – European Union's response to an uncertain US commitment

The structural issues outlined in the previous chapter have led to a fundamental question being raised with increasing urgency among Member States, that is how the European Union should adapt its defence and security strategies to an increasingly uncertain transatlantic environment. In fact, the future of European security cannot be considered separately from the evolution of the transatlantic relationship.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has highlighted the persistence of European dependence on US capabilities in several areas of security, despite the progress made in recent years towards strengthening European defence cooperation. The outbreak of the war has particularly revealed the extent to which European security continues to rely on transatlantic capabilities, including in areas where European states have sought to develop greater capacity. In this sense, the conflict has reinforced the importance of addressing the gap between Europe's ambitions as a security actor and the reality of its strategic autonomy.

On the one hand the invasion of Ukraine and the EU's initially limited capacity to provide a military response raised questions in the expert community whether European strategic autonomy is over, while also giving renewed prominence to critical voices that have been sceptical of the French-led aspiration to make the European Union an independent security provider³²⁷.

On the other hand, it is difficult to deny the growing political capacity of the EU to deal with crisis of this magnitude that have been witnessed from the beginning of the conflict. In fact, the declaration by the heads of state and government on 24 February 2022 placed

³²⁷ Niklas Helwig, *EU Strategic Autonomy after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Europe's Capacity to Act in Time of War*, Journal of Common Market Studies (2023).

the full responsibility on Russia, declared solidarity with Ukraine and underlined the unprecedented scale of the aggression³²⁸.

The military support that the Union and its Members are providing to Ukraine is still substantial and has increased its relative importance as the US military assistance has declined. According to the Kiel Institute's Ukraine Support Tracker, European countries allocate €72 billion in military aid to Ukraine by April 2025, compared with €65 billion allocated by the United States³²⁹, marking the first time since June 2022 that European military assistance had surpassed US support³³⁰.

However, one of the main challenges that remains for the EU's response to the crisis is that its authority in the field of security and defence is limited³³¹. Some authors have used the war in Ukraine as a "proving ground" to test European capacity to reach a real strategic autonomy³³². The study of Matteo Mazziotti and Mattia Sguazzini has highlighted two main issues regarding EU's capacity. The first challenge is represented by the persistence of a strategic cacophony, that is the presence of continent-wide divergences across national threat perceptions; the second one concerns the severe military capacity shortfalls, since their analysis suggests that many European countries, especially in the South, have not reacted by addressing their military deficiencies³³³.

Consequently, from the point of view of the actual military equipment and resources, the EU tied itself consciously to the United States, as shown by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's decision in early 2023 to "deliver Leopard battle tanks only if the Biden administration promises equivalent US-made Abrahams tanks"³³⁴.

³²⁸ See the Declaration at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/699488/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)699488_EN.pdf#:~:text=On%2024%20February%202022%2C%20EU%20leaders%20met%20to,on%20a%20new%20set%20of%20sanctions%20against%20Russia.](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/699488/EPRS_BRI(2022)699488_EN.pdf#:~:text=On%2024%20February%202022%2C%20EU%20leaders%20met%20to,on%20a%20new%20set%20of%20sanctions%20against%20Russia.)

³²⁹ Taro Nishikawa and Christoph Trebesch, *Ukraine Support: Europe largely fills the US aid withdrawal, led by the Nordics and the UK*, KIEL Institute (2025).

³³⁰ Taro Nishikawa and Christoph Trebesch, *Ukraine Support Tracker: Europe now leading spender on weapons production for Ukraine*, KIEL Institute (2025).

³³¹ Niklas Helwig, *EU Strategic Autonomy after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Europe's Capacity to Act in Time of War*, Journal of Common Market Studies (2023).

³³² See also the work of Oriol Costa and Esther Barbé, *A moving target. EU actorness and the Russian invasion of Ukraine*, Taylor & Francis Groups (2023).

³³³ Matteo Mazziotti di Celso and Mattia Sguazzini, *The Road to Strategic Autonomy: Reflections from the Russia-Ukraine War*, De Europa Journal (2024).

³³⁴ Laura Pitel, Guy Chazan and Ben Hall, *Why Olaf Scholz is reluctant to send battle tanks to Ukraine*, Financial Times (2023).

Moreover, on the legislative side, the EU has no option to amend its budget to provide military aid, given that the treaties exclude EU budget expenditures with military or defence implications³³⁵. For this reason, Member States established the European Peace Facility (EPF)³³⁶, an off-budget instrument designed to finance CSFP actions without having to rely to the Union's budget³³⁷.

In addition, the war stressed the scepticism in Central and Eastern Europe against ideas of strategic autonomy that go beyond EU efforts in support of member-state and alliance policies³³⁸. The Russian war of aggression underlined that strategic autonomy of the EU will unlikely be developed independently from NATO, but rather through greater European contributions and influence within the Alliance³³⁹. For this reason, trying to achieve complete strategic autonomy from the rest of the world, today seems to be even less of an option than before³⁴⁰.

Therefore, the results of the debates seem to affirm that the EU and its Member States need global partners and allies, since, without them, it does not appear that safety in the neighbourhood can be guaranteed. As a consequence, while EU member states are increasing their joint coordinative and political capacity, they also link their security more closely to the United States, as illustrated by the decisions of Sweden and Finland to join NATO following Russia's invasion³⁴¹.

However, with President Donald Trump at the White House, the previous certainty of the American security guarantee, on which the allies placed their hope, has been largely called into question. Particularly under his second administration, Trump's rhetoric and policy choices have contributed to a deterioration of trust between the US and Europe.

³³⁵ See article 41 (2) of the Treaty on European Union at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2008/art_41/oj/eng.

³³⁶ See more at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-peace-facility/>.

³³⁷ See the work of Malte Brosiga, John Karlsrud and Yf Reykers, *The EU's evolving role in international peace and security: insights from the European peace facility*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group (2026).

³³⁸ Niklas Helwig, *EU Strategic Autonomy after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Europe's Capacity to Act in Time of War*, Journal of Common Market Studies (2023).

³³⁹ See the works of Daniel Fiott, *The three images of EU strategic autonomy: perspectives on wedging, binding and hedging*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group (2025); Christian Freudlsperger and Frank Schimmelfennig, *Europeanisation of NATO*, Journal of Common Market Studies (2026).

³⁴⁰ Niklas Helwig, *EU Strategic Autonomy after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Europe's Capacity to Act in Time of War*, Journal of Common Market Studies (2023).

³⁴¹ US Government Official Website, document at https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IN/PDF/IN11949/IN11949.8.pdf#:~:text=Sweden%20joined%20NATO%20on%20March%207%2C%202024%2C%20enlarging,the%20intention%20to%20accede%20to%20the%20alliance%20together.

The new administration's actions, wittingly or not, have undermined the foundations of transatlantic trust, displaying an increasingly confrontational approach towards the European project³⁴².

One of the crucial problems behind the genuine collaboration under NATO is that being able to predict partners' likely behaviour is essential for planning purposes and for cooperation. But under Trump 2.0, transatlantic unpredictability has become the norm³⁴³, leaving the allies uncertain about what his next moves might be. While there was unpredictability also during Trump's first mandate, checks and balances within the administration and the Republican party filtered the president's most unconventional ideas. Now the situation is different and, since he is in full command of his party, the doctrine "America First" translates essentially into whatever the president decides³⁴⁴.

In 2016, Trump's first election was initially perceived by many European observers³⁴⁵ as an exceptional disruption to the transatlantic relationship. Given the resilience of the institutional and political ties linking the United States and Europe, there were expectations that the relationship could recover after the 2020 election, even if tensions were likely to persist. However, with the second mandate to the White House, it is far harder to make that claim. Most surveys show increasing scepticism by US citizens towards international institutions, alliances, and permanent American involvement abroad³⁴⁶.

The repercussion of Trump's political strategies is consequently perceived also by the citizens of the other countries. According to data, the European public is increasingly tending not only to lose trust in American politics, but also to regard the US no longer as a trusted ally, but rather as a "necessary partner"³⁴⁷. According to an analysis published by the EU Institute for Security Studies³⁴⁸, favourable European attitudes towards the

³⁴² Steven Everts, Giuseppe Spatafora and Alice Ekman, *Low trust: navigating transatlantic relations under Trump 2.0*, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUSS) (2025).

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Chris Piper and Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, *Assessing President Trump's second-term staffing record*, Brookings (2026).

³⁴⁵ Scholars such as Anna Dimitrova, Jussi M. Hanhimäki and Emmanuelle Blanc, although cautiously, argued that the structures of the relation were sufficiently solid to allow continuity.

³⁴⁶ Steven Everts, Giuseppe Spatafora and Alice Ekman, *Low trust: navigating transatlantic relations under Trump 2.0*, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUSS) (2025).

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Steven Everts, Giuseppe Spatafora and Alice Ekman, *Low trust: navigating transatlantic relations under Trump 2.0*, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUSS) (2025).

United States declined by 12.9% between 2024 and 2025, based on data from the Pew Research Center.³⁴⁹

In light of this new geopolitical landscape, which is particularly characterised by instability and uncertainty, European leaders find themselves unsure how to deal with Washington. The fragmentation of Member States' interests and their awareness of their own strategic weaknesses, highlighted by the conflicts of recent years, reinforced the realisation that they cannot currently become completely independent from the United States³⁵⁰.

At the same time, these last years' difficult intergovernmental dynamics and challenging diplomatic relations make it clear that, regardless of who takes over from Trump in the US government, it is in EU's best interests to be more autonomous regardless of which political future US administration may take. In their study, Barbara Lippert and Stefan Mair, affirmed "*Even if the next US presidential elections might create breathing space, the pendulum could still swing back again four years later*", explaining exactly one of the key points of this thesis³⁵¹.

Debates regarding who might succeed Donald Trump, therefore, lose their significance: the point is not to predict who the next US president will be, but to demonstrate that the uncertainty surrounding the continuity of American commitment, which depends on the winning party and the political views of future presidents, nevertheless makes it necessary for Europe to have a greater capacity to act autonomously. In other words, a return to the previous model of US leadership in Europe can no longer be taken for granted³⁵².

The point is not that Trump represents the future of US foreign policy, but that his administration has made it clear the possibility that American and European interests do not always coincide³⁵³. Every four years, US administrations may change their priorities, their perception of threats, the allocation of resources and their attitude towards allies and

³⁴⁹ See the statistics at <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/06/11/us-image-declines-in-many-nations-amid-low-confidence-in-trump/>.

³⁵⁰ Steven Everts, Giuseppe Spatafora and Alice Ekman, *Low trust: navigating transatlantic relations under Trump 2.0*, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) (2025).

³⁵¹ Barbara Lippert and Stefan Mair, *With, Without, Against Washington: Redefining Europe's Relations With the United States*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) (2026).

³⁵² Barbara Lippert and Stefan Mair, *With, Without, Against Washington: Redefining Europe's Relations With the United States*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) (2026).

³⁵³ Ibid.

the Union cannot simply adjust its own security strategy every four years in response to US's changed directions.

In this context, greater European strategic autonomy would therefore depend, among other factors, on the development of a clearer and long-term plan for reducing critical dependencies on Washington ³⁵⁴. In fact, in the short and medium-term objective should not be replacing the United States, but to reduce the Union's vulnerability to changes in US strategic priorities by focusing on precise aspects such as limiting European dependence of American capabilities, strengthening EU capacity to act and favour a more balanced burden-sharing.

In this regard, European debates in 2026, which are moving in this direction, are also particularly urgent, reflecting the concern that uncertainty surrounding the US military presence in Europe is no longer merely a matter of political rhetoric, but also involves a practical review of US military deployments in Europe³⁵⁵.

According to the study of Barabara Lippert and Stefan Mair, since realistically speaking Europe cannot become more self-sufficient overnight, it would be important to take advantage of this “accelerator awareness” to begin the transition now, precisely because building the necessary capabilities takes time³⁵⁶. Consequently, President Trump should be understood less as the “cause” of European Union's search for strategic autonomy than as an “accelerator” of a transformation driven by deeper structural vulnerabilities.

European strategic autonomy should therefore not be understood as a rejection of the transatlantic relationship, but as the capacity to preserve European security interests even when American priorities change.

1.2 – From strategic dependence to selective autonomy

Following point 1.1, the question is no longer whether Europe should pursue greater strategic autonomy, but where and to what extent such autonomy is both necessary and

³⁵⁴ Luigi Scazzieri, *HEDGING AGAINST UNCERTAINTY: How European defence is adapting to Trump 2.0*, European Union Institute for Security Studies (2025).

³⁵⁵ The recent article of 26 August 2026, *Pentagon official to brief NATO allies as review fuels questions* by Lili Bayer, Humeyra Pamuk and Sabine Siebold precisely explains the new strategic discussion between Allies. See more at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/pentagon-official-brief-nato-allies-review-fuels-questions-2026-08-26/>.

³⁵⁶ Barbara Lippert and Stefan Mair, *With, Without, Against Washington: Redefining Europe's Relations With the United States*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) (2026).

realistically achievable. This requires the identification of the specific sectors in which European capabilities should be prioritized.

Europe's defence industry is neither hollow nor uncompetitive but structurally misaligned with its strategic ambitions. This is most evident in a remaining gap between the immediate necessity for rapid rearmament and the long-term goal of durable autonomy. In areas such as air and missile defence, long-range strike and digital capabilities, demand signals, production scale and governance arrangements often fail to converge³⁵⁷. As a consequence, Europe essentially faces a dilemma. For crucial military capabilities, Europe remains dependent on US technologies and platforms, while parts of the supply-chains underpinning EU defence production remain vulnerable to dependencies on China and other external suppliers³⁵⁸.

On this basis, many scholars emphasise the important distinction between “strategic autonomy” and “self-sufficiency”, to highlight that a complete break with the United States is not necessary³⁵⁹. In fact, the EU should continue to collaborate with the US whenever interests coincide and when cooperation with the US remains necessary, and this is clearly demonstrated in the defence sector, where Europe cannot immediately replace all American capabilities.

However, given that near-total dependence creates weaknesses that the EU cannot afford to continue to tolerate, the strategic approach to adopt should be to accept managed dependence in certain areas, while prioritising strategic autonomy where control is most critical. It is therefore important to distinguish those sectors where it is most relevant to develop the concept of “selective strategic autonomy”. Building on the literature on critical dependencies³⁶⁰, this thesis proposes three criteria to identify the sectors in which

³⁵⁷ Floor Stoelinga, Karen van Loon, Davis Ellison et al., *Catching up: Europe's Path to Strategic Autonomy in the defence Industry*, The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (2026).

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ See the works of Giovanni Grevi, *Strategic Autonomy for European Choices: The Key to Europe's Shaping Power*, EPC Discussion Paper (2019); Suzana Anghel, Beatrix Immenkamp, Elena Lazarou, et al., *On the path to “strategic autonomy”: The EU in an evolving geopolitical environment*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) (2020).

³⁶⁰ See the works of Malthe Mikkel Munkøe, *Strategic Approach to Mitigating Europe's Critical Dependencies: Aligning Economic Security Instruments with the Criticality of Supply Chains*, Intereconomics (2026); Elvire Fabry and Andreas Veskoukis, *Strategic Autonomy in Post-Covid Trade Policy: How Far Should We Politicise Supply Chains?*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) (2021); Elvire Fabry, *Leveraging trade policy for the EU's strategic autonomy*, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) (2022).

greater European autonomy should be prioritized: high strategic importance, significant current external dependency and realistic potential for European development.

In other words, the literature on critical dependencies suggest that European efforts towards greater strategic autonomy should focus on developing sufficient autonomous capabilities particularly in those sectors where external dependence creates the greatest vulnerabilities, while concentrating its resources on capabilities that can realistically be developed collectively. In this way, in the event of a deterioration in transatlantic political relations, Washington cannot use that dependence as a means of exerting pressure and it will be possible for the European Union not only to say “no” to its partner, but also to really take action even when US is unwilling or unable to do so.

Following the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine and the resulting spotlight on the shortcomings of European defence, a number of reports have attempted to highlight specifically which critical sectors are in the most urgent need of support, through capacity-building and the realisation of economies of scale. For instance, the report “*Strategic autonomy and European competitiveness: Security now comes first*” requested by the ECON Committee³⁶¹, seeks to identify the sectors in which action should be taken and the order of priority. The main logical approach followed by the authors is that security must take precedence over competitiveness. Among the priority areas identified are defence production, intelligence and surveillance, critical technologies, space and cyber capabilities, alongside critical raw materials and energy security. The report therefore reinforces the idea that European autonomy cannot be achieved uniformly across all sectors but requires prioritisation of those areas in which dependencies are particularly consequential.

Moreover, key areas also include the critical raw material sector, or which the EU should implement the Critical Raw Materials Act³⁶² and establish a European platform to aggregate demand, and the energy sector. The latter is particularly significant, as it is

³⁶¹ See the report at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2025/764371/ECTI_STU\(2025\)764371_EN.pdf#:~:text=Escalating%20security%20threats%20have%20revealed%20defence%20dependencies%20that,E%20must%20increase%20military%20and%20economic%20autonomy%20further.](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2025/764371/ECTI_STU(2025)764371_EN.pdf#:~:text=Escalating%20security%20threats%20have%20revealed%20defence%20dependencies%20that,E%20must%20increase%20military%20and%20economic%20autonomy%20further.)

³⁶² European Commission, European Critical Raw Materials Act, https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/green-deal-industrial-plan/european-critical-raw-materials-act_en.

linked not only to the issue of energy dependence on other countries, but also to the fact that high energy costs undermine the competitiveness of European industry itself³⁶³.

This approach is not merely theoretical. The EU's most recent defence-industrial initiatives increasingly reflect the logic of prioritising selected capability areas in which collective European action can address critical gaps. In July 2026, the Commission proposed five major cross-border defence projects, known as the European Defence Projects of Common Interest (EDPCIs)³⁶⁴, “to help EU countries strengthen their defence capabilities by developing key military systems together”³⁶⁵. The new projects provide a framework for EU countries to work together on major defence initiatives that are too large or too complex for individual countries to develop on their own. By supporting long-term cooperation, they aim to strengthen Europe's defence industry and improve the EU's ability to respond to shared security challenges, in line with NATO capability priorities³⁶⁶. These projects include drones and counter-drone systems, maritime and seabed defence, space, air and missile defence, and, lastly, strengthening security along the EU's Eastern Flank. In this way, European strategic autonomy is not seen as a separation between the two sides of the Atlantic, but as a form of “European insurance”.

Following this concept, authors³⁶⁷ stressed the importance of idea of “Europeanization” of the NATO, meaning gradually increasing the influence of Member States within the Alliance. The Western Balkans provide a concrete example of this approach. As Bojana Zorić argues, the uncertainty surrounding future US engagement in the region makes it increasingly important for the Union to strengthen its capacity³⁶⁸. In particular, the author underlines that reinforcing EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina³⁶⁹ and preparing

³⁶³ See the report at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2025/764371/ECTI_STU\(2025\)764371_EN.pdf#:~:text=Escalating%20security%20threats%20have%20revealed%20defence%20dependencies%20that,E%20must%20increase%20military%20and%20economic%20autonomy%20further](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2025/764371/ECTI_STU(2025)764371_EN.pdf#:~:text=Escalating%20security%20threats%20have%20revealed%20defence%20dependencies%20that,E%20must%20increase%20military%20and%20economic%20autonomy%20further).

³⁶⁴ See more at https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/edip-forging-europes-defence_en#european-defence-projects-of-common-interest.

³⁶⁵ Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space, *Commission proposes five joint defence projects to strengthen Europe's industrial capabilities*, European Commission Official Website (2026).

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ See the works of Bojana Zorić, Barbara Lippert e Stefan Mair, Cecilia Navarra and Lenka Jančová.

³⁶⁸ Bojana Zorić, *Testing continuity: The Western Balkans at the margins of transatlantic (dis)engagement*, European Union Institute for Security Studies (2025).

³⁶⁹ EUFOR Althea is an operative mission that began on 2 December 2004 under a United Nations mandate, with the aim of supporting the training of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina to bring them into line with NATO standards, and of helping to create a secure environment in Bosnia and Herzegovina with a view to stabilising the country. See more at <https://www.euforbih.org/index.php/en/background>.

to eventually replace the US forces within the NATO-led KFOR mission in Kosovo³⁷⁰ would allow European actors to assume greater responsibility, without necessarily withdraw from existing transatlantic structures³⁷¹.

To conclude, it is possible to outline three possible trajectories for the future transatlantic relationship³⁷². The first scenario is characterized by the return of a pro-EU American leader, according to which the Union should take advantage of the resumption of cooperation to build European capacity, rather than reverting to the previous state of dependence. The second one, sees the United States remains in NATO and continues to cooperate with Europe, but basing this collaboration on a “quid pro quo” approach³⁷³. In this case, Europe should focus its efforts on obtaining a greater burden-sharing and a more balancing of powers with the US.

The last scenario, the most challenging, involves a significant decline in the American involvement in the security of the Union and its neighbourhood. In such a problematic situation, the European Union must be able to assume a much greater share of its own security. A possible US withdrawal, in fact, should never leave Europe unable to defend itself or to respond to a crisis.

The crucial point is that the optimal European response does not fundamentally change across these trajectories, showing that greater EU capacity is beneficial under all the possibilities. Strategic autonomy should therefore be understood not as an attempt to replace the United States, but as a broader matter of European responsibility.

Following this approach, the question of strategic autonomy extends beyond Europe’s internal capabilities to the way in which the EU manages its external dependencies. Reducing vulnerability to change in US strategic priorities may therefore require not only

³⁷⁰ KFOR is a NATO-led international peacekeeping military force in Kosovo founded in 1999, with the aim of building a secure environment and guaranteeing the freedom of movement through all Kosovo territory for all citizens, irrespective of their ethnic origins. See more at <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/operations-and-missions/natos-role-in-kosovo>.

³⁷¹ Bojana Zorić, *Testing continuity: The Western Balkans at the margins of transatlantic (dis)engagement*, European Union Institute for Security Studies (2025).

³⁷² See also the work of Barbara Lippert and Stefan Mair, *With, Without, Against Washington: Redefining Europe’s Relations With the United States*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) (2026).

³⁷³ Meaning “this for that”, it refers to an exchange of goods or services for other goods or services. Source Britannica Website, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/What-Is-a-Quid-Pro-Quo-and-Is-It-Always-Bad>.

strengthening European capabilities in critical sectors, but also diversifying the Union's external partnerships.

2. Beyond the transatlantic framework: Indo-Pacific partnership and the role of middle powers

2.1 – The Indo-Pacific as an emerging security partner

The contemporary international environment is increasingly characterized by growing interconnections across geographical and political boundaries. Advances in communication, technology and the easier circulation of information have contributed to reducing the relevance of geographical distance, allowing states to become increasingly aware of, and affected by, developments occurring beyond their immediate borders. This growing interconnectedness, together with the evolution of the recent geopolitical scenario, has transformed the way international security is understood, encouraging states to look beyond their traditional regional environments and to consider how developments in distant theatres may affect their own strategic interests. This evolution is particularly evident in the relationship between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions.

Since the end of the Second World War, European security has been primarily understood within the geographical boundaries of the Euro-Atlantic area, with NATO and the protective guarantees provided by the United States at its core. However, the evolving international security environment has increasingly brought the Indo-Pacific region into the European strategic debate, despite its considerable geographical distance.

This renewed interest comes as no surprise to many scholars³⁷⁴. In the last decades this region has emerged as the centre of gravity of global military competition, economic growth, and technological innovation. For many experts whatever happens in the Indo-Pacific is likely to have a pervasive impact on the structure and future of international order³⁷⁵.

³⁷⁴ See the works of Gorana Grgić (2025), Céline Pajon and Eva Pejsova (2021), Phillip Shetler-Jones and Michito Tsuruoka (2023), Giulio Pugliese (2021; 2023).

³⁷⁵ Céline Pajon, Jagannath Panda, Eva Pejsova et al., *Centre Of Gravity: Security And Defence In The Indo-Pacific – What Role For The European Union?*, Brussels School of Governance (CSDS) (2022).

The relevance of the Indo-Pacific for the EU is particularly evident in maritime, economic and technological dimensions of security. The region includes some of the world's most important maritime routes and strategic chokepoints, including the Strait of Malacca and the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea³⁷⁶. Given that most of the EU's external trade is transported by sea, the protection of freedom of navigation and the security of maritime trade routes are directly relevant not only to nearby countries but also to European economies³⁷⁷.

In addition, the war in Ukraine shows that Indo-Pacific actors can have a relevant impact on European security dynamics. This was demonstrated, for instance, by the support supplied by states such as Australia, Japan and South Korea, that not only provided military, financial, and humanitarian aid, but they also decide to joint European countries in the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia³⁷⁸. The interconnectedness was also proven through China's support for Moscow and North Korea's deployment of troops on European soil³⁷⁹³⁸⁰. The war therefore provided concrete evidence that a conflict within the Euro-Atlantic area could generate significant political, economic and military consequences involving actors located thousands of kilometres away.

Nevertheless, even prior the full invasion of Russia in 2022, security cooperation between the two regions already existed, as various European countries had begun to identifying China as a security challenge and acknowledging the urgency of addressing global threats like climate change and cyber warfare. Consequently, the European Union's idea was to deepen strategic partnerships with like-minded Indo-Pacific states, and this intensified cooperation between the two regions reflects a broader realignment in global security strategies³⁸¹. Therefore, Russia's aggression of Ukraine can be considered more as a

³⁷⁶ For instance, the Strait of Malacca, a critical shipping route because it is the shortest sea route between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, it represents one of the most heavily travelled shipping channels globally, it links major Asian trade hubs like China, India, Malaysia, and Singapore; the Taiwan Strait, separating the island of Taiwan and mainland Asia, that connects the South China Sea to the south, and the East China Sea to the north. Source *Britannica Official Website*.

³⁷⁷ European Parliament Official Website, *REPORT on the EU and the security challenges in the Indo-Pacific* (2022). See the report at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022IP0224>.

³⁷⁸ Gorana Grgić, *Bridges across regions: the effects of Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific cooperation on European security architectures*, International Politics (2025).

³⁷⁹ Jacob Mardell, *Europe's Indo-Pacific security gap: A new dataset on the EU coordination deficit*, Böll EU Brief (2026).

³⁸⁰ See also NATO Official Website, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2024/11/06/north-korean-troops-in-europe-marks-turning-point>.

³⁸¹ European Commission, *The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council (2021).

factor that has reinforced this pre-existing process of increasing partnership and has reinforced the perception of interconnection among the two regions³⁸².

As previously explained in point 1.1 of this Chapter, one of the most important objectives that the Unions should achieve in the short and medium-term is to reduce its vulnerability to changes in US strategic priorities by focusing on limiting its dependence on American capabilities. To reach that, one of the options available to the EU is to diversify its external partnerships, including in the fields of defence and supply chains, in order to not be dependent on a single foreign actor.

In line with this approach, the European Union has already developed a strategy for cooperation with the region, the *EU Indo-Pacific Strategy*³⁸³, with the aim of fostering dialogue and joint activities to further strengthening the Indo-Pacific partnership in the field of security. According to the Strategy, “*By working closely with Indo-Pacific nations, the EU aims to address global challenges and reinforce stability, security, and shared prosperity in the region.*”

However, while the European Union is increasingly investing in diversification strategies by concluding agreements with new actors, it is also true that greater diversification does not necessarily translate into greater strategic autonomy. The author Riccardo Alcaro analyses the paradox at the basis of the European process towards deeper strategic autonomy: the European Union is seeking to reduce its external dependencies and to acquire a greater capacity to act autonomously, yet many of the instruments through which it pursues this objective may, on the contrary, create new forms of dependency³⁸⁴.

In his paper, he explicitly underlines the core principle of his analysis, that is having diversified strategies can reduce vulnerabilities without eliminating dependency³⁸⁵. In other words, he calls into question the notion that lowering a dependency, in this case toward the US, automatically results in a higher degree of European autonomy. Diversifying Europe’s external partnership, including with Indo-Pacific countries, may therefore redistribute rather than eliminate its reliance on external actors.

³⁸² Gorana Grgić, *Bridges across regions: the effects of Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific cooperation on European security architectures*, International Politics (2025).

³⁸³ See the Strategy at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eu-indo-pacific-strategy-topic_en.

³⁸⁴ Riccardo Alcaro, *Running in Circles: How Europe’s Quest for Autonomy Creates New Dependencies*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) (2026).

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

Consequently, the main issue highlighted by Alcaro is that the European Union risks to move from one historic external dependency, the US, to a wider network of dependencies, without being able to develop the autonomous capabilities required to act independently³⁸⁶.

To conclude, following Alcaro's analysis, European autonomy should therefore not be understood as the achievement of complete "self-sufficiency", but rather as the reduction of its strategic vulnerabilities arising from excessive external dependencies and the development of sufficient European capabilities to act when necessary.

2.2 – Middle powers as strategic partners

As discussed in detail in the previous paragraph, in order to avoid being completely attached to just one partner, the European Union should therefore forge new partnerships with countries who share a similar mindset and comparable values. In particular, a key category that could prove strategically useful to the Union, appears to be that of "middle powers".

Defining this category is not an easy task. For decades theorists have attempted to theorise the social structure of the international system from the perspective of this group of actors³⁸⁷. Despite scholars frequently label various important and influential states as "middle powers" in world politics, almost all academic analyses of this concept criticize the lack of progress in identifying a clear set of dispositional characteristics or behaviour that distinguish middle powers as a class or category of actors³⁸⁸.

For the purposes of this thesis, the definition that it is considered for the analysis sees "middle powers" as sovereign states which do not possess the capacity or strength to assert themselves unconditionally in the international system in the same way as great powers, such as the US and China, but which nevertheless hold sufficient resources to shape international events. Giacomello and Veerbeek emphasise that middle-power status cannot be defined solely in material terms, but is also socially constructed through the way states perceive their own international role and how this role is recognised by

³⁸⁶ Riccardo Alcaro, *Running in Circles: How Europe's Quest for Autonomy Creates New Dependencies*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) (2026).

³⁸⁷ John de Bhal, *Rethinking "middle powers" as a category of practice: stratification, ambiguity, and power*, Cambridge University Press (2023).

³⁸⁸ See the works of Gabriele Abbondanza, John de Bhal, Meltem Müftüler Baç.

others³⁸⁹. Building on this notion, Sung Chul Jung and Jaehyon Lee affirmed that “*middle powers are in a position to either foster cooperation among major powers or exacerbate tensions between them*”, suggesting that this category could epitomize a new form of potential Thucydides’ trap³⁹⁰.

Consequently, the power held by this group of countries, even if not comparable with the one of superpowers, can have huge impact in geopolitical situations and can largely contribute to managing international security. For this reason, they play an important role in EU’s quest for a greater diversification of collaborations and European actors have increasingly acted on this logic. In fact, between the EU’s 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy³⁹¹ and the fourth Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum in November 2025³⁹², European security engagement in the region moved from aspiration to something more tangible³⁹³. In 2024, the EU translated the previous framework language into more concrete security arrangements with the signature with Japan and South Korea of the Security and Defence Partnerships (SDPs)³⁹⁴, followed by India and Australia in early 2026³⁹⁵.

It is no coincidence that the European Union has chosen to enter into important agreements with these states. Australia, India, Japan and South Korea are extremely relevant not only because of their strategic maritime positions, but also because they perceive the balance of power vis-à-vis China as the most critical and effective way to sustain order in the Indo-Pacific³⁹⁶. In fact, although these countries differ from one another in many respects, what they essentially have in common is their shared vision of

³⁸⁹ Giampiero Giacomelli and Bertjan Verbeek, *Introduction: Middle Powers as the Ugly Ducklings of International Relations Theory*, ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD (2020).

³⁹⁰ Gabriele Abbondanza, *Whither the Indo-Pacific? Middle power strategies from Australia, South Korea and Indonesia*, Oxford University Press (2022).

³⁹¹ See the document at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7914-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

³⁹² See more at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-indo-pacific-ministerial-forum-brussels-20-21-november-2025-%E2%80%9Cbuilding-together-resilient_en.

³⁹³ Jacob Mardell, *Europe’s Indo-Pacific security gap: A new dataset on the EU coordination deficit*, Böll EU Brief (2026).

³⁹⁴ Security and Defence Partnerships (SDPs) are non-binding political instruments that frame tailored dialogue and cooperation with key bilateral partners. Source: European Union External Action Official Website, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-security-and-defence-partnerships_en#:~:text=Security%20and%20Defence%20Partnerships%20%28SDPs%29%20are%20non-binding%20political,tailored%20dialogue%20and%20cooperation%20with%20key%20bilateral%20partners.

³⁹⁵ Jacob Mardell, *Europe’s Indo-Pacific security gap: A new dataset on the EU coordination deficit*, Böll EU Brief (2026).

³⁹⁶ Richard Ghiasy, Julie Yu-Wen Chen and Jagannath Panda, *Fostering Order In The Indo-Pacific: What the EU Can Learn From and Do With Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam*, Institute for Security and Development Policy (2025).

the interpretation of order. They all agree that the ideal situation for their region is characterized by a stable, free and open rules-based Indo-Pacific, that facilitates economic integration and, in parallel, that excludes anyone's unilateral actions³⁹⁷.

Clearly, each of these four countries has its own political, economic and technological characteristics. For this reason, some scholars argue that the development of European security could benefit not so much from a single, large alliance with these regions, but rather from flexible, multi-level networks of cooperation, based on the areas of excellence of individual states.

For instance, the SDP with Japan represents a useful alliance in the fields of maritime security, cybersecurity and digital connectivity, providing Europe with a technologically advanced and strategically aligned partner³⁹⁸. South Korea, on the other hand, could be a precious ally because of its advanced defence industry and its shipbuilding capabilities³⁹⁹.

The partnership with Australia offers the EU an opportunity to diversify its foreign and defence policy engagement, while providing Australia with access to European defence procurement and industrial initiatives⁴⁰⁰. This collaboration is extremely valuable for the Union also due to its interest in better understanding China's strategic behaviour, since Australia has deep knowledge on issues such as defence and maritime security developments in the South China Sea and around Taiwan, and domestic resilience against foreign interferences⁴⁰¹.

The case of India, however, is more peculiar. The state, in fact, cannot be directly classified as "like-minded partner", also due to its ambition to become a new great power in the international arena. However, since partnership does not necessarily require complete political alignment, Brussels and New Delhi could mutually benefit in the fields of maritime cooperation and security dialogue⁴⁰².

³⁹⁷ Ibid p. 89.

³⁹⁸ Elena Atanassova-Cornelis and Eva Pejsova, *The EU-Japan security cooperation in defence of the liberal international order: achievements and limitations*, Springer Nature (2025).

³⁹⁹ Tae Hyun Oh, *유럽 방위산업 강화 전략과 한-EU 협력방안* (Strategy for Strengthening European Defence Industry and Policy Recommendations for Korea-EU Cooperation), Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (2026).

⁴⁰⁰ Bart Hogeveen, *The EU-Australia security and defence agreement: Not a pact but a partnership*, JSTOR (2026).

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² Agnieszka Kuszewska-Bohnert, *India In The European Union Foreign And Security Policy.Strategic Opportunities, Structural Constrains And Political Ambiguities*, Jagiellonian University, Kraków and UNISCI Journal (2026).

Moreover, these states represent all important trading partners for the EU since, as a whole, almost 25 percentual point of total European exports go to these territories⁴⁰³.

To conclude, it is interesting to investigate the perceptions that these countries have regarding the European Union. The paper of Ghiasy, Chen and Panda suggests that the four Indo-Pacific states have generally a positive stance of EU's presence in the region, especially when it comes to the economy or sustainability topics⁴⁰⁴. On the contrary, the main weakness that these countries recognise in the European Union concerns precisely its ability to act in the field of security and defence⁴⁰⁵. The EU appears to not be regarded as a particularly credible actor in this field and the main reason is that, since it is not a single sovereign state, the different strategic objectives and opinions between the Members does not only create problems inside the Union, but makes it appear as a less reliable actor⁴⁰⁶.

However, it is important to highlight that this lack of credibility does not necessarily mean there is no European military presence in the region. On the contrary, Member States such as France and Italy have confirmed their military ties with the Indo-Pacific⁴⁰⁷, similarly to Germany, the Netherlands and, more recently, Spain that have carried out significant naval deployments often in collaboration with partners of the region⁴⁰⁸.

Consequently, the problem of the perception of the European Union as a not reliable actor, is a matter of the Union as a whole and not linked with its single members.

⁴⁰³ Nicholas Ross Smith and Martin Holland, *The European Union in the Indo-Pacific: Gauging the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy Across Eight Indo-Pacific Locations*, Wiley Online (2026).

⁴⁰⁴ Richard Ghiasy, Julie Yu-Wen Chen and Jagannath Panda, *Fostering Order In The Indo-Pacific: What the EU Can Learn From and Do With Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam*, Institute for Security and Development Policy (2025).

⁴⁰⁵ Nicholas Ross Smith and Martin Holland, *The European Union in the Indo-Pacific: Gauging the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy Across Eight Indo-Pacific Locations*, Wiley Online (2026).

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ See more at <https://frstrategie.org/en/publications/fiches-indo-pacifique/n4-military-presence-defence-diplomacy> and <https://cimsec.org/on-wider-seas-italian-naval-deployments-and-maritime-outreach-to-the-indo-pacific/>.

⁴⁰⁸ See more at <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/12/german-navy-wraps-indopacific-deployment-a-naval-news-assessment/#:~:text=Berlin-class%20supply%20ship%20Frankfurt%20am%20Main%20and%20F125,environment%20meanwhile%20casts%20shadows%20over%20stated%20political%20ambitions,>
<https://swzmaritime.nl/news/2026/02/24/dutch-naval-vessel-de-ruyter-to-deploy-to-indo-pacific/#:~:text=HNLMS%20De%20Ruyter%20will%20depart%20in%20mid-April%20for,and%20command%20frigate%20will%20call%20at%20several%20ports.> and
<https://seawaves.com/spain-strengthens-maritime-cooperation-with-indo-pacific/#:~:text=From%20October%2030%20to%20November%207%20C%20the%20Chief,strengthenin g%20naval%20cooperation%20and%20promoting%20international%20maritime%20security.>

CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to assess to what extent current European initiatives and defence cooperation can provide the foundations for a greater EU strategic autonomy, and in which operational areas such cooperation appears to be more realistic.

In order to answer this question, the analysis has highlighted two different tensions affecting the Union. The first one concerns the external pressures that, due to the current international context, pushes Europe towards greater strategic responsibility and the development of its own autonomous capacities. The second one, that represents the internal constraints, has shown that European institutional and structural weaknesses are slowing down the progresses towards this goal.

In the last few years, the developments in the international arenas have effectively accelerated certain forms of cooperation among member States, demonstrating, to some extent, that a number of instruments for more coordinated European action are already in place. However, the establishment of an autonomous European capacity across the defence sector as a whole remains hampered by political, institutional and industrial fragmentation.

As illustrated by the Singaporean model, defence effectiveness depends not only on the number of resources available, but on the ability to translate these resources into coherent, coordinated and rapidly deployable capabilities. The crucial issue for the European Union is therefore not merely whether it possesses the instruments and financial resources to become a stronger security actor, but rather whether it has the political capacity and willingness to use them collectively. In other words, Europe's strategic ambition is growing faster than its capacity for collective action.

At the same time, the analysis conducted in Chapter 1 it has shown how, historically speaking, European security has always been largely anchored to American power and how this vulnerable relationship cannot longer be assumed. This does not, however, imply that the European Union should seek complete independence from the United States. Indeed, the thesis has demonstrated that interdependence should not necessarily be regarded as negative. NATO, US capabilities, as well as transatlantic cooperation remain essential components of European security and defence.

Therefore, the central problem is not “interdependence” itself, but rather an unbalanced and strategically vulnerable version of it. European members should consequently still aim to reach greater autonomy selectively, focusing on areas where strategic importance, existing external dependencies and realistic European capacity to develop overlap. As demonstrated in the cases of sectors such as ammunition, air and missile defence, drones and cyber capabilities, this approach appears more realistic than attempting to achieve autonomy across the entire defence domain.

However, the development of additional capabilities alone will not automatically translate into greater strategic autonomy. Greater European capabilities should proceed in parallel with continued transatlantic cooperation and the diversification of external partnership, including with Indo-Pacific partners. Such an approach would allow the EU to reduce excessive dependence on any single external actor without abandoning a cooperative structure.

In conclusion, the European Union’s strategic autonomy should not be understood as the pursuit of self-sufficiency, but as the ability to remain secure and capable of acting when external support becomes uncertain. Uncertainty regarding the future US engagement represents a structural factor, while the need for EU to develop its own capabilities remains valid regardless of which administration occupies the White House. The ultimate objective is therefore not to replace the United States, but to ensure that European security is no longer entirely contingent upon the strategic choices of any single external power. This is not simply a question of autonomy, but a matter of European responsibility.

Ultimately, the analysis of this work presents some limitations that open avenues for further research. A systematic historical comparison of different phases of European strategic cooperation and dependence on the United States falls beyond the scope of this thesis. Moreover, while selected cases illustrate the development of European defence cooperation, a broader empirical analysis would be needed to assess whether these initiatives have effectively reduced external dependencies and strengthened European capacity to act. Future research could therefore combine a longer-term comparative perspective with more extensive empirical evidence.

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