

Europe at war and European defence: the same as ever?

Félix Arteaga | Investigador principal, Real Instituto Elcano

Theme

There have never been so many reasons for putting European defence on a collective footing: wars in Europe and adjoining territories, risks of escalation, geopolitical confrontation and a change of presidency in the US. The new European Parliament can choose to seize the moment and make great strides towards common defence or continue in the same vein as always, taking baby steps.

Summary

Europe is at war, a long and expensive war of attrition. Russia has seized the initiative in [Ukraine](#), has placed its economy on a war footing and can rely on the help of 'decisive facilitators' such as China and North Korea to sustain long-term conventional warfare. Moreover, it is perpetrating all manner of hybrid attacks against the EU, its member states and its [allies in NATO](#), including coercion, sabotage, subversion, disinformation, immigration and cyberattacks.¹ In response, the EU and its member states are providing economic and military aid to Ukraine and preparing for what may lie in store: increasing their defence budgets, recruiting new soldiers and stepping up their production of equipment and munitions, although they do so under US leadership and the coordination of NATO, a subordination that may fare badly if there is a change of Administration in the White House or the conflicts in Taiwan or Israel escalate. The assessment of what needs to be done with European defence varies depending upon whether the focus is placed on the steps being taken (glass half full) or emphasis is placed on what is needed (glass half empty). But unless this scenario of pressing needs is used to remove the obstacles to common defence, European defence seems destined to follow the same path as always: beset by small advances and no single great leap forward.

Analysis²

In the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam, the EU agreed to establish a common defence policy that could lead to common defence if the European Council so decided (art. 42.2 TEU). Since then, the European partners have taken defence decisions jointly, but without pooling their defence. Europeans have exhibited more differences than haste in taking control of their own defence, even when this was restricted to the management of low-intensity crises, defence budgets could be trimmed and the EU was content with being a regulatory power. Now that a military threat has returned to Europe, requiring enlarged

¹ European Council, doc. EUCO/17 dated 27 June with conclusions about Ukraine, p. 1; North Atlantic Council, 'Russian hybrid activities', 2/V/2025.

² The formulation of this analysis drew on the inestimable collaboration of Daniel Fiott.

forces and greater budgets, and powers have a more geopolitical outlook than ever, European states face the dilemma of using the situation to prepare their defences individually or taking more decisive steps towards common defence.

Europe is at war and a Russian victory in Ukraine would have extremely adverse effects for the future of the EU, which would be even greater were it not for its US allies.³ The dilemma that the strategic situation gives allied and European armed forces is not only that of preparing for a war but also of being capable of fighting –and therefore deterring– for such time as may prove necessary. To this end, as well as deploying forces and intensifying their level of readiness as they have been doing up until now, Western countries need to face up to structural changes in their military stance, their defence industry capabilities and their resilience as long as the Russian military threat persists. They need first to transform their defence policies to increase their national strategic autonomy and, secondly, to find synergies and economies of scale with their allies to enable NATO or the EU to enhance their deterrence and defence capabilities against Russia. If they do the former, they will be preparing themselves to a greater or lesser extent for war individually, but if the latter they will preparing their collective defence.

Europe needs to be capable of deterring Russia on a conventional scale: having more deployed forces, greater GDP, higher defence spending and a greater share of worldwide arms exports. However, it lacks sufficient strategic autonomy to do so and continues relying on its NATO allies for its defence, mainly the US. The [strategic autonomy of defence](#) comprises three components: the political, the operational and the industrial, and to enable the EU to have the autonomy of a global strategic actor, its common defence will need access to all three in abundance. As will become apparent below, the EU has made more progress towards its industrial than towards its operational and political autonomy. War and the need to prepare for it opens up a window of opportunity for European defence, and the obstacles that have hampered its progress will need to be dismantled if European defence is to avoid its continued reliance on others, even if they are allies and trustworthy.

1. The industrial component of European defence

The war in Ukraine has exposed the limitations of European countries' industrial policies.⁴ They have reduced their industrial capacity in a disjointed manner, opted out of European cooperative projects, invested little in research, resorted to non-European suppliers and prioritised national over collective capabilities, meaning that they are the ones responsible for the fragmentation of the industrial sector and the inability of national industries to provide aid to Ukraine, replenish inventories and scale up production to meet Europe's deterrence and defence needs. Their delay in meeting the agreed spending targets has deprived the EU's Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) of approximately €1,770 billion from the 2% of GDP target and €425 billion from

³ Carl Bildt, Nathalie Tochi, Robin Niblett et al. (2024), 'Europe alone', *Foreign Policy*, 1/VII/2024; European Parliamentary Research Service (2024), 'What think tanks are thinking on European defence, strategic autonomy and NATO', 23/II/2024; and Camille Grand (2024), 'Defending Europe with less America', European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), *Policy Brief*, 3/VII/2024.

⁴ Jean-Charles Larsonneur & Jean-Louis Thiériot (2024), 'L'industrie de défense, pourvoyeuse d'autonomie stratégique en Europe?', Assemblée Nationale, *Raport d'information*, nr 2625, 15/V/2024.

the 20% in investments, almost 80% of their purchases are made outside the EU and new foreign suppliers are entering the European market. Added to this deterioration in the EDTIB highlighted by the European Commission in its latest report, there is also the problem of lengthening delivery timeframes, the insecurity of supply chains and the lack of interoperability between equipment.⁵

The European Commission has taken small steps that have enabled member states, within their Single Market industrial competences, to stimulate, fund and rationalise the EDTIB.⁶ It has created management structures (DG DEFIS), EU funds (MFF) and incentives for industrial cooperation (EDF, Horizon Europe), and in the wake of the lessons learnt in Ukraine has launched some new instruments for joint procurement (EDIRPA) and for the production of munition (ASAP), along with other, more transformative measures that could enhance the industrial autonomy of European defence, such as the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) and the European Defence Industrial Programme (EDIP). There are proposals to facilitate joint purchases, establish reserves, develop programmes of interest and accelerate the transformation of supply chains, among others, which are not shared by all industrial countries.⁷

However, the Commission lacks the ability to impose its priorities and programmes on member states that put their national plans ahead of those developed jointly within the Capabilities Development Plan (CDP), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) or the 'binding' commitments of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). There are therefore minimal prospects of the new Commission being able to meet its targets for the next European legislative term: increasing the European Defence Fund, creating a Single Market for Defence or developing common air defence or cyber defence systems,⁸ unless the member states accept binding commitments or the Commission can offer major economic incentives.

Rather than proceeding by small steps, European defence could advance with longer strides such as those recently put forward by Enrico Letta and Mario Draghi to provide the EU with greater cohesion, resilience and global influence, making headway both in terms of its political integration and in the efficacy of its governance. Funding the leap towards integration in defence proposed by Enrico Letta requires the establishment of new funding instruments, in quantity and quality, such as offering a unique instrument covering the entire lifecycle of equipment, lines of credit with conditions similar to those that were established for the European Stability Mechanism during the pandemic or overcoming the European Investment Bank's dual use limits to invest in defence.⁹

⁵ DG DEFIS, Addenda C (2024) 4822 to the COM (2024)150 proposal to establish the European Defence Industrial Policy (EDIP), 8/VII/2024.

⁶ From the first pilot project in 2016 (€1.4 million) to the Preparatory Action on Defence Research in 2017 (PADR, €90 million), the European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP, €500 million) to the European Defence Fund (EDF, €8 billion) under the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027. European Parliament (2023), 'Budgetary aspects of EU defence policy', EP 752.384, July.

⁷ Daniel Fiott (2024), '¿Más allá de la estrategia? Estrategia industrial y futuro de la defensa europea', Elcano Royal Institute, ARI, nr 58/2024, 9/V/2024; and Félix Arteaga (2024), 'La Estrategia Industrial de Defensa de la UE: señalar la luna, mirar el dedo', Elcano Royal Institute, *Commentary*, 12/III/2024.

⁸ Ursula von der Leyen (2024), Speech to the European Parliament, 18/VII/2024.

⁹ Enrico Letta (2024), 'Much more than a market', April, pp. 73-75.

Industrial policy also requires the radical change that Mario Draghi is calling for: increasing joint procurement, the interoperability of equipment and coordinating investments to reduce dependencies and enhance economies of scale.¹⁰

It is difficult for European countries to meet all their defence commitments and needs without putting themselves on a war economy footing.¹¹ It is not only a case of increasing the budgets necessary to meet the new commitments but also of adapting production capabilities to the demands of high-intensity and long drawn-out conflicts.¹² Increasing the preparedness of combat units, replenishing stocks, providing aid, recruiting personnel and strengthening strategic autonomy require planning and sustainability models for times of war. According to the president of the Commission, an extra €500 billion will be needed over the next 10 years, funds that will not be able to come either from member states' additional contributions or from issuing Eurobonds, due to the opposition of the frugal countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, among others.¹³ Nor is it likely to be easy to assemble the €100 billion requested by the former commissioner Bretton, but it is clear that the current EU funds –€1.8 billion for defence in 2025– or the interest from frozen Russian assets are no match for the declared level of ambition with regard to autonomy.

The widespread raising of budgets towards 2% –whenever it is achieved, because real budgets do not always coincide with what is announced–,¹⁴ serves as a means of remedying the deteriorated baseline of 2014, but not of confronting the situation of forthcoming years. The sustainability of efforts depends on the economic prospects of the European allies, and some, such as Belgium, Spain and Italy, followed by Sweden and France, start from a situation characterised by reduced defence spending and difficulties in increasing public debt, increasing taxes or reducing social expenditure.¹⁵ Most of the major military powers, such as France, Italy, Poland and Belgium, will exceed the 3% deficit target in 2024 while others such as Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Belgium have a ratio of debt to GDP greater than 60%, which impedes their budgetary efforts.¹⁶ Economic aid to private companies, similar to that established by the US in the [Defense Production Act](#), and long-term planning could enhance sustainability, but even countries like France that have long-term funding models, and have increased annual budgets (from €47 billion in 2024 to €67 billion in 2030) have had to postpone the meeting of targets to the long term (from 2030 to 2035) to accommodate short-term objectives.

¹⁰ Mario Draghi (2024), 'Radical change is what is needed', Groupe d'Études Géopolitiques, 16/IV/2024.

¹¹ Antoaneta Roussi (2023), 'EU industry chief: we need to switch to "war economy mode"', *Politico*, 11/V/2023.

¹² B. Barry *et al.* (2023), 'The future of NATO's European land forces: plans, challenges, prospects', IISS, June, p. 6.

¹³ Aurélie Pugnet (2024), 'EU's von der Leyen assesses bloc's defence needs to €500 billion', *Euractive*, 27/VI/2024.

¹⁴ Christopher F. Schuetze (2024), 'Germany promised to step up militarily. its budget says differently', *The New York Times*, 18/VII/2024.

¹⁵ Florian Dorn, Niklas Potrafke and Marcel Schlepper (2024), 'European defence spending in 2024 and beyond: how to provide security in an economically challenging environment', *Econpol Policy Brief*, nr 45, January.

¹⁶ European Commission, COM (2024)598 final, 19 June 2024 in accordance with art. 126.3 of the TFEU.

Member states can prepare themselves for the European defence future individually, as the majority do, or collectively, as the European Commission and European Defence Agency have been calling for, and although it is acknowledged that it is becoming increasingly difficult and expensive for each country to develop its own arms systems individually, European countries continue to avoid the joint development of the systems they need.¹⁷ It is reasonable that purchases made outside the Union from countries able to satisfy the urgency of demand have increased in the short term, but if the industrial and technological bases of European defence are not integrated it will be difficult to attain appropriate industrial autonomy in the future. The necessary transition towards a war economy owing to the war in Ukraine may reverse this trend and facilitate European cooperation, just as the European Defence Industrial Strategy maintains. But it could also accelerate the centrifugal dispersal of the European defence market and nudge member states towards more dynamic arenas for cooperation such as NATO.¹⁸

2. The operational capacities

Adapting the structure and readiness of the armed forces to warfare of greater intensity and duration is the second challenge facing European defence policies in the coming years. After cutting troops, equipment, maintenance and large-scale manoeuvres for decades, the allies will now have to raise their levels of preparedness considerably to deter or combat forces like those that Russia is deploying on the Ukrainian front.¹⁹ This goal was not included among those mentioned in the 2020 Strategic Compass for the security and defence of the EU, and although progress has been made in the rapid deployment capability, in military mobility and in exercises, as the High Representative observes in his annual report,²⁰ the EU does not wield defence and deterrence capabilities appropriate to the current strategic situation. The creation of forces has always been a problem in European crisis management and, if it is to safeguard its territorial defence, the EU needs to have access to more and better prepared forces and larger reserves.²¹ Expanding and maintaining structures comprising larger forces collides with the EU's demographic, social and employment reality. With compulsory military service having been abandoned by most European countries, prospects for its reintroduction are remote and there is no alternative but to improve the employment and economic conditions of recruitment to compete in the labour market. Higher salaries and better professional prospects may offset the shortage of personnel and facilitate

¹⁷ Daniel Fiott, 'The challenges of defence spending in Europe', *Intereconomics*, vol. 59, nr 4, pp. 189-192.

¹⁸ In addition to the NATO Industrial Capacity Expansion Pledge, NATO has also overtaken the EU in the coordination of military aid to Ukraine with a new command in Wiesbaden, Germany; a new training centre; and a budget of US\$40 billion for 2025. Summit celebrating the 75th anniversary of NATO in Washington DC.

¹⁹ For an assessment of NATO forces' level of readiness, see Sean Monaghan *et al.* (2024), 'Is NATO ready for war?', CSIS, 11/VI/2024.

²⁰ Josep Borrell (2024), 'ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT on the Implementation of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence', March.

²¹ The EU has only 1.4 million troops in reserve, mostly in neutral countries or where there is compulsory service, compared with Russia's 1.5 million, according to figures from the IISS, 'Military Balance 2024', pp. 70-144 and 191.

mobilisation, but they are also going to swallow a major part of the new defence budgets.²²

Unlike the industrial component, the operational component has not made the progress that had been expected. PESCO, mothballed since the Treaty of Lisbon and relaunched in 2017 with the goal of generating European forces for the most demanding missions (art. 46.2 TEU), has made more progress on the industrial than on the operational side.²³ After rejecting the idea of having an expeditionary force of 60,000 soldiers, the EU can barely muster a couple of operational combat groups, which it wants to remodel to have a Rapid Deployment Capability at the level of a brigade. It also lacks strategic intelligence, command and control, air defence and in-depth attack capabilities, among others, which depend on the US. The return to territorial defence and high-intensity operations have increased the levels of availability and operational capability (readiness) expected from the units deployed on the eastern front and those that support them to enable them to take on large-scale combat missions.²⁴ With a low-profile military stance, its range limited to the EU's geographical vicinity and at the lower intensity end of the spectrum of military operations, the EU will face difficulties in providing security to third parties and will be unable to take operational responsibility either for the defence of Europe or the protection of its citizens and will therefore continue relying operationally on its US allies.

NATO by contrast *has* taken responsibility for protecting Europe with regional plans from the Baltic to the Black Sea, within its Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) concept. It has deployed eight multinational brigades to have up to 300,000 troops available in 30 days, to be reinforced by a further 500,000 if needed, with which it will be equipped in the medium term with a [new model of forces](#) backed by maritime and airborne forces. Virtually all of the former will be European and they will be assigned to a specific multinational unit and sector by rotation. The EU has been unable either to keep up with the creation of multinational units that NATO has set up or to integrate the bilateral and subregional units that European countries have developed within their strategic areas of interest within a joint defence framework.²⁵ However, European defence could take advantage of the readiness effort carried out within NATO in order to gradually dovetail European forces under a European command capable of deterring by denial.²⁶ The 'Europeanisation' of allied forces deployed in Eastern Europe, which is to say their permanence, the coverage of the entire spectrum of operations, support for

²² Raphael S. Cohen (2024), 'The return of military draft', *RAND Commentary*, 13/VIII/2024.

²³ The success of PESCO differs according to whether the number of projects (68) or those that have acquired full operating capacity are counted (European Medical Command and Rapid Cyber Response Teams). Beatriz Cortázar (2023), 'Bring back the spirit of PESCO!', *Egmont Policy Brief*, nr 308, June, p. 3.

²⁴ Rodolfo Arroyo (2023), '¿Listos para qué? Alistamiento versus readiness', Generis Publishing, pp. 23-25.

²⁵ Bence Nemeth (2024), 'Bilateralism and minilateralism are Europe's secret strengths', *War on the Rocks*, 3/VI/2024.

²⁶ Sven Biscop (2022), 'The New Force Model. NATO's European Army', *Egmont Policy Brief*, nr 285, September; and Jacopo M. Bosica (2024), 'Deterrence, defence and crisis management missions in a complex Euro-Atlantic security landscape', *Atlantic Forum*, 12/X/2024.

military mobility on the eastern border,²⁷ the gradual harmonisation of their equipment²⁸ and their command and control under a European SACEUR would enable the EU to have the structure of forces it needs to deter Russia within NATO. The NATO-EU 'dual hat' structure of the forces deployed against Russia would strengthen the visibility of the European pillar within the Alliance and the viability of an autonomous European defence. European defence requires structures of operating forces of greater calibre, and the rapid reaction units, temporal rotation and limited size of the EU's Battlegroups and the NATO Reaction Force have shown their limitations in providing security and lack deterrent capability for defence. Nor do they enable their size to be scaled up because it always proves easier to create a small expeditionary force on the basis of a robust structure of forces readied for territorial defence than the contrary.

3. The political component

The EU has exhibited a considerable capacity for reaction in response to the invasion of Ukraine, more than might have been expected in light of the aforementioned limitations. It has earmarked €17 billion from the European Peace Facility to pay for transfers of weapons and altogether has provided more than US\$160 billion in financial, military and humanitarian aid, as well as preserving its internal cohesion despite the tensions stemming from the political and economic efforts exerted.²⁹ The discrepancies between its member states on common defence remain, as does the lack of harmony in the Franco-German partnership³⁰ and the spectre of a second Donald Trump presidency hovering over transatlantic relations.³¹ As a consequence, and in the face of the military situation in which it finds itself, the EU needs to take political decisions for the transformation of European defence that cannot be attained by reactive means.

The path to be followed is unclear for several reasons, such as the fragmentation of perceptions and the gap between declarations and deeds. First, European surveys show that opinions on the situation in Ukraine vary with geographical distance –greater concern the closer one gets to the border with Russia– and with time –the concern diminishes the longer the war drags on–. For French citizens, Russia ranks sixth among the most dangerous threats, seventh for Germany and 12th for Italy, whereas concern about a Russian attack has increased in Finland (68%) and Pistorius, the German Defence Minister, believes that an attack on NATO could take place in five to eight years.³² Belief in a Ukrainian victory has fallen to 10%, half the number envisaging a Russian victory (20%), while belief in a negotiated settlement has grown (37%). European support for humanitarian aid has thus remained steady, but support for military

²⁷ Action Plan on Military Mobility 2.0, JOIN (2022) 48 final, 10/XI/2022.

²⁸ Following the concept of NATO Framework Nation as outlined by Rainer I. Glatz & Martin Zaffe (2017), 'Ambitious framework: Germany in NATO', *SWP Comments*, nr 35, September.

²⁹ European External Action Service (2024), 'EU assistance to Ukraine', April.

³⁰ Henry Foy, Leila Abboud & Guy Chazan (2023), 'Cracking French-German tandem delays EU decisions', *Financial Times*, 3/X/2023.

³¹ Arancha Gonzalez Laya *et al.* (2024), 'Trump-proofing presidency', *Foreign Affairs*, 2/II/2024.

³² Nicolas Camut (2024), 'Putin could attack in "5 to 8 years", German defense minister warns', *Politico*, 19/I/2024.

and economic aid has weakened: it remains at around 55% but has lost between eight and nine percentage points since the spring of 2022.³³

The Eurobarometers continue to reflect widespread support for the common security and defence policy (77%), for increasing cooperation (80%) and increasing defence spending (66%), but these percentages are of limited use for decision-making because the figures serve as much to endorse greater integration as to show satisfaction with the current state of affairs.³⁴ Some European countries, those nearest to the Russian border, have assimilated the existence of a war in Europe –hybrid and low-intensity, but with chances of escalating to one of high intensity– and have thus started to change their defence outlooks and structures. As some of their recent defence documents acknowledge, war is being waged in Europe on a large scale, and neither NATO’s superiority nor its unity may be taken for granted, hence the need to strengthen their national defence capabilities.³⁵ Other countries, even if it runs counter to their strategic culture, have significantly boosted their military spending, renounced neutrality or contributed with additional forces to the front-line defence against Russia, which fosters the perception that European defence is doing well because it is being reinforced.

But the progress made on the common defence policy is insufficient for securing a common defence. Despite the political agreements on restructuring forces in NATO and the EU, each country is modernising its forces in accordance with its perception of the threat and its military planning,³⁶ the decision-making processes surrounding industrial and military cooperation are lengthened by the divergences³⁷ and common defence is left, as always, pending the qualitative breakthrough and unanimity that never materialises. Meanwhile, a succession of reactive measures and proposals have sought to improve the way the common policy operates: the creation of a Defence Commissioner, although it is unclear what such a person’s ultimate competences would be; the failed attempt to convert the European Parliament’s Security and Defence subcommittee into a committee; and a long list of good intentions for European defence with neither significant nor binding changes, such as those set out in the European Council’s 2024-29 Agenda in June.³⁸

³³ European Parliament (2024), ‘Public opinion on Russia’s war against Ukraine’, DG COMM’s Public Opinion Monitoring Unit. Surveys carried out between 8 December 2023 and 21 February 2024, 23/II/2024. Results similar to those reported in survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre, ‘Views of Ukraine on UE involvement with the Russia-Ukraine war’, 8/V/2024.

³⁴ ‘Public opinion in the European Union’, *Standard Eurobarometer*, 101, Annex, April-May 2024.

³⁵ Ministry of Defence (2020), ‘Defence Vision 2035. Fighting for a safer future’, October; ‘A stronger Netherlands, a safer Europe. Investing in a robust NATO and EU’, 2022 Defence White Paper; Swedish Defence Commission (2024), ‘Report on the development of military defence’, 26/IV/2024; Extracts from the Defence of Denmark Agreement, 28/VI/2024; United Kingdom Ministry of Defence (2024), ‘New era for defence: government launches root and branch review of UK armed forces’, press release, 16/VII/2024; and Lee Ferran & Aaron Mehta (2024), ‘Ticking clock: Northern NATO defense chiefs see ever-closing “window” to prepare for Russia’, 8/VII/2024.

³⁶ European Investment Bank (EIB) (2024), ‘EU Finance Ministers set in motion EIB Group Action Plan to further step-up support for Europe’s security and defence industry’, 12/IV/2024; and Renaud Bellais & Axel Nicolas (2024), ‘Cinq années qui ont transformé la défense européenne’, Fondation Jean Jaurès, 29/IV/2024, p. 7.

³⁷ Discussions surrounding the EDIRPA joint procurement plan dragged on for a year and a half and approval of the Aspides operation took more than three months.

³⁸ Strategic Agenda 2024-2029, Conclusions of the European Council, 27/VII/2024.

Each new legislature in Brussels brings successive calls for structural changes to European defence. In her speech of July 2024, the President of the future Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, declared the moment had arrived to build a 'true' European Defence Union and to create a single market for defence.³⁹ The adjective in inverted commas reveals the dissatisfaction with European defence hitherto, which advances aimlessly step by step and with no fixed timescale. The existence of a strategic situation as pressing as the current one casts doubt on the validity of policy directives designed for the post-war era. The 2016 EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy has been rendered out of date and the Commission requires a new strategy to implement its action plans up to 2029.⁴⁰ It needs to avoid what happened in the previous legislature, when it began its term with a geopolitical focus that lacked a strategy to apply it, as Sven Biscop points out.⁴¹ Having decided what kind of global actor it seeks to be, the EU should set out when and how it would use EU force in its defence or beyond its borders. European defence needs to renew its strategic framework in order to integrate, rather than accumulate, the various sectoral strategies it has at its disposal. In addition to the aforementioned industrial strategy of the preceding legislature there is now the EU's strategy for military and civil preparedness commissioned from Finland's former President, Sauli Niinistö, and the drafting of a white paper on defence within the first 100 days of the new term, although it is not known whether this will complement or replace the prevailing Strategic Compass.

In order to move 'defence to the heart of European policies', as Josep Borrell, the EU's former High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, called for,⁴² it is not enough to continue designing a common policy, little by little. In order to accept our strategic responsibility, to defend ourselves by ourselves and to build a strong European pillar within NATO it is necessary to do so now, seizing the opportunity. To achieve this, the EU needs its member states to redefine their concept of sovereignty and to ponder which elements of their national autonomy they are prepared to renounce for the benefit of European autonomy. Without such a redefinition and structural transformations, European defence will remain as always: making small advances but no leap forward.

Conclusions

The steps to be taken

European defence must defend Europe and must also provide security to third parties as it has done up to now. For this it requires large multinational units stationed permanently in the European theatres of risk with their corresponding regional plans and means of support. In order to deter, Europe's defence needs to be upscaled, to cover the entire spectrum of the use of force and to harmonise its equipment. To be autonomous, the structure of European forces requires critical capabilities, assuming command and control of European forces and restricting the US to the role of

³⁹ Speech to the European Parliament, 18/VII/2024.

⁴⁰ Giovanni Grevi (2024), 'Power for progress: why the EU needs a New EU Global Strategy', CSDS Policy Brief, 22/VII/2024.

⁴¹ Sven Biscop (2024), 'Not another geopolitical commission, please!', *Egmont Commentaries*, 26/VI/2024.

⁴² Josep Borrell (2024), 'Three work strands to better protect Europe', 14/IV/2024.

reinforcement. In order to be credible, and ensure all member states trust its protection, European defence must provide more assurances than national defences and accept responsibility for those provided by NATO on European soil. Great strides will be taken if progress is made towards collective military structures within those of NATO, but also separately if need be.

The defence of Europe is expensive and the resources need to match the requirements of war economies. Both the EU and its member states must increase their defence spending with the same speed and decisiveness that they reduced it when the risk of war in Europe was in retreat. Any additional expenditure may be worthwhile if it is spent better and collectively. European funds should prioritise projects that alleviate European operational dependency and add value to its technological and industrial base. Large European multinational units should have European standards and equipment because interoperability helps the armed forces but does not generate economies of scale in the industrial sector. Nor will splitting investment in national systems help to sustain the competitiveness of the European industrial and technological base in the face of new competitors in the global marketplace. Funding should explore new instruments for investing in joint procurement, throughout the entire lifecycle and in order to eliminate structural shortcomings. Making strides involves affirming that spending on defence is a form of social expenditure, harnessing shared resources for acquiring capabilities and assets that alleviate European shortcomings in defence, and ensuring that European citizens understand from what and how much the EU is protecting them (just as they know that NATO and the US are doing to defend them).

The length of the steps, short or long, reveals the level of political ambition. Unless member states decide that part of their autonomy can be transferred to European defence, the latter will proceed aimlessly and with no fixed calendar. European defence needs a review of its foreign and security policy framework to be carried out, adapting it to the current geopolitical and warfare context to ascertain what type of global actor the EU wants to be. Once this has been done, it needs to regain the balance between the political, operational and industrial components of its autonomy. To this end it needs to make strides in institutional architecture, to overcome the obstacles of unanimity and the superimposition of competences, and to delve deeper into its concept of common defence, to differentiate it from the more ambiguous concept of security and defence.

Such strides do not guarantee that common defence will be achieved in the short term, but they will leave the EU better placed to secure it –and swiftly– if the most feared developments, such as the defeat of Ukraine, the withdrawal of the US or a Russian attack on the borders of the EU come to pass. Preparation consists precisely in anticipating scenarios of risk. If, on the other hand, it is thought that the above will not come to pass, and the current circumstances are squandered, European defence policy will continue along the same path as always, taking many steps, but very short ones.