



Publisher

<http://jssidoi.org/esc/home>

DISCUSSING EU'S SECURITY IDENTITY: DEFENCE SPENDING, STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND TRANSITION FROM NORMATIVE AMBITION TO GEOPOLITICAL REALITY

Radoslav Ivančík¹, Vladimír Andrassy²

¹University of the Constantine Philosopher, Faculty of Arts, Department of Philosophy and Political Science, Hodžova 1, Nitra, Slovakia

²Armed Forces Academy of General Milan Rastislav Štefánik, Demänová 393, Liptovský Mikuláš, Slovakia

E-mails:¹ rivancik@ukf.sk; ² vladimir.andrassy@aos.sk

Received 15 May 2025; accepted 31 July 2025; published 30 September 2025

Abstract. This article examines the evolving nature of the European Union's (EU) security identity, arguing that the traditional perception of the EU as a normative or civilian power is being gradually redefined in light of recent geopolitical challenges. By integrating political analysis with economic data on defence spending and military aid to Ukraine, the study highlights the Union's transition from rhetorical ambition to tangible strategic engagement. Drawing on four comparative graphs that illustrate the increase in defence expenditures, joint EU-level funding, and military assistance provided by member states, the article underscores the growing material basis of the EU's security role. It explores how initiatives aimed at strengthening strategic autonomy—such as PESCO, EDF, and the Strategic Compass—are increasingly complemented by measurable financial commitments and operational capacities. While internal divergences and external dependencies persist, the empirical evidence suggests that the EU is moving beyond symbolic declarations and toward becoming a more cohesive geopolitical actor. The article concludes by outlining key dilemmas and opportunities for the EU as it redefines its role in an era of strategic uncertainty and a dynamically evolving global and regional security environment.

Keywords: European Union; defence spending; strategic autonomy; normative ambition; geopolitical reality.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Ivančík, R., Andrassy, V. 2025. Discussing EU's Security Identity: Defence Spending, Strategic Autonomy and Transition from Normative Ambition to Geopolitical Reality. *Entrepreneurship and Sustainability Issues*, 13(1), 411-425. <http://doi.org/10.9770/c2892383535>

JEL Classifications: F50, F52, H56, P16

Additional disciplines: Political Science, Security, International Relations

1. Introduction

The contemporary international environment is undergoing a profound transformation marked by growing geopolitical instability, strategic fragmentation, and intensified rivalry between democratic and authoritarian systems. The global security architecture, once anchored in multilateralism and a rules-based order, is increasingly challenged by revisionist powers and shifting centres of influence. Within this complex and unpredictable setting, the European Union (EU) is confronted with mounting pressure to redefine its role as a global actor capable of responding to conventional, hybrid, and systemic threats.

The catalyst for this strategic re-evaluation was the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which not only destabilised the EU's immediate neighbourhood but also exposed structural vulnerabilities in its security and defence architecture. These deficiencies became evident in the form of

insufficient military readiness, strategic dependence on external actors, and the lack of an integrated response mechanism. Simultaneously, the conflict served as a critical stress test for the EU's political cohesion and defence solidarity, prompting unprecedented decisions in areas such as sanctions, arms transfers, and the mobilisation of financial resources for military support.

In response, the EU has embarked on a multidimensional shift from a primarily normative and civilian power to a more strategic and autonomous actor. This shift is reflected not only in political declarations and strategic documents but also in tangible changes in defence spending and operational engagement. According to the European Defence Agency (EDA) (EDA, 2024a) and Eurostat (2025), defence expenditure by EU member states increased by 16.25% in 2023 and 16.85% in 2024, reaching historically high levels in both relative (as % of GDP) and absolute terms. These figures, documented in the first two graphs of this study, signal a recalibration of political priorities and a recognition of the need for stronger defence capabilities within the Union.

Beyond the quantitative increase in defence spending, a notable qualitative transformation is underway. The EU is no longer merely expanding its budgetary commitments—it is actively redefining the underlying rationale of its security and defence policy. The shift from a declaratory strategic culture to a performance-oriented one is evident in new initiatives such as the European Peace Facility, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF), and the Strategic Compass (EEAS, 2022), which collectively illustrate the EU's ambition to enhance its strategic autonomy. Furthermore, substantial military assistance provided to Ukraine by individual member states—exceeding tens of billions of euros since 2022 (Figure 4)—has revealed both the limits and the latent potential of European defence coordination.

This evolution poses fundamental questions about the EU's identity as a security actor. The long-dominant notion of the EU as a “normative power” (Manners, 2002, 2006), built on values such as the rule of law, human rights, and multilateral cooperation, is being critically reassessed. Scholars such as Howorth (2019) and Biscop (2022a) have pointed to the growing asymmetry between the EU's declared ambitions and its actual strategic capabilities. Recent developments reinforce the need to bridge this gap through a redefinition of priorities, legal instruments, and institutional mechanisms. The war in Ukraine has not only challenged the normative foundations of EU foreign policy but has also accelerated its transition towards a more interest-driven and geopolitically aware posture.

Simultaneously, the rise of China and other systemic competitors has underscored the broader geopolitical imperative of strategic autonomy. China's model of authoritarian capitalism, its control of technological supply chains, and its assertiveness in international fora pose an alternative to the liberal international order. In this environment, the EU is increasingly vulnerable not only to conventional military risks but also to cyberattacks, economic coercion, energy insecurity, and technological dependency (Bojinović Fenko & Brsakoska-Bazerkoska, 2024; Rieker & Giske, 2024).

In this multidimensional security environment, the EU's internal debates are gradually shifting from idealistic aspirations to pragmatic considerations of power, sovereignty, and operational capability. As highlighted by Akgüç (2021) and Lippert et al. (2019), strategic autonomy encompasses the ability to act independently where necessary, while cooperating with allies where possible. This concept is now increasingly understood not only in political or military terms but also in relation to industrial policy, technological sovereignty, and defence investment patterns. In this regard, recent data on defence-related investments in military defence (new systems, technologies, hardware, etc.) (Figure 3) demonstrate a significant surge in joint procurement, research, and innovation, further embedding the economic dimension into the EU's strategic reorientation.

Against this backdrop, scholarly research is also evolving. While the earlier academic consensus emphasised the EU's civilian character (Majchút, 2024), more recent analyses – such as those by Rieker and Giske (2024), Bojinović Fenko and Brsakoska-Bazerkoska (2024), and Csiki Varga (2024) – highlight the need to view the EU as a complex, multilayered actor operating within a hybrid security environment. In this setting, the boundaries between economic, military, cyber, and legal instruments are increasingly blurred. The EU's security

identity is no longer based solely on normative declarations but shaped by concrete policies, financial commitments, and industrial capacities.

This article seeks to critically examine the EU's evolving security identity through the lens of its response to contemporary geopolitical challenges. It analyses how increased defence spending, institutional adaptation, and military assistance to Ukraine have influenced the EU's strategic posture, while also assessing the legal and political constraints that continue to shape the contours of European defence integration. By drawing on academic literature, EU policy documents, defence data, and conceptual frameworks, the study aims to contribute to the scholarly debate on the EU's transformation from a normative union into a strategic security actor capable of autonomous action in a multipolar world.

2. The EU as a Security and Geopolitical Actor

For decades, the European Union was primarily perceived as a civilian and normative power, focused on promoting the values of democracy and economic cooperation. Its character was reflected in its orientation towards soft power instruments, such as development aid and diplomatic engagement (Manners, 2002). Although the Treaty of Lisbon strengthened the EU's ambitions as a global actor, its capacities for autonomous action remained limited (Howorth, 2014; Maheshi & Sayuri, 2025).

However, the war in Ukraine represents a fundamental turning point. Russian aggression exposed the limits of a security policy based exclusively on normative power and compelled the EU to reassess its strategic position (Rieker & Giske, 2024). Consequently, the EU is moving towards a transformation from a civilian guarantor of normative order to an active geopolitical actor, capable of independently confronting threats and shaping the security balance. This shift is evidenced in strategic documents such as the EU Strategic Compass (March, 2022), which declares objectives like building a rapid deployment force, increasing defence expenditure, and strengthening cyber resilience (EEAS, 2022). This indicates a shift away from exclusive reliance on NATO for security guarantees.

There is a growing consensus in academic literature that the EU's strategic autonomy is a necessity in an era of multipolar competition (Helwig & Sinkkonen, 2022). This trend is reinforced by changing attitudes within member states, which are moving from passivity to a more active promotion of common defence policies. At a theoretical level, the shift can be understood as a transition from 'soft' power to 'smart power', combining diplomatic and economic tools with military capabilities and innovation (Becker et al., 2025). The EU is becoming a 'multi-level actor', integrating various dimensions of security: traditional, cyber, climate, and technological (Bojinović Fenko & Brsakoska Bazerkoska, 2024; Rieker & Giske, 2024).

Besides internal factors, exogenous determinants are also crucial. The war in Ukraine has shown that the EU cannot rely on multilateral guarantees that fail where rules are systematically violated (Mauro, 2023). The EU is compelled to re-evaluate its own security sovereignty not only in military capabilities but also in energy security (Dirma et al., 2024; Okunevičiūtė Neverauskienė et al., 2025) and technological independence. This development is supported by increasing coordination among member states in identifying threats and formulating common responses, as confirmed by more recent decisions of the EU Council and the European Council.

The full-scale war in Ukraine has reshaped the EU's security environment not only geographically but also paradigmatically. It exposed the absence of operational command and a unified defence culture (Fiott, 2022). In response to these deficits, a rapid series of security and political decisions were made – ranging from unprecedented sanctions against Russia and massive aid to Ukraine (including military assistance via the European Peace Facility) (European Parliament, 2024a; European Council, 2025), to increased investment in defence and resilience against hybrid threats (European Commission, 2025a). A pivotal moment was the adoption of the Strategic Compass in March 2022, which defines the new direction of the CSDP and identifies four pillars: act, invest, partner, and secure (EEAS, 2022).

The war – in addition to a significant increase in defence spending (Figure 1) – accelerated reflection on the need to transform Common Foreign and Security Policy and rebuild the defence potential of member states

(Genini, 2025). The Commission introduced initiatives like ReArm Europe and Readiness 2030 (European Commission, 2025b). These steps are unfolding in a more complex multipolar environment, where the EU must navigate between value loyalty to the USA and the necessity of preserving strategic autonomy. The EU's actorness is conditioned by its ability to maintain unity among member states and assert itself against global competitors (Bojinović Fenko & Brsakoska Bazerkoska, 2024).

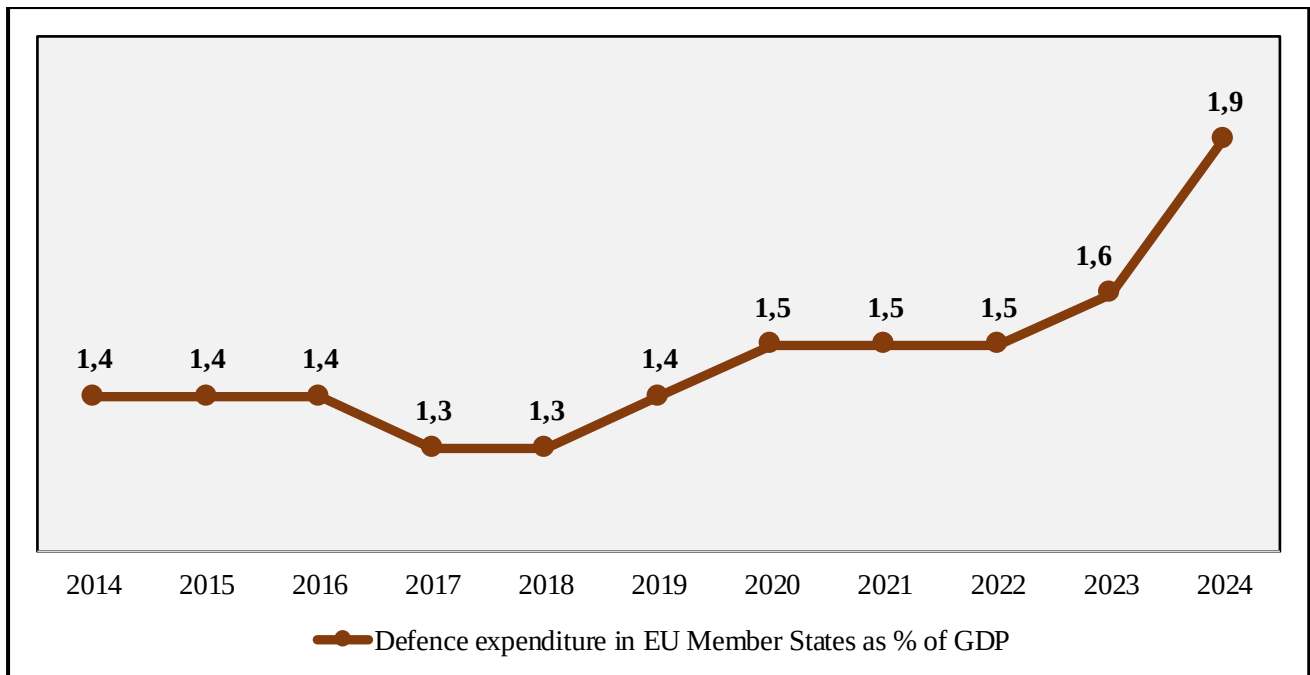


Figure 1. Overview of total defence expenditure in EU Member States (in % of GDP)

Source: EDA, 2024a

The EU is gradually realising that its geopolitical relevance will depend not only on its economic weight but also on its capacity to act as a security guarantor in its immediate neighbourhood and the broader global framework. This paradigm shift is accompanied by a growing recognition of the EU as a defence actor by some partners, although it still faces legitimacy challenges in global security fora. The analysis indicates that the EU is striving to redefine its role and security identity and respond to evolving security threats. This process is profoundly influenced by enduring ties and commitments to NATO and the USA. The following chapter will therefore focus on the intricate balance between the pursuit of EU strategic autonomy and the maintenance of transatlantic cohesion.

3. Strategic Autonomy vs. Transatlantic Linkage: Reality and Ambitions

The concept of EU strategic autonomy first appeared in the conclusions of the European Council in December 2013 (European Council, 2013). Originally, the term applied mainly to the area of security and defence, with an emphasis on the development of European defence capabilities and capacities that would strengthen the EU's ability to act autonomously. And although ideas about greater European autonomy in defence and security policy had appeared earlier (for example, at the St. Malo summit in 1998), 2013 is considered to be the first official appearance of the term “strategic autonomy” itself in EU documents.

However, it only came to the fore after 2016 in connection with the European Global Strategy (EUGS), which declared the need for Europe to take greater responsibility for its security (EEAS, 2016). Strategic autonomy is understood here not as isolationism, but as the ability to act alone when necessary and with partners when possible. This framework was further refined in the Strategic Compass (2022), which emphasizes building the EU's full-spectrum capabilities to respond to crisis situations (Kavan & Dušek, 2022) without exclusive dependence on NATO or the US.

However, this ambition has provoked critical reactions from some member states (e.g., Poland, the Baltic states) and transatlantic partners (USA), who warned against a possible weakening of NATO unity. The tension between strategic autonomy and transatlantic linkage reveals a dilemma of the EU's security identity: how to ensure its own capacity for action without fragmenting NATO's collective defence (Ossa 2024). While states like France advocate for 'European sovereignty' in defence, Central and Eastern European states perceive the USA and NATO as guarantors of deterrence and fear a weakening of the transatlantic bond (Howorth, 2019; Rieker & Giske, 2024).

The reality of implementing strategic autonomy is asymmetrical. Although instruments such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Coordinated Annual Review of Defence (CARD) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) have been created, their contribution is still limited, which undermines the goal of creating an integrated European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB), key to autonomy in the production of military technologies (Csiki Varga, 2024). On the other hand, due to dramatic changes in the security situation in Europe, as well as the efforts of Member States to strengthen the combat capabilities and capacities of their armed forces, total defence spending has seen a significant increase in 2023 (by 16.25%) and 2024 (by 16.85%) (Figure 2), which will undoubtedly increase the level of ensuring European security and defence.

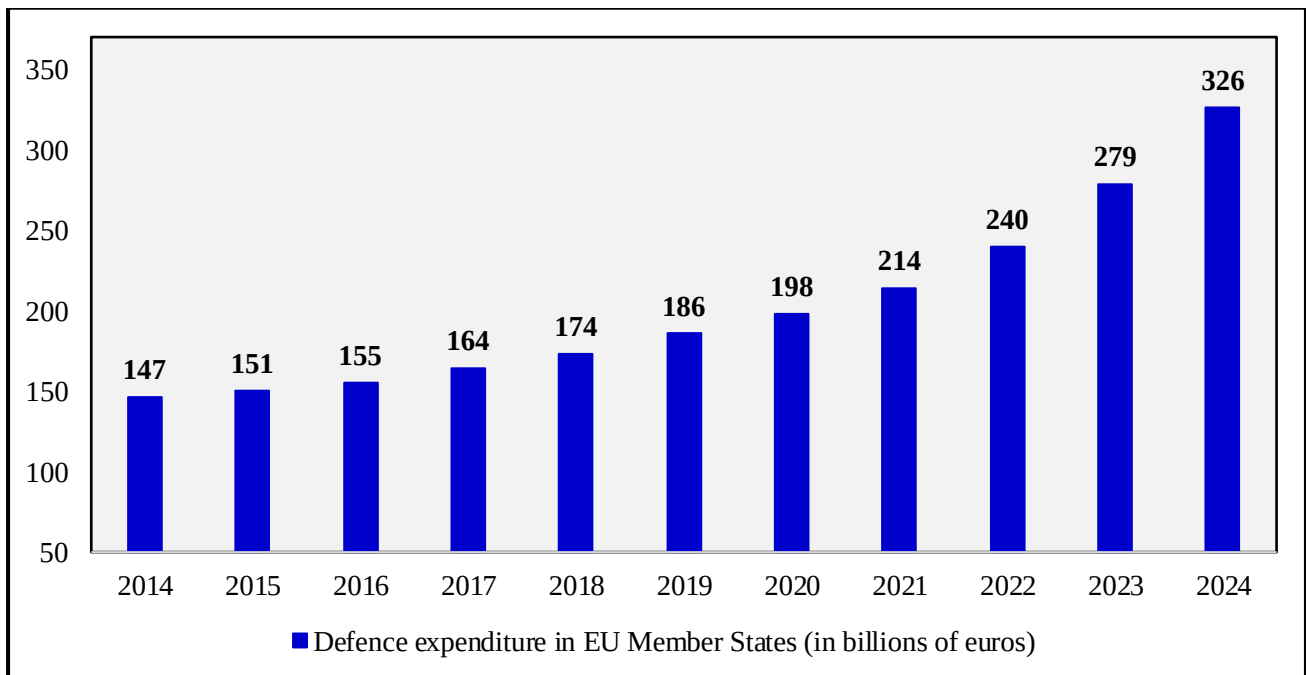


Figure 2. Overview of total defence expenditure in EU Member States (in billions of euros)

Sources: EDA, 2024a; Eurostat, 2025

A key strategic document is the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, which provides a more concrete operational plan and timelines. It comprises over 80 measures, some of which have already begun implementation, such as the establishment of the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity and the strengthening of joint military exercises (EEAS, 2022). It emphasises the need to reduce operational dependencies, enhance defence research, and build resilience against hybrid and cyber threats.

Another significant instrument is the European Defence Fund (EDF), with €8 billion allocated for 2021–2027 to support research and development of defence technologies (European Commission, 2025c). However, academic literature points to its limited effectiveness due to low participation from all member states and the dominance of a few leading nations (Csiki Varga 2024). Similarly, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), launched in 2017, has seen over 60 projects, yet few have achieved full operational capability (EDA 2024b). Critics point out the duplication of efforts and the absence of binding control mechanisms in this regard (Fiott, 2023).

On the other hand, the positive side is the growing investments in the development, research and development of military defence (new systems, technologies, hardware, etc.). These investments have been continuously increasing since 2014, with a sharp increase in 2023, when they reached 72 billion euros (an increase of 24,14 %), and 2024, when they reached even 102 billion euros (an increase of 41,67 % (!)) (Figure 3). In this context, it is clear that the driving force behind the growing volume of investment in defence, military technologies and hardware was mainly the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

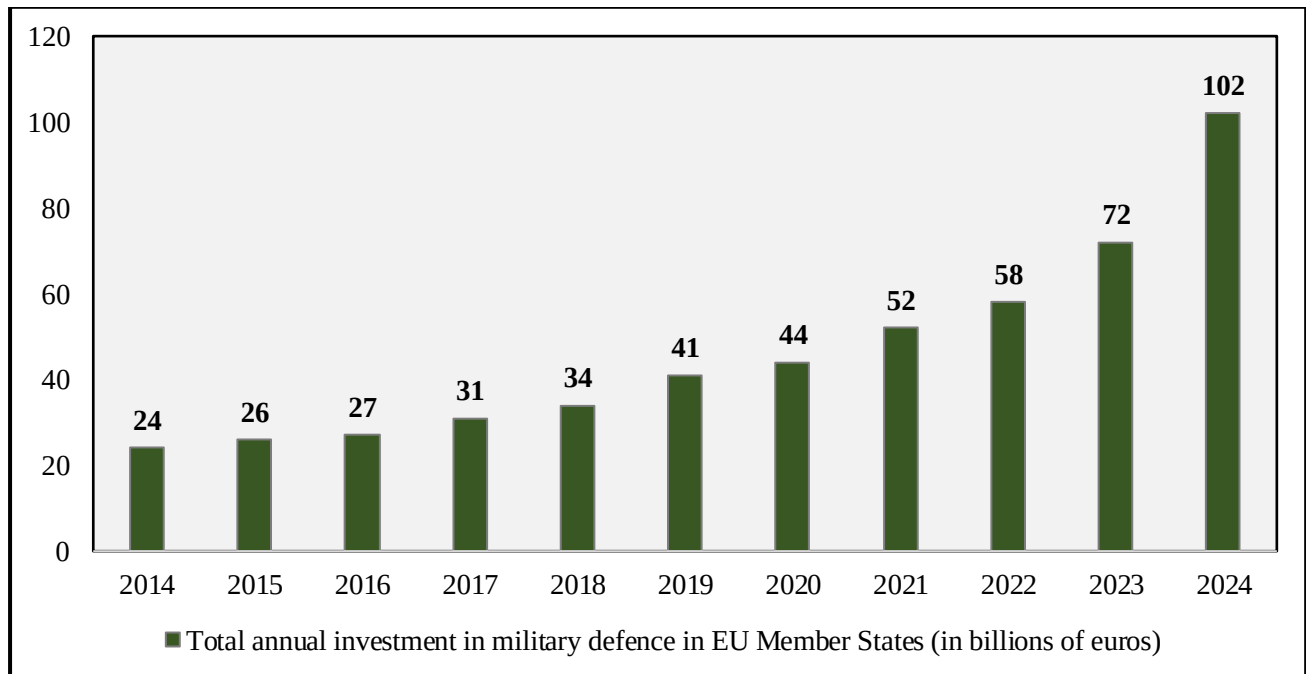


Figure 3. Overview of total annual investment in military defence in EU Member States (in billions of euros)

Sources: EDA, 2024; Statista, 2025

To overcome existing limitations, the Commission introduced the EDIRPA (European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act) initiative in 2023 to stimulate joint procurement of military equipment. Initiatives like ReArm Europe and Readiness 2030, in turn, focus on increasing the manufacturing capacity of the defence industry, supporting innovation, and accelerating the deployment of technologies (European Commission, 2022).

Despite these initiatives, systemic weaknesses persist, caused by insufficient political integration, uncoordinated national priorities, and member states' caution regarding the transfer of sensitive competencies. European defence cooperation often remains declarative without sufficient performance, which undermines its credibility. Member states, especially those with historical experience of sovereignty protection, perceive defence as the core of national sovereignty and prefer bilateral alliances over firm institutional commitments within the EU. This trend is reinforced by the absence of a common European strategic culture and differing perceptions of threats (Monaghan, 2023; Nikers & Tabuns, 2024).

From a legal standpoint, the EU's institutional capabilities in defence are constrained. Although Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) enshrines the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), it explicitly stipulates that *'the implementation of a common defence policy shall be subject to a unanimous decision by the European Council'* and that *'the CSDP shall not affect the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States'* (EU, 2012, Art. 42). This implies that even the most ambitious initiatives must be implemented based on consensus and with due regard for national prerogatives, which represents a structural limitation.

A further weak point is the absence of a robust executive authority or operational command for coordinating military operations. While the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) was established in 2017, its mandate remains limited, and its operational scope is restricted to non-executive missions. Without such a vertical command structure, the EU's capacity for action is contingent upon the assent of its member states.

Despite these limitations, there is potential for synergy among the various CSDP instruments. The Strategic Compass provides the political-strategic framework, the European Defence Fund (EDF) furnishes resources for research and development, PESCO offers a platform for collaborative projects, and EDIRPA addresses acute capability requirements. If existing gaps can be eliminated through increased defence spending, simplified decision-making processes, enhanced transparency, and more effective coordination, the EU could achieve the 'critical mass' necessary for effective autonomous action in crisis situations (Csiki Varga, 2024).

From the perspective of transatlantic relations, strategic autonomy need not imply competition with or a weakening of NATO; rather, it can contribute to a greater balance and strengthen joint capabilities. A more robust EU could complement NATO's activities in regions where the EU possesses unique instruments (e.g., the Western Balkans, Africa) and provide an independent response where the USA lacks the interest or capacity to intervene. As Josep Borrell (2022) observed, *'strategic autonomy is not independence from partners – but independence from vulnerabilities'*.

The analysis of the tension between the ambitions of strategic autonomy and the transatlantic linkage has highlighted the necessity of a more in-depth examination of internal conditions, particularly the legal and institutional framework of the CSDP. The subsequent chapter will therefore focus on legal restrictions, institutional fragmentation, competence tensions, and novel legislative initiatives that hold the potential to reinforce the integrative character of European defence policy.

4. Legal and Institutional Framework of the CSDP and Strengthening the EU's Defence Industry

The legal framework for the European Union's security and defence policy has evolved gradually, respecting the sensitivity of member states regarding the transfer of sovereign powers. Although the Treaty on European Union (Lisbon Treaty), in Articles 42 to 46, establishes the basis for the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as an integral part of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), it simultaneously explicitly preserves the decisive role of member states (EU, 2012). This means that the EU can only conduct military operations based on the unanimous consent of member states within the Council, with neither the Commission nor the Parliament having the authority to directly initiate or control military decisions.

This model of 'intergovernmental governance', while ensuring national sovereignty, leads to an institutional dispersion of powers, legal ambiguity, and limited executive capacity. For instance, the European External Action Service (EEAS), including its military structures (EUMS, MPCC), has a restricted mandate and does not fulfil the function of a full-fledged operational command, unlike NATO (Vimont, 2021; Fiott & Zeiss, 2021). The absence of a centralised command means that the EU is reliant on ad hoc coalitions of member states or cooperation with NATO for larger missions. From a legal perspective, there is thus a tension between the ambition to build an autonomous European security policy and the restrictions stemming from primary EU law, which weakens decision-making coherence (Blockmans, 2017). A competence conflict also persists between national and European policies, particularly concerning the financing and development of defence capabilities.

An important issue is also the legal stability of financial instruments such as the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the European Peace Facility (EPF). The EDF, although falling under the multiannual financial framework, is not explicitly defined in the treaties, which creates legal tension when extending its mandate to defence matters. More controversial is the EPF, an off-budget instrument allowing for the financing of military equipment for third countries, including lethal weapons. While it possesses its own legal basis, questions persist regarding its legal accountability and democratic oversight (Portela, 2021).

In the domain of industrial policy, the EU faces the challenge of a lack of harmonisation in legal regulations among member states. Despite efforts to create a European Defence Technological and Industrial Base

(EDTIB), the legal framework for cross-border projects remains disjointed, and defence procurement rules often defer to national exemptions. The consequence is market fragmentation, low interoperability, and weak competitiveness among European manufacturers.

In recent years, the European Commission and the European Defence Agency (EDA) have introduced new legislative initiatives to bolster the legal basis of the defence industry. Among the most significant is the proposed EDIRPA Regulation (European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act), which aims to increase the level of common procurement among member states, reduce costs, and improve interoperability (Clapp, 2023). EDIRPA is underpinned by TFEU articles relating to the internal market and provides a legal framework for joint procurement of military equipment in response to urgent needs arising from the war in Ukraine.

Building on EDIRPA, the Commission in 2024 prepared the draft European Defence Investment Programme (EDIP). EDIP is intended to be a stable legislative instrument for joint investments in defence research, development, and production, representing a shift from a temporary to a systemic mechanism for industrial support (European Commission, 2025d).

At the level of secondary EU law, Council directives and decisions in the field of defence procurement are important. Directive 2009/81/EC establishes a framework for transparency, but its application is uneven. Many states utilise exemptions based on national security (Article 346 TFEU), thereby weakening the single market and the effectiveness of common instruments (Koutrakos, 2013; Trybus, 2014).

With the aim of streamlining the legal environment for defence and strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy, calls for the adoption of a so-called European Defence Strategy are increasingly frequent. This strategy should unify legal, institutional, and political instruments under one coherent framework, build upon the Strategic Compass, and reinforce the nexus between the industrial and operational dimensions of defence (Blockmans, 2017).

From a legal perspective, the issue of democratic legitimacy and oversight of decision-making within the CSDP also remains a challenge. The European Parliament holds only a consultative role, although it has intensified its activities through resolutions concerning defence expenditure and arms exports. There is also pressure to strengthen judicial scrutiny over EU defence decisions, particularly regarding arms exports to third countries, where the EPF pushes the boundaries of existing legal mechanisms (Vroeghe, 2024).

Looking ahead, the crucial aspect is linking the legal framework with practical defence needs. This necessitates not only institutional innovations but also the political will of member states to accept an increased defence spending and higher degree of integration. If the EU succeeds in overcoming existing legal and competence barriers, it can establish a stable and predictable framework for the development of European defence capabilities, able to confront the challenges of a multipolar and conflict-ridden environment.

In parallel, calls are emerging for improved judicial oversight of EU decisions in the defence domain, particularly in relation to the functioning of the European Peace Facility (EPF). The EPF funds the supply of military equipment, including lethal weapons, thereby exceeding the traditional normative boundaries of EU foreign policy. This shift raises questions about the EU's legal accountability as a subject of international law and the scope of the Court of Justice of the EU's jurisdiction in cases of breaches of international humanitarian law (Genini, 2025).

From a long-term perspective, the strategic imperative is to link the EU's legal framework with the practical demands of defence. This requires not only the harmonisation of rules but also a fundamental change in member states' approach to sovereignty in defence matters. If the EU is to be capable of confronting the challenges of an unstable world, it must overcome the current model of 'voluntary fragmentation' and establish conditions for rapid, coordinated, and legally sustainable decision-making. Such a reform should encompass new mechanisms for fund control, assessment of compliance with international law, and an enhanced oversight role for the European Parliament (Kilic, 2024; European Commission, 2025e).

The future of European defence policy will hinge on the EU's ability to transform its legal framework from an instrument of restriction into one of strategic support. By removing legal, competence, and institutional barriers, the EU can acquire a stable and predictable framework for developing its own defence capabilities, thereby strengthening its position in the global security architecture.

However, the legal and institutional architecture of defence constitutes merely one pillar of strategic capability. Genuine autonomy also necessitates material, technological, and industrial preparedness. Therefore, the following chapter analyses the status and prospects of the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB), addressing mechanisms such as the EDF, EDIRPA, Readiness 2030, and joint procurements.

5. Development of the European Defence Industry and Technological Base

The European Union entered the 21st century with a fragmented, underfunded, and strategically uncoordinated defence industry. This state was a consequence of historical, economic, and political factors, such as the end of the Cold War, reduced defence spending, and a strong orientation towards NATO (Fiott, 2022). Consequently, the EU lost a significant strategic lead over the USA and China in defence research, development, and production.

This structural deficit is evident in manufacturing capacities, interoperability, technological dependence, and insufficient interconnectivity among member states. In 2021, only approximately 11% of EU member states' defence acquisition expenditure was executed collaboratively, with only a small proportion pertaining to strategic technologies (EDA, 2023). The European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) thus remained fragmented, and a large proportion of modern technologies were imported from non-European sources (Andersson & Britz, 2025).

Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the situation changed dynamically. Massive deliveries of military materiel to Kyiv (Figure 4) led to the depletion of stocks in EU member states, exposing logistical and capacity weaknesses and the absence of a collectively planned production chain. European states were compelled to replenish stocks on an ad hoc basis and through non-EU purchases, thereby deepening their reliance on external actors (Csiki Varga, 2024).

The Commission responded by declaring a 'defence industrial emergency' and introducing new initiatives. Among the most significant is the EDIRPA proposal – a legislative framework for joint public procurement of defence materiel, aimed at overcoming fragmentation. Concurrently, in 2023, the Readiness 2030 initiative proposal emerged, which aims to increase the capacities of the European defence industry, support innovation, and restore critical capabilities (Vroege, 2024).

From the perspective of strategic autonomy, the European Defence Fund (EDF) plays a pivotal role, co-financing research and development projects to foster a European innovation ecosystem in defence. Supported areas include artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, unmanned systems, and space surveillance. The EDF is becoming a platform for connecting small and medium-sized enterprises, research institutions, and large corporations, thereby accelerating technology transfer into production. Despite bureaucracy and opaque rules, the EDF is gradually shifting the logic of defence investment to a European framework.

The establishment of strategic and technological autonomy is a fundamental pillar of European security policy. While cooperation with NATO has dominated defence thinking, increasing instability and geopolitical pressure have reinforced the demand for a resilient and independent industrial base. The objective is not autarky, but a level of self-sufficiency that enables the EU to act autonomously (Fiott, 2022; Rieker & Giske, 2024).

A fundamental prerequisite is to increase production capacity, particularly in critical areas such as ammunition, missile systems, and air defence. The Commission has urged member states to jointly plan demand, harmonise specifications, and form consortia. The pressure for an integrated industrial base is a response to the disparity between the EU and the USA, where the defence industry benefits from massive public investments and centralised management (Csiki Varga, 2024).

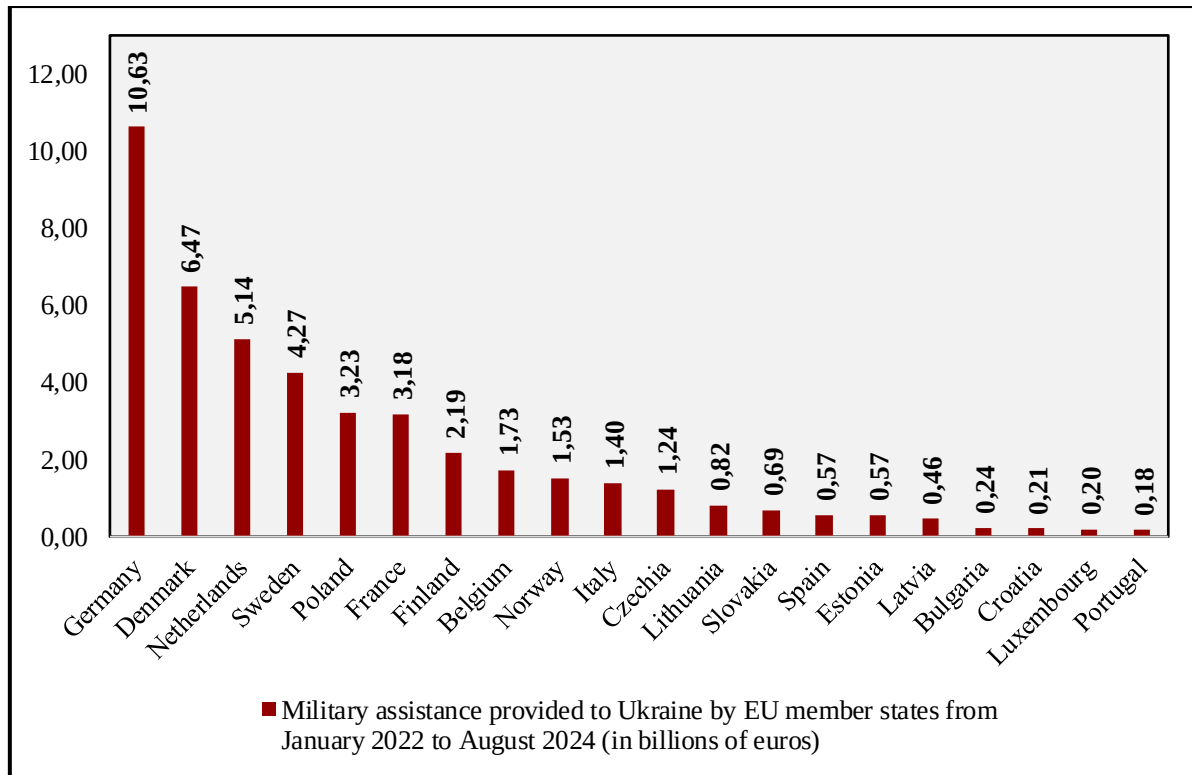


Figure 4. Overview of military assistance provided to Ukraine by EU member states from January 2022 to August 2024 (in billions of euros)

Sources: Statista, 2025

From a long-term perspective, it is essential for the European Union to build a robust, flexible, and technologically advanced European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). This is a strategic objective that extends beyond merely overcoming short-term shortfalls and aims towards constructing a sustainable defence ecosystem with a high degree of adaptability and innovation potential (European Commission, 2024, 2025a).

Achieving such an objective necessitates fulfilling several key conditions:

- **Coordinated Investments and Predictable Demand Planning:** The absence of common, long-term demand planning leads to project duplication and weakened investment certainty. Joint planning will ensure efficient resource allocation, stability for manufacturers, and improved interoperability. Predictable demand is a prerequisite for competitiveness against American and Asian firms.
- **Balanced Involvement of All EU Countries:** The development of the EDTIB must align with the objective of territorial cohesion, implying the active inclusion of smaller member states. Programmes such as the EDF or EDIRPA must support regional clusters and technology transfer, enabling smaller actors to acquire know-how and build capabilities. This will foster a truly European defence industry.
- **Increased Transparency and Reduced Bureaucracy:** Despite the positive impact of the EDF, the process of drawing on funds is bureaucratically demanding. Simplifying procedures and enhancing transparency will contribute to greater participation from SMEs, research centres, and academia, thereby broadening the innovation base and accelerating technology transfer.
- **Support for Export Opportunities:** For long-term competitiveness, it is essential to increase access to foreign markets. This requires a coherent export policy that respects ethical, legal, and political constraints. Political support and joint guarantees for export agreements are also crucial.

- Implementation of Mechanisms for Resilience Against Economic Coercion: The EU's industrial base must withstand geopolitical blackmail, disruptions to supply chains, and cyber-attacks. This necessitates technical protection, diversification of suppliers, strategic reserves, control over component exports, and strengthened legal guarantees for investments in the defence sector (Aerospace, Security and Defence Industries Association of Europe, 2023; European Commission, 2024; European Parliament, 2024b; Blockmans, 2024; Aerospace, Security and Defence Industries Association of Europe, 2025; Kollias & Tzeremes, 2025).

If the European Union succeeds in fulfilling these prerequisites, it can build a strategically autonomous, technologically advanced, and globally competitive defence industrial base by 2035. This base will not merely be a response to short-term challenges but also a long-term asset for European security and strategic sovereignty. Indeed, in an environment of great power rivalry and geopolitical fragmentation, the question of defence industrial potential becomes a crucial pillar of both national and collective security (Biscop, 2022b; Balfour & Baroncelli et al., 2024).

From the analysed factors, it can be concluded that the EU has made significant progress in developing defence instruments, yet it continues to face limitations that hinder its geopolitical establishment. The combination of legal obstacles, political disunity, and a fragmented defence industry represents a fundamental challenge to its capacity for action. The concluding chapter will therefore present a synthesis of findings, strategic recommendations, and an outlook on the evolution of European security and defence policy, thereby concluding the presented study.

Conclusions

The European Union's security identity is undergoing a profound transformation. What once appeared as a largely declaratory and normatively defined actor is increasingly responding to hard security imperatives through tangible policy measures, defence investments, and operational commitments. The war in Ukraine has acted as a catalyst for this transition, forcing the EU to reconsider not only its geopolitical environment but also its internal coherence, strategic ambitions, and practical capabilities. The volume and structure of military assistance to Ukraine, alongside a notable rise in defence spending across member states, indicate that the EU is taking incremental but significant steps toward assuming greater strategic responsibility.

This evolution, however, does not imply a complete rupture with the EU's foundational principles. Rather, it suggests a recalibration of its identity—one that integrates normative aspirations with pragmatic security considerations. As defence budgets expand (Figure 1) and strategic instruments such as the European Peace Facility are operationalised, the EU is acquiring new tools to assert its presence in a volatile security environment. The creation of shared procurement mechanisms and investments in new defence systems, technologies etc. (Figure 3) also marks a shift toward the development of credible capabilities, which are essential to underpin any vision of strategic autonomy.

At the same time, this transition is riddled with tensions. Despite rhetorical commitments to act more cohesively, intra-EU divergences in strategic culture, national threat perceptions, and political will remain significant. The normative ambition to be a global peace-promoting actor must now coexist with geopolitical realities that demand power projection, resilience, and deterrence. Bridging this gap between identity and capacity remains a critical challenge for the EU.

The incorporation of economic and military dimensions into the EU's security posture represents more than a policy adjustment—it signifies a conceptual shift. The figures reflecting growing national and collective defence spending (Figures 1 and 2), along with the scope of assistance to Ukraine (Figure 4), suggest a clear departure from the traditional reluctance to engage in hard power dynamics. Instead, the EU is constructing a hybrid security identity, balancing its normative heritage with emerging operational responsibilities and geopolitical ambitions.

This shift also redefines the meaning of strategic autonomy. No longer an abstract notion confined to policy documents, autonomy is increasingly associated with measurable inputs: financial allocations, defence

procurement, operational capabilities, and institutional adaptability. As shown in recent academic contributions (Rieker and Giske, 2024; Bojinović Fenko and Brsakoska-Bazerkoska, 2024), the ability to act autonomously entails not only the willingness to formulate independent policies but also the material capacity to implement them. Within this context, the EU's recent initiatives—such as increased joint defence investments, operational missions, and rapid reaction forces—demonstrate the emergence of a more assertive and capable European security actor.

Nevertheless, this emerging identity remains contested and incomplete. The EU still lacks a unified threat assessment, common strategic culture, and cohesive decision-making architecture. Fragmentation in national approaches continues to undermine the Union's capacity to respond swiftly and decisively to external crises. Moreover, the EU's dependency on NATO—and particularly the United States—for high-end military capabilities underscores the limits of European strategic sovereignty in the near term.

As the EU's security identity evolves, so too must the academic frameworks through which it is analysed. Traditional dichotomies—such as normative vs. strategic, civilian vs. military, or soft vs. hard power—no longer suffice to explain the complexity of the Union's evolving role. The empirical data now available, including trends in defence spending and external engagements, challenge static conceptualisations and call for more dynamic, multidimensional theories of European actorness and strategic behaviour. The EU's transition from a normative ambition to a geopolitical reality is not linear, nor is it irreversible—but it is unmistakably underway.

For policymakers, this evolution presents both opportunities and dilemmas. The redefinition of the EU's security role offers the chance to build a more resilient, capable, and autonomous actor in global affairs. Yet it also demands a careful balancing act between internal cohesion, democratic accountability, and responsiveness to a rapidly changing threat environment. As the EU continues to navigate the turbulence of strategic transformation, future research should closely examine how defence investments, strategic cultures, institutional mechanisms, and external partnerships interact to shape the Union's security trajectory.

In sum, the EU's security identity is no longer a question of aspiration—it is a matter of empirical development, political will, and strategic necessity. The convergence of ambition and capacity will determine whether the EU can sustain its transition from a civilian power with normative intent to a geopolitical actor equipped for responsibility in an era of strategic uncertainty and a dynamically evolving global and regional security environment.

References

- Aerospace, Security and Defence Industries Association of Europe. (2023). *Defence strategic objectives*. <https://www.asd-europe.org/our-industry/defence/strategic-objectives/>
- Aerospace, Security and Defence Industries Association of Europe. (2025). *Why do we need a European defence industry?* <https://www.asd-europe.org/our-industry/defence/why-do-we-need-a-european-defence-industry/>
- Akgüç, M. (2021). *Europe's open strategic autonomy*. ETUI Policy Brief, 1–8. <https://www.etui.org/publications/europes-open-strategic-autonomy>
- Andersson, J. J., & Britz, M. (2025). The European Union's role in European defence industry policy. *Defence Studies*, 25(2), 322–341. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2025.2472694>
- Balfour, R., & Baroncelli, E., et al. (2024). *Geopolitics and economic statecraft in the European Union*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/geopolitics-and-economic-statecraft-in-the-european-union?lang=en>
- Becker, M., Bendiek, A., & Kempin, R. (2025). *Strengthening Europe's capacity to act in foreign and security policy*. German Institute for International and Security Affairs. <https://doi.org/10.18449/2025C17>
- Biscop, S. (2022a). The EU's role in security and defence: Still indispensable. In S. Giusti & G. Grevi (Eds.), *Facing war: Rethinking Europe's security and defence* (pp. 47–60). Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale.

Biscop, S. (2022b). *European defence: The full package*. Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations. <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/european-defence-the-full-package/>

Blockmans, S. (2017). *Differentiation in CFSP: Potential and limits*. Istituto Affari Internazionali. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/eu60_5.pdf

Blockmans, S. (2024). *Understanding and strengthening EU foreign and security policy in a complex and contested world*. Centre for European Policy Studies. <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-projects/understanding-and-strengthening-eu-foreign-and-security-policy-in-a-complex-and-contested-world-joint/>

Bojinović Fenko, A., & Brsakoska-Bazerkoska, J. (2024). The EU as a global actor: The significance of changes in the world order from 2004 to 2024 as regards EU actorness. *Studia Europejskie – Studies in European Affairs*, 28(2), 7–26. <https://doi.org/10.33067/SE.2.2024.1>

Borrell, J. (2022). *The war in Ukraine and its implications for the EU*. European External Action Service. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/war-ukraine-and-its-implications-eu_en

Clapp, S. (2023). *European defence industry reinforcement through common procurement act (EDIRPA)*. European Parliamentary Research Service. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/739294/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)739294_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/739294/EPRS_BRI(2023)739294_EN.pdf)

Csiki Varga, T. (2024). Reinforcing European defence industry for times of great power conflicts. In *Shielding Europe with the Common Security and Defence Policy* (pp. 73–108). https://doi.org/10.54237/profnet.2024.zkjeszcodef_2

Dirma, V., Okunevičiūtė Neverauskienė, L., Tvaronavičienė, M., Danilevičienė, I., & Tamošiūnienė, R. (2024). The Impact of Renewable Energy Development on Economic Growth. *Energies*, 17(24), Article 6328. <https://doi.org/10.3390/en17246328>

Dušek, J. (2025). Transformation of Settlement Structures in Europe: Trends, Challenges, and Reform Approaches. *Land*, 14(1), Article 167. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land14010167>

European Commission. (2022). *Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52022PC0349>

European Commission. (2024). *The future of European competitiveness: In-depth analysis and recommendations*. https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/ec1409c1-d4b4-4882-8bdd-3519f86bbb92_en?filename=The%20future%20of%20European%20competitiveness_%20In-depth%20analysis%20and%20recommendations_0.pdf

European Commission. (2025a). *Joint White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030 (JOIN/2025/120 final)*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025JC0120>

European Commission. (2025b). *Commission unveils the White Paper for European Defence and the ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030*. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_793

European Commission. (2025c). *EDF: Developing tomorrow's defence capabilities*. https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/european-defence-fund-edf-official-webpage-european-commission_en

European Commission. (2025d). *EDIP: A dedicated programme for defence*. https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/edip-dedicated-programme-defence_en

European Commission. (2025e). *Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the safety, resilience and sustainability of space activities in the Union*. https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/0adeee10-af7a-4ac1-aa47-6a5e90cbe288_en?filename=Proposal-for-a-Regulation.pdf

European Council. (2013). *European Council 19/20 December 2013 – Conclusions*. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-217-2013-INIT/en/pdf>

European Council. (2025). *EU military support for Ukraine*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/military-support-ukraine/>

European Defence Agency. (2023). *Defense data 2022: Key findings and analysis*. https://eda.europa.eu/docs/default-source/brochures/2022-eda_defencedata_web.pdf

European Defence Agency. (2024a). *EDA Defence data 2023–2024*. <https://eda.europa.eu/publications-and-data/thematic-policy-reports/eda-defence-data-2023-2024>

European Defence Agency. (2024b). *Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)*. <https://pesco.europa.eu>

European External Action Service. (2016). *Shared vision, common action: A stronger Europe. A global strategy for the European Union's foreign and security policy*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf

European External Action Service. (2022). *A strategic compass for security and defence*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf

European Parliament. (2024a). *Continued financial and military support to Ukraine by EU Member States*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2024-0012_EN.html

European Parliament. (2024b). *Joint Communication on a new European Defence Industrial Strategy: Achieving EU readiness through a responsive and resilient European Defence Industry*. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-a-new-era-for-european-defence-and-security/file-european-defence-industrial-strategy>

European Union. (2012). *Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union*. Official Journal of the European Union. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

Eurostat. (2025). *How much do governments spend on defence?* <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250327-1>

Fiott, D. (2022). A clash of concepts? Making sense of 'European sovereignty' and 'strategic autonomy'. In *Beyond autonomy: Rethinking Europe as a strategic actor* (pp. 11–18). London School of Economics. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/reports/LSE-IDEAS-FNF-Beyond-Autonomy.pdf>

Fiott, D. (2023). In every crisis an opportunity? European Union integration in defense and the war on Ukraine. *Journal of European Integration*, 45(3), 447–462. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2183395>

Fiott, D., & Zeiss, M. (2021). *Yearbook of European Security 2021*. EU Institute for Security Studies. https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/YES_2021.pdf

Genini, D. (2025). How the war in Ukraine has transformed the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. *Yearbook of European Law*, 00, 1–43. <https://doi.org/10.1093/yel/yeaf003>

Helwig, N., & Sinkkonen, V. (2022). Strategic autonomy and the EU as a global actor: The evolution, debate and theory of a contested term. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 27(Special Issue), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2022009>

Howorth, J. (2014). *Security and defence in the European Union*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Howorth, J. (2019). Differentiation in security and defence policy. *Comparative European Politics*, 17(5), 261–277. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-019-00161-w>

Kavan, Š., & Dušek, J. (2022). Violation of Electronic Communication Systems Security as a Potential Crisis. *11th Mediterranean Conference on Embedded Computing (MECO)*. <https://doi.org/10.1109/MECO55406.2022.9797183>

Kilic, S. (2024). Half-hearted or pragmatic? Explaining EU strategic autonomy and the European Defence Fund through institutional dynamics. *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, 18(1), 43–72. <https://doi.org/10.51870/FSLG6223>

Kollias, C., & Tzeremes, P. (2025). Europe's defence industrial strategy and the EDTIB: A connectedness-based analysis of major European defence industries. *European Security*, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2025.2500296>

Koutrakos, P. (2013). *The EU Common Security and Defence Policy*. Oxford University Press.

Lippert, B., von Ondarza, N., & Perthes, V. (2019). *European strategic autonomy: Actors, issues, conflicts of interests*. German Institute for International and Security Affairs. <https://doi.org/10.18449/2019RP04>

Maheshi, T., & Sayuri, M. (2025). The European Union as a security actor: Balancing strategic autonomy and transatlantic alliances with NATO in a multipolar world. *Regional Centre for Strategic Studies*. <https://tinylink.info/17J9N>

Majchút, I. (2024). Contemporary Civil-Military Relations. *Challenges to national defence in contemporary geopolitical situation: Proceedings of the 4th International Scientific Conference*, 124–133. <https://forum.lka.lt/scientific-materials-cndcgs-2024>

Manners, I. (2002). Normative power Europe: A contradiction in terms? *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2), 235–258. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353>

Manners, I. (2006). Normative power Europe reconsidered: Beyond the cross-roads. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13(2), 182–199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760500451600>

Mauro, F. (2023). *The war in Ukraine and Europe's geopolitical awakening*. Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques. https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/17_ProgEurope_FMauro_EN.pdf

Monaghan, S. (2023). *Solving Europe's defense dilemma: Overcoming the challenges to European defense cooperation*. Center for Strategic & International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/solving-europes-defense-dilemma-overcoming-challenges-european-defense-cooperation>

Nikers, O., & Tabuns, O. (2024). Bureaucratic policy and defense cooperation among the Baltic states. *Security and Defence Quarterly*, 37(1), 41–54. <https://doi.org/10.35467/sdq/145571>

Okunevičiūtė Neverauskienė, L., Dirma, V., Tvaronavičienė, M., & Danilevičienė, I. (2025). Assessing the Role of Renewable Energy in the Sustainable Economic Growth of the European Union. *Energies*, 18(4), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.3390/en18040760>

Ossa, H. (2024). *European strategic autonomy in the transatlantic security context*. Finnish National Defence University. <https://urli.info/13u3I>

Portela, C. (2021). Conceptualizing coherence in EU external action. In S. Gstohl & S. Schunz (Eds.), *The external action of the European Union: Concepts, approaches, theories* (pp. 87–101). Bloomsbury Academic.

Rieker, P., & Giske, M. T. E. (2024). *European actorness in a shifting geopolitical order: European strategic autonomy through differentiated integration*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Statista. (2025). *Defense and security in the European Union*. <https://www.statista.com/study/136099/defense-and-security-in-the-european-union>

Trybus, M. (2014). *Buying defence and security in Europe: The EU Defence and Security Procurement Directive in context*. Cambridge University Press.

Vimont, P. (2021). Esprit de corps: Has the EEAS missed something? *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 26(1), 13–24. <https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2021003>

Vroege, B. (2024). *Arming Europe: Defence-industrial policymaking under the dual constitution of the European Union*. Ridderprint.

Data Availability Statement: More information and data can be obtained from the authors on a reasonable request.

Author Contributions: The authors contributed equally, they have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Radoslav IVANČÍK, Assoc. Prof. Dipl. Eng., PhD. et PhD., MBA, MSc. is an associate professor at the Department of Philosophy and Political Science, Faculty of Arts, University of the Constantine Philosopher in Nitra, Slovakia.

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2233-1014>

Vladimír ANDRASSY, Assoc. Prof. Dipl. Eng., PhD. is an associate professor at the Department of Security and Defence, Armed Forces Academy of General Milan Rastislav Štefánik in Liptovský Mikuláš, Slovakia.

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1207-300X>

Copyright © 2025 by author(s). Publishing rights by Entrepreneurship and Sustainability Center

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access