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EUROPEAN SECURITY, DEFENCE INDUSTRY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND LONG-TERM RESILIENCE

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Abstract. Security and stability constitute fundamental prerequisites for the long-term sustainable development of societies. The return of high-intensity interstate warfare to Europe following Russia's aggression against Ukraine has profoundly altered the European security environment and challenged long-established assumptions underpinning European integration and development. This article analyses the transformation of European security, the defence industry and the institutional role of the European Union in the context of efforts to strengthen strategic autonomy and long-term resilience. Drawing on a qualitative analytical approach based on the analysis of strategic documents, policy initiatives and academic literature, the article identifies structural weaknesses of the European defence technological and industrial base, assesses the growing involvement of the Union in defence industrial policy and defence financing, and highlights the broader implications of these processes for Europe's sustainable development. The findings indicate that security, the defence industry and institutional adaptation are increasingly interconnected, and that the ability to ensure security and defence, reduce strategic dependencies and strengthen industrial resilience represents a key condition for Europe's sustainable development in an increasingly unstable global environment.

Keywords: European security; defence industry; sustainable development; strategic autonomy; institutional transformation; resilience

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1. Introduction

Security and stability constitute fundamental prerequisites for the sustainable development of modern democratic societies. The capacity of states to ensure the defence and protection of their territory, population, environment, and critical infrastructure establishes a necessary framework for long-term economic growth, a favourable business environment, technological innovation, and social cohesion. In this sense, security is not an antithesis to sustainability, but rather one of its fundamental premises. Consequently, contemporary security turbulence and geopolitical shifts fundamentally influence not only the sphere of defence but also the broader perspectives of sustainable development in Europe.

The Russian military aggression against Ukraine, which commenced in February 2022, represents a historical turning point in the European security environment and, simultaneously, a severe challenge to the long-

established model of European development based on the assumptions of stability, predictability, and peaceful cooperation (Borrell Fonteles, 2023; Jurčák & Ivančík, 2023; Andrassy & Ondruš, 2024). The return of high-intensity interstate armed conflict to Europe has called into question not only the post-war security order but also the basic foundations upon which the economic integration, industrial policy, and sustainable development of the European Union (EU) were constructed. The security crisis has thus become a catalyst for deeper structural changes (European Parliament, 2025; Gennini, 2025a) that transcend a narrowly defined military dimension.

In this context, issues concerning the securing of European defence and the support of the defence industry are coming to the fore as strategic factors with a direct impact on economic resilience, technological sovereignty, and the long-term sustainability of the European continent's development. Long-term underinvestment in defence capabilities, the fragmentation of the defence market, and the optimisation of production for peacetime conditions have led to a situation where the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) was ill-prepared for the sudden surge in demand caused by the conflict in Ukraine (Barry et al., 2025; Ivančík & Majchút, 2026). These weaknesses are manifested not only in the sphere of guaranteeing European security but also carry significant economic and institutional implications, affecting supply chain stability, investment decisions, and Europe's ability to respond to systemic crises (European Union, 2025; Hellemeier, 2025).

The gradual transformation of the EU from a predominantly civilian integration project into an actor with an increasing role in defence and defence industrial development represents a broader process of institutional adaptation to new security and economic conditions. The development of European defence capabilities, the promotion of the defence industry, and the search for new models of defence financing are increasingly intertwined with discussions on strategic autonomy, economic resilience, sustainable development, and societal robustness (Riddervold & Rieker, 2024; Ivančík & Andrassy, 2025). Concurrently, the Union seeks to reduce its strategic dependencies in the fields of technology, energy, and critical raw materials, thereby linking defence policy with economic, energy, and environmental security (Chehabeddine et al., 2023), as well as the digital and green transitions (Dirma et al., 2024; Okunevičiūtė Neverauskienė et al., 2025; Churikanova et al., 2025) as key pillars of its long-term development strategy.

The aim of this article is to analyse the transformation of European security, the defence industry, and the EU's institutional framework within the context of efforts to strengthen strategic autonomy and long-term societal resilience as prerequisites for long-term sustainable development. The article focuses on identifying the primary structural challenges facing the European defence industry, analysing the Union's role in defence financing and industrial policy, and evaluating the broader implications of these processes for Europe's security, economic stability, and sustainable development.

From a methodological perspective, the article is based on a qualitative analysis of strategic documents, policy statements, academic articles, and professional literature focused on European security, defence, and the defence industry. The applied analytical-synthetic approach allows for the integration of the security, defence, industrial, and developmental dimensions of the issue under investigation, while comparative and institutional approaches contribute to understanding the dynamics of the relationship between national and European levels of governance. A limitation of the research remains the highly dynamic nature of developments in the global and regional security environment, which, however, underscores the significance of the subject matter for the future sustainable development of Europe.

2. The Transformation of Europe's Security Environment and New Requirements for Defence Capabilities

The post-war European security order, which took shape after 1945 and evolved into a relatively stable and predictable system following the end of the Cold War, was founded upon a combination of several pivotal assumptions. Most significant among these were the military security dominance of the United States in Europe, enshrined within the Alliance; the gradual integration of the Russian Federation into the broader framework of international institutions and norms; and the conviction that economic interconnectedness and the mutual dependence of major actors would serve as an effective deterrent against the resurgence of large-scale interstate

conflicts (Kazanský & Andrassy, 2019; Andor & Optenhögel, 2023; Ivančík & Dušek, 2026a). Within this framework, European states were able to concentrate on internal economic and political consolidation, while matters of collective defence were largely externalised through the transatlantic relationship. This model permitted a long-term reduction in defence budgets, the downsizing of armed forces, and a limitation of investment in the defence industry, without immediately jeopardising the fundamental security interests of the majority of European states (Jurčák & Martaus, 2021; Ellison et al., 2023; Götz & Ekman, 2024).

However, the gradual erosion of this order was evident well before 2022. The Russian military intervention in Georgia in 2008 (Roy, 2013), the annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of eastern Ukraine after 2014 (Poli & Candura, 2023), and the increasing utilisation of hybrid instruments of influence represented clear signals that Europe's security environment was becoming less stable and less predictable. Despite these warnings, the response from most European states remained partial and often delayed. Although strategic documents identified emerging threats, their practical implementation was hindered by political compromises, budgetary constraints, and a lingering belief that a large-scale conventional war in Europe was improbable. This discrepancy between declared risk perceptions and actual readiness became fully manifest after February 2022, when the Russian invasion of Ukraine definitively shattered the illusion of the permanence of the post-war security order (Jurčák & Ivančík, 2023; European Council, 2024).

The war in Ukraine has acted as a catalyst for profound structural shifts in European security thinking. For the first time since the Second World War, Europe faces a protracted, high-intensity interstate armed conflict in which conventional armed forces, the mass employment of artillery, missile systems, and aviation, as well as the systematic destruction of critical infrastructure, play a decisive role. This conflict has demonstrated that technological superiority and modern weapon systems alone cannot substitute for the need for sufficient stockpiles, production capacities, and the ability to sustain a high tempo of military operations over the long term. For European states, this has necessitated a fundamental return to the core questions of collective defence, territorial security, and the capacity to defend sovereign territory in the event of an armed attack (Pynnöniemi & Parpei, 2024; Bocquillon et al., 2024).

A particularly significant aspect of the war in Ukraine is its character as a war of attrition, which places extreme demands on logistics, supply chains, and industrial manufacturing. The daily consumption of artillery ammunition, missiles, and spare parts reaches levels that far exceed the planning assumptions of most European militaries. As a result of massive military aid to Ukraine, the stockpiles of many NATO and EU member states have fallen to historically low levels, thereby exposing their limited ability to rapidly replenish exhausted capacities. This state of affairs is not merely a consequence of the current conflict, but also the result of a long-term approach that prioritised efficiency, lean inventories, and short production runs over redundancy and systemic resilience (Hofer, 2024; Mills, 2025).

3. The European Defence Industry: Structure, Capacities, and Systemic Weaknesses

The European defence industry represents one of the most complex and, simultaneously, most problematic segments of the European economic and security architecture. Its current form is the result of historical developments in which defence production was shaped predominantly at the national level, closely intertwined with concepts of national sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and political control over the armed forces. Unlike other industrial sectors, the defence industry in Europe has not undergone a full-scale integration process within the Single Market. This has led to the emergence of a highly fragmented environment characterised by parallel production capacities, duplicate programmes, and limited interoperability (European Union, 2025). Historically, this fragmentation was regarded as an acceptable price for maintaining national control over key military capabilities; however, within the context of the contemporary security environment, it increasingly appears to be a strategic weakness.

The fragmentation of the European defence market manifests at multiple levels. Historically, each member state of the European Union has constructed its own defence industrial base, tailored to specific doctrinal needs, political preferences, and industrial capacities. The result is the existence of a vast array of different types of weapon systems that perform similar tasks but differ in technical parameters, logistical requirements, and life

cycles (Clapp, 2025). This state of affairs leads to higher costs for development, production, and maintenance, limits the opportunities to achieve economies of scale, and complicates the joint deployment of forces within NATO or the European Union. While the United States possesses a relatively centralised defence market with large production runs, Europe remains divided into numerous smaller markets that often fail to generate sufficient demand to sustain competitive manufacturing (Andersson, 2023; Ilzetzki, 2025).

A pivotal concept in assessing the state of the European defence industry is the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). This term refers to the collective of enterprises, research institutions, and technological capacities that ensure the development, production, and maintenance of military capabilities in Europe. The EDTIB is of strategic importance not only from an economic perspective but, primarily, from a security standpoint, as its existence and functionality determine the ability of European states to act autonomously in crisis situations (Mattelaer, 2023). Nevertheless, the EDTIB remains significantly fragmented and unevenly developed, with a concentration of high-end capacities in a few large member states, while smaller countries are often reliant on imports or participation in international programmes as subcontractors (Wilkinson, 2020; Wollf, 2024).

The war in Ukraine has dramatically exposed the limitations of the EDTIB regarding serial production and the ability to respond rapidly to a sharp surge in demand. For decades, the European defence industry was optimised for low-volume production, short production runs, and long lead times, reflecting an environment of peacekeeping operations and limited conflicts. Under the conditions of a war of attrition, however, this model has proven unsustainable. The production of artillery ammunition, missiles, and spare parts for armoured vehicles faces capacity limits that cannot be overcome without substantial investment in infrastructure, workforce, and technological equipment. Furthermore, the lack of long-term orders and uncertainty regarding future demand hinder the industry's willingness to invest in expanding production (Mattelaer, 2023; Clapp, 2025).

Furthermore, serial production within the defence industry is closely intertwined with the functioning of complex supply chains that transcend national borders. Modern weapon systems are dependent on a broad spectrum of components, including electronics, specialised metals, and chemical substances, the supply of which is often secured globally. In recent years, this dependency has emerged as a significant risk factor, as geopolitical tensions, disruptions to global trade, and increasing competition for strategic raw materials threaten the continuity of production. In this regard, the European defence industry is particularly vulnerable in the area of critical raw materials, where the EU is heavily reliant on imports from third countries, including actors that may prove to be politically or strategically unreliable in a crisis situation (Kollias & Tzeremes, 2025).

The issue of resource dependency carries not only an economic dimension but a strategic one as well. Ensuring stable access to critical materials is an indispensable prerequisite for sustainable defence-industrial production during a protracted conflict. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that the capacity to conduct military operations is determined not only by the number of modern platforms but also by the availability of relatively simple yet essential components, such as fuels and lubricants, explosives, or spare parts (Kleczka et al., 2025). A shortage of these inputs can lead to production bottlenecks, which have a direct impact on the operational readiness of the armed forces.

Another fundamental characteristic of the European defence industry is the persistent tension between national sovereignty and the pursuit of deeper European cooperation. The defence industry is traditionally perceived as an integral component of national security, prompting governments to seek control over key production capacities and decision-making processes (Ivančík & Andrassy, 2025; Clapp, 2025). This logic is manifested in the preference for domestic suppliers, the protection of national 'champions', and a cautious stance toward supranational solutions that might diminish political control over defence capabilities. Simultaneously, however, the escalating costs of developing modern weapon systems and the necessity for interoperability create pressure for joint projects and the integration of production capacities at the European level (Wilkinson, 2020; Wollf, 2024).

This tension is also reflected in the divergent priorities of member states, which possess differing strategic cultures, threat perceptions, and industrial interests. While some countries advocate for an ambitious vision of European defence-industrial integration, others remain sceptical, preferring bilateral or transatlantic solutions. The result is often a compromise-based approach that, while facilitating the emergence of joint initiatives, simultaneously constrains their scope and effectiveness. This fragmentation of political will subsequently translates into a limited capacity for the European defence industry to function as a truly unified and resilient system (Kollias & Tzeremes, 2025).

In the context of security of supply, the European defence industry finds itself at the centre of several fundamental dilemmas. On the one hand, there is a drive to ensure the highest possible degree of autonomy and resilience through domestic or European manufacturing. On the other hand, the reality of the globalised nature of modern industry is that complete self-sufficiency is economically demanding and technologically problematic (Klecza et al., 2025). The extent to which it is possible and desirable to reduce dependence on external suppliers remains a subject of intense political and professional debate. However, the war in Ukraine has shifted this discussion from the realm of theoretical considerations to a level of urgent practical necessity.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the European defence industry has entered a period of fundamental transformation, in which its traditional structural weaknesses have become a strategic problem. Market fragmentation, limited production capacities, vulnerable supply chains, and the tension between national and European priorities create a complex challenge that cannot be addressed through isolated measures. These systemic weaknesses also explain why the European Union has become increasingly active in the sphere of the defence industry and defence financing in recent years. The analysis of this role and its implications for the future direction of European defence will be the subject of the following chapter.

4. The Role of the European Union in the Defence Industry and Defence Financing

The role of the European Union in the sphere of defence and the defence industry has undergone a fundamental transformation over the last two decades, a process that has accelerated significantly since 2022. While at the beginning of the 21st century, the security and defence dimension of integration was perceived as a peripheral and strictly intergovernmental domain, current developments demonstrate a gradual institutionalisation of EU defence policy and an expansion of its practical instruments. This process does not signify the emergence of a European defence in the classical state-centric sense; rather, it represents a significant shift towards a more systematic and coordinated approach to the development of defence capabilities and the defence industry. The institutional evolution of the EU in this field is the result of a combination of long-term trends and acute crisis impulses, among which the war in Ukraine plays a pivotal role (Hartley, 2024).

The gradual institutionalisation of EU defence policy relies on the expansion of competences and instruments that are primarily of a coordinating, stimulatory, and financial nature. Although the European Union does not possess its own armed forces, and decision-making in the field of defence remains formally in the hands of the member states, it is increasingly able to influence the shape of European defence capacities through industrial policy, research, and budgetary tools. This approach reflects the specific nature of the EU as a political entity which, instead of directly exercising military power, creates frameworks, incentives, and a regulatory environment for cooperation between states and industry. In this context, the defence industry has become one of the primary vectors through which the EU strengthens its role in the sphere of security (Pöllänen, 2025).

A key milestone in this development was the establishment of the European Defence Fund (EDF), which, for the first time, systematically utilises the EU budget to support research and development in the field of defence technologies. The European Defence Fund represents a tool aimed at reducing the fragmentation of defence research, fostering cooperation between enterprises from multiple member states, and strengthening the competitiveness of the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (European Commission, 2025a). Although the EDF was not originally focused on serial production or procurement, it established an important precedent for the legitimisation of using common EU financial resources in the area of defence. This precedent proved crucial following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, when the need for a rapid and large-scale response became an urgent political priority.

This situation was followed by further initiatives that expanded the EU's scope from research and development toward supporting production and procurement. The Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) was designed as a temporary yet exceptionally significant instrument to stimulate the defence industry, with the aim of increasing the production of ammunition and key components in a short timeframe. ASAP responds to identified shortages in production capacity and seeks to remove certain bottlenecks through financial incentives, the simplification of administrative procedures, and support for infrastructure investment (European Commission, 2025b). Similarly, the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) represents an attempt to motivate member states toward joint purchases of military equipment, thereby achieving economies of scale, increasing interoperability, and strengthening European manufacturers (European Commission, 2025c).

A significant step in this direction is also the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), which signals an ambition to create a more long-term and systematic framework for supporting the defence industry at the EU level. EDIP has the potential to link individual initiatives into a more coherent strategy encompassing research, development, production, and procurement. Simultaneously, it creates space for the deeper integration of Ukraine's defence industry into European supply chains, thereby linking EU defence policy with its broader geopolitical and strategic objectives (European Commission, 2025c). A special role in this system is played by the European Peace Facility (EPF), which has enabled the EU to finance the delivery of military equipment to partner states, including Ukraine. The use of the EPF to support a country engaged in an active armed conflict represents a historical precedent that fundamentally alters the nature of the EU's engagement in the field of security (European Council, 2025).

However, joint procurement, which has become one of the primary pillars of the EU's new approach, encounters several limitations. Despite financial incentives, decision-making regarding procurement remains in the hands of member states, which possess differing operational requirements, budgetary capacities, and political priorities. The willingness to participate in joint projects is often contingent upon national industrial interests and the desire to ensure that a significant portion of the value chain remains within domestic territory. This factor constrains the scope and the pace at which joint procurement can establish itself as the dominant model. Furthermore, joint projects necessitate complex coordination, the harmonisation of technical requirements, and compromises that may prolong decision-making processes at a time when a rapid response is required.

The issue of defence financing represents another fundamental dimension of the EU's role. Traditionally, defence expenditure was exclusively a matter for national budgets, with investment levels reflecting the political priorities of individual states. However, the current security situation has exposed the limits of this approach, particularly in the case of states with constrained fiscal space (Ivančík & Dušek, 2026b). Discrepancies in the economic strength and indebtedness of member states lead to an uneven capacity to respond to new security requirements, which can undermine collective defence capabilities. In this context, there is increasing debate regarding the need to supplement national budgets with supranational financial instruments that would allow for more efficient and solidary resource mobilisation (De Lemos Peixoto et al., 2025).

In this regard, the ReArm Europe initiative represents an ambitious, yet controversial, attempt to strengthen European defence financing through a combination of national and European instruments. Its aim is to create the fiscal and legal space for a significant increase in defence investment, even at the cost of a temporary relaxation of budgetary rules. ReArm Europe highlights the EU's growing willingness to enter spheres long considered the core of national sovereignty, while simultaneously exposing the legal-institutional limits of the current integration framework. The use of existing treaty provisions to finance defence raises questions about the long-term sustainability of this approach and the potential necessity for treaty amendments (Santopinto, 2025; Clapp et al., 2025).

The legal-institutional challenges associated with the expansion of the EU's role in defence are therefore an inseparable part of this process. The tension between the intergovernmental nature of defence policy and the increasing role of European institutions creates uncertainty that may hinder more ambitious initiatives. Nevertheless, crisis situations such as the war in Ukraine demonstrate that the existing framework is capable of

adaptation and that the EU can find pragmatic solutions even in legally sensitive areas. The question remains to what extent these solutions will become a permanent feature of the European defence architecture.

Overall, it can be stated that in the areas of the defence industry and defence financing, the EU is transforming from a peripheral actor into a key coordinating and stimulatory player. Through a combination of financial instruments, regulatory initiatives, and political coordination, it seeks to overcome the structural weaknesses of the European defence environment and strengthen the ability of member states to respond to new security challenges. However, this process remains unfinished, and its success will depend on the political will of the member states, the ability to align national and European interests, and the further evolution of the security environment. The perspectives of this development and the question of Europe's strategic autonomy will be the subject of the following chapter.

5. Strategic Autonomy and the Future Direction of European Defence

The concept of strategic autonomy has, in recent years, emerged as one of the central themes in the debate concerning the future of European defence and security (Michaels, & Sus, 2024; Ossa, 2025; *Wrange*, 2026). Initially formulated in a somewhat vague manner, often eliciting divergent interpretations among member states, the concept has acquired a more concrete and urgent significance since 2022. In its contemporary understanding, strategic autonomy does not imply European isolationism nor an attempt to replace existing security ties; rather, it signifies Europe's capacity to decide and act independently on pivotal issues of its security in situations where its interests so require. It is, therefore, a concept that combines political ambition with a suite of practical capabilities, without which any declaration of autonomy would remain mere empty rhetoric (Varma, 2024; Ivančík & Andrassy, 2025).

From a practical perspective, strategic autonomy is closely intertwined with Europe's ability to secure its own defence capabilities, maintain a functional defence industry, and possess mechanisms for rapid decision-making and financing. Without a sufficient industrial base, reliable supply chains, and adequate stockpiles of military materiel, it is impossible to speak of genuine autonomy in the sphere of defence (European Union, 2025). Simultaneously, however, strategic autonomy transcends a narrowly defined military dimension. An inseparable component is the strengthening of autonomy in the fields of economics, technology, and critical infrastructure. Within this context, the European Union strives to reduce strategic dependencies, promote digital transformation, develop its own technological capacities, and pursue a green transition based on the utilisation of renewable energy sources. These processes carry not only economic and environmental significance but also directly influence the EU's security resilience, as energy, technological, and industrial self-sufficiency reduce vulnerability to external pressure and crises (Klecza et al., 2025; Möller, 2025).

The relationship between the Union's strategic autonomy and the Alliance remains one of the most sensitive issues in the European security debate. Critics of the autonomy concept frequently highlight the risk of capability duplication and the potential weakening of the transatlantic link, while its proponents emphasise the need for a more balanced burden-sharing between Europe and the United States. From an analytical standpoint, however, strategic autonomy is not necessarily at odds with the functioning of NATO. On the contrary, it can act in a complementary fashion if it leads to the strengthening of European capabilities, which are subsequently available for collective defence within the Alliance. A key prerequisite for this complementarity is transparency, coordination, and a clear demarcation of roles between European initiatives and Alliance structures (Ossa, 2025).

It is precisely in this context that strategic autonomy acquires a pragmatic dimension. Europe recognises that NATO remains the fundamental pillar of its collective defence, yet it simultaneously faces a reality in which the United States is increasingly orienting its strategic attention away from the European theatre. The strengthening of European defence capabilities should therefore not be perceived as an alternative to NATO, but as an essential supplement that enhances the overall resilience of the transatlantic security system. From this perspective, strategic autonomy is an instrument for strengthening the partnership rather than weakening it, provided it is implemented in close cooperation with Alliance allies (Mölling et al., 2023; Budginaite-Froehly, 2025).

The risks of a partial American withdrawal from Europe represent one of the primary factors lending urgency to the discussion on strategic autonomy. Although a complete security decoupling of the United States from Europe is not a realistic scenario, repeated political signals regarding the need to shift American resources to the Indo-Pacific region increase uncertainty concerning the long-term extent of American engagement (Kandyuk, 2022; Pszczel, 2024). For European states, this implies they must be prepared to assume greater responsibility for their own defence, not only through political declarations but also through concrete investments in capabilities and industry. In this sense, strategic autonomy becomes a form of insurance against future strategic shocks that could disrupt the stability of the European security environment.

The support for Ukraine represents a long-term test of Europe's capacity to act as a strategically autonomous actor. The scale and duration of the conflict have revealed the extent to which European states are capable of coordinating their policies, mobilising resources, and maintaining political unity amidst rising costs and domestic political pressures. Simultaneously, it has become evident that the ability to support Ukraine is not merely a matter of solidarity but a direct indicator of Europe's own defensive capacity. Deficiencies in stockpiles, production capacities, or decision-making processes translate immediately into a limited ability to respond to the requirements of Ukrainian defence, thereby undermining Europe's credibility as a security actor (Vachudova & Koval, 2024).

In this context, strategic autonomy also possesses a normative dimension. Supporting Ukraine is not merely a reaction to a specific conflict but part of a broader effort to preserve a rules-based international order (Becker et al., 2024). In this way, Europe is testing its capacity to assert its own values and interests in an environment increasingly characterised by great power rivalry and the erosion of international norms. Success or failure in this endeavour will have long-term consequences for the perception of the EU as a global actor.

The perspectives for the further development of European defence will depend on several interconnected factors. Crucial will be the political will of member states to continue deepening cooperation even after the acute phase of the security crisis has subsided. Equally important will be whether temporary crisis instruments can be transformed into permanent mechanisms that ensure stable financing and the development of defence capabilities. Finally, it will be decisive to what extent the defence dimension of strategic autonomy can be aligned with other EU priorities, such as economic and environmental security (Chehabeddine et al., 2023), and the digital and green transitions (Dirma et al., 2024; Okunevičiūtė Neverauskienė et al., 2025), to create a coherent model of security, economic resilience, and technological development.

Overall, it can be stated that strategic autonomy is gradually evolving from an initially abstract political concept into a practical framework shaping the future direction of European defence. Its implementation, however, will inevitably be marked by compromises between national and European interests, between ambitions and real capacities, and between the pursuit of autonomy and the maintenance of strong transatlantic ties. It is precisely the ability to manage these tensions that will determine whether Europe can establish itself as a credible and resilient security actor in an increasingly unstable international environment.

Conclusion

The present article has analysed the transformation of European security, the defence industry, and the EU's institutional framework within the context of the fundamental shift in the security environment accelerated by Russian aggression against Ukraine. The return of high-intensity interstate armed conflict to the European continent has definitively terminated the era of strategic illusions upon which the post-war European security order was constructed for decades. Simultaneously, it has severely challenged the assumptions of long-term sustainable development based on stability, predictability, and external security guarantees. It has become evident that security is not an isolated domain existing outside of economic, technological, and social development, but rather one of its pivotal structural prerequisites.

The results of the analysis demonstrate that the war in Ukraine does not represent an isolated crisis but is a symptom of a deeper transformation of the international system, characterised by the return of power politics, rivalry, attritional warfare, and the increasing significance of hybrid and multi-domain threats. These changes

fundamentally redefine the requirements for the defence capabilities of European states, placing emphasis on the capacity to ensure the long-term protection of populations, critical infrastructure, and the economic foundations of society. The escalating demands from NATO – and particularly the USA – alongside the pressure for a more equitable burden-sharing in securing collective defence, have highlighted the necessity for the EU to strengthen its own capacity to act as a responsible and resilient security actor.

The second analytical section of the article has demonstrated that the European defence industry represents one of the key determinants of this capacity. The fragmentation of the defence market, limited production capacities, vulnerable supply chains, and a high degree of dependence on external inputs undermine not only the Union's military readiness but also its economic resilience and technological sovereignty. While the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base possesses significant innovative potential, this remains underutilised without coordinated demand, long-term planning, and institutional support. Thus, the defence industry emerges not only as a tool of security policy but as a strategic sector with direct implications for the sustainable development and stability of the European economy.

In this connection, the article has highlighted the increasing role of the EU as a coordinating, regulatory, and stimulatory actor in the field of the defence industry and defence financing. Through instruments such as the EDF, ASAP, EDIRPA, EDIP, and the EPF, the EU is gradually shifting from the position of a peripheral observer toward actively shaping the defence-industrial environment. This process represents a significant institutional transformation that simultaneously exposes the limits of the existing integration framework, particularly regarding the tension between national sovereignty, joint procurement, and the long-term fiscal sustainability of defence expenditure.

Particular attention was devoted to the concept of strategic autonomy as a framework linking the security, industrial, and developmental dimensions of European integration. The analysis confirmed that strategic autonomy does not represent an attempt to isolate Europe or weaken transatlantic ties but is a pragmatic response to changing geopolitical conditions and the increasing uncertainty of the global environment. Autonomy in the sphere of defence is inseparably linked to economic, technological, and energy autonomy, which is reflected in the EU's efforts toward digital and green transitions, the reduction of strategic dependencies, and the strengthening of the overall resilience of European society. In this context, the support for Ukraine appears as a long-term test of the Union's ability to act in a unified, sustainable, and strategic manner, and thus as a trial of its credibility as a global actor.

Based on the analysis conducted, it can be stated that the EU possesses significant potential to become a stable pillar of European security and sustainable development; however, the fulfilment of this potential will depend on the ability to transform crisis measures into permanent institutional mechanisms. It will be crucial to overcome the fragmentation of the defence market, ensure predictable financing for the defence industry, and align national priorities with long-term European objectives in the areas of security, economic stability, and societal resilience.

Regarding policy implications, the article points to the need for a systematic linkage of the EU's security, industrial, and developmental policies. For the defence industry, this necessitates adaptation to the requirements of long-term production cycles, a higher degree of integration into European value chains, and the increasing role of innovation. For the academic sphere, space is opened for further research into the relationships between security, economics, strategic autonomy, sustainable development, and the institutional capacity to respond to complex crises.

In conclusion, it may be added that the current security crisis has created a historical opportunity for the Union not only to strengthen its defence but also to reassess the very foundations of sustainable development under conditions of increasing uncertainty. Whether this opportunity is successfully seized will be a decisive test of political will, strategic vision, and the capacity to act collectively for the benefit of the long-term security, stability, and resilience of European society.

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