

Challenges and Perspectives of the European Union's Security and Defence Policy in the New Geopolitical Era: Fragmentation or Integration?

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Abstract

This article analyses the challenges and perspectives of the European Union's security and defence policy in a new geopolitical era shaped by Russian aggression against Ukraine, growing US-China rivalry, and instability in the EU's neighbourhood. It identifies three key weaknesses that limit the Union's strategic autonomy: insufficient military capabilities, the fragmentation of the defence industry, and a reliance on external suppliers of weapons, equipment, and critical raw materials. Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework that combines political economy, political science, European studies, and security studies, the article examines how existing tools and initiatives, the EDF, PESCO, ASAP, EDIRPA, and the ReArm Europe plan, are responding to these deficits. While these instruments and initiatives demonstrate the EU's ambition to strengthen its security role, their effectiveness remains limited by political divergences and restricted resources. The author concludes that overcoming fragmentation and building sustainable mechanisms for defence cooperation are essential if the EU is to establish itself as a credible security actor in a multipolar world.

KEY WORDS: *Security and defence policy of the European Union, new geopolitical era, challenges, fragmentation, integration.*

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1. Introduction

A new geopolitical era, characterised by a deteriorating global and regional security environment, a worsening security situation in several regions, and the rise of multipolar competition, great power rivalry, and the struggle for influence and resources, presents a fundamental challenge to the European Union (EU) and its security and defence policy. For a long time, the EU defined itself primarily as a civilian power, founded on the values of multilateral cooperation, diplomatic solutions, and economic strength. However, this concept began to waver after 2014, in the context of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent destabilising actions of the Russian Federation in its eastern neighbourhood. A definitive turning point occurred with the full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which marked the end of Europe's post-war security architecture and exposed the Union's unpreparedness to respond to a large-scale conventional war in its immediate vicinity.

In the new geopolitical reality, it has become evident that the EU faces three fundamental problems: (a) an insufficient level of military capabilities and capacities, European armies have been chronically underfunded, possess limited ammunition stockpiles, and are unable to sustain a high-intensity conflict for more than a few weeks; (b) fragmentation of the defence industry—characterised by the duplication of weapon systems, poor interoperability, and the dominance of national interests over common European ones; and (c) dependence on external suppliers and critical raw materials—the EU relies heavily on the US for hardware and on China for the supply of critical materials.

These three factors create a high risk that the EU will be unable to establish itself as an autonomous security actor and will remain dependent on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the United States of America (USA), thereby significantly limiting its ability to be a fully-fledged geopolitical player.

In light of the above, the aim of this paper is to analyse the challenges and prospects of the EU's security and defence policy in the new geopolitical era. The author focuses on identifying the main weaknesses—primarily the fragmentation of the defence industry, the lack of military capabilities and capacities, and the dependence on external suppliers—while also seeking realistic recommendations for strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy and resilience. Although the war in Ukraine serves as the immediate trigger for a more intensive discussion on defence, the goal is a broader reflection on whether the EU can transform from a predominantly economic union into a fully-fledged security actor capable of defending and protecting its interests in a multipolar world.

The author's approach to this paper is based on a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, primarily drawing on: (a) academic studies published in scientific journals and monographs that examine the development of European security and defence policy, its institutional frameworks, and theoretical underpinnings; (b) EU political documents and strategies (e.g., the Strategic Compass, the European Security Strategy, documents concerning the European Defence Fund, Permanent Structured Cooperation, etc.) that illustrate political ambitions and their translation into concrete measures; (c) analyses from think tanks and research institutes (such as the European Council on Foreign Relations, the Centre for European Policy Studies, and the Jacques Delors Institute) that reflect on current issues and problems within the Union's foreign, security, and defence policy; and (d) a comparative analysis of selected initiatives—the European Defence Fund (EDF), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), and the ReArm Europe programme—which represent different approaches to addressing the capabilities deficit and supporting the European defence industry.

The methodological framework is interdisciplinary, combining elements of political economy, political science, European studies, and security studies. Political economy allows for an analysis of the interaction between political decisions, economic interests, and institutional structures, while the perspective of political science and European studies provides an opportunity to reflect on the dynamics of integration processes and the different strategic cultures of member states. At the same time, security studies offer analytical tools for examining the transformation of threats, military capabilities, and the concept of strategic autonomy. The methodology thus combines an analytical framework with a comparative political approach that allows for the analysis and comparison of how individual EU member states approach defence cooperation. Through this approach, the author examines the EU's security and defence policy in terms of its geopolitical context, industrial limitations, and available policy tools, with particular attention paid to current initiatives (EDF, PESCO, ASAP, EDIRPA, and the ReArm Europe Plan) and their ability to overcome existing barriers.

The paper is divided into four chapters. The first chapter analyses the historical context and the current geopolitical landscape of the EU's security and defence policy. The second focuses on the issue of the fragmentation of the European defence industry. The third chapter presents the main EU defence instruments and initiatives, evaluating their effectiveness and limitations. The fourth chapter is dedicated to the political economy of European defence and the prospects for future development. The conclusion summarises the main findings, offers predictions for the coming years, and provides recommendations for policymakers.

The author's goal with this paper is to contribute to the ongoing academic debate on the challenges and future of European security and defence, while also providing an analytical framework that can be useful for practical policymaking. This article demonstrates that the future of European defence and security policy will depend on the ability to overcome fragmentation, secure strategic resources, and build effective and sustainable cooperation mechanisms that will enable the Union to act as a genuine global player in a multipolar world.

2. Geopolitical Context and the Development of EU Security and Defence Policy

The geopolitical context and evolution of the European Union's security and defence policy is the result of a long-term dynamic that intertwines the ambition to strengthen the EU's autonomous position with its close ties to the transatlantic community. The 1992 Maastricht Treaty, which laid the foundation for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), already signalled an ambition to extend the integration project into the areas of security and defence. This step represented a fundamental shift from purely economic integration towards an effort to build a political union with the ability to project power. While the Maastricht Treaty did not explicitly establish EU armed forces, it created the basic framework that was later developed through the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) [1].

The CSDP began to take shape at the turn of the millennium, when Europe faced a series of regional conflicts in the Balkans that revealed its inability to independently manage security crises in its immediate neighbourhood. The experience of the 1999 Kosovo War showed that without the military support of NATO and the United States, the EU could not conduct a large-scale military operation. This led to the development of crisis management [2], European defence structures, the creation of the Political and Security Committee, the EU Military Staff, and the gradual establishment of EU battle groups [3]. Despite these institutional innovations, two key problems became apparent from the outset: a lack of funding and political will among member states to invest in common capabilities and capacities, and the persistent dominance of NATO as the primary guarantor of European security.

The EU's relationship with NATO thus became a defining factor for its entire security and defence policy. On the one hand, there was an effort to build autonomous capabilities and capacities, while on the other, member states—especially

in Eastern and Central Europe—stressed that NATO was the key pillar of defence against external threats. This dualism was also reflected in the so-called "Berlin Plus agreements," which allowed the EU to use NATO's operational capabilities to conduct its own missions [4]. While this synergy enhanced the EU's capabilities, it also confirmed its limited autonomy.

The first major geopolitical turning point came with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when the security situation in Europe deteriorated dramatically [5]. Although the first European Security Strategy was adopted in 2003 [6], its emphasis on multilateral solutions and partnerships became increasingly difficult to sustain after 2014. While the EU's response to the annexation of Crimea included sanctions against Russia [7] and strengthened cooperation with NATO, changes in military capabilities and capacities remained only cosmetic. It became clear that European armies were unprepared for a high-intensity conflict, and the defence industry was unable to respond quickly to the increased demand for weapons and ammunition [8].

The definitive moment for a reassessment of European security policy was the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This event marked the end of the post-war security architecture based on the idea that a large-scale conventional war would not be fought in Europe again [9,10]. The EU found itself in a situation where its member states faced the urgent need to increase military spending, coordinate the supply of ammunition and weapons for Ukraine, and simultaneously re-evaluate their own defence readiness. The unprecedented unity in imposing sanctions on Russia and in providing political support to Ukraine demonstrated that the EU could act quickly and decisively, but in the area of industrial and military capacities, long-unaddressed structural shortcomings once again came to the fore.

One of the EU's key responses to Russian aggression was the adoption of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence in 2022. This document represents the most comprehensive framework for the Union's security and defence policy since its inception and declares the ambition to build its own rapid deployment capacity of up to 5,000 troops by 2030, increase investment in joint research and development, and strengthen cooperation among member states in defence acquisitions. The Strategic Compass also reflects that the EU's security environment is influenced not only by direct threats from Russia but also by structural challenges such as hybrid threats, cyberattacks, and the vulnerability of supply chains [11]. However, the implementation of the document runs up against traditional obstacles: the reluctance of member states to cede some of their national competencies, the limited EU budget, and the absence of a clear mechanism for coordinating defence priorities.

The transatlantic dimension of European security remains another key factor. During Donald Trump's first administration (2017–2021), it became clear that traditional American security guarantees for Europe might no longer be a given. Trump's open criticism of NATO, his questioning of the collective defence commitment, and his emphasis on the economic aspects of allied relations led many European states to seriously consider the need for greater autonomy [12,13]. Although the arrival of Joe Biden's administration renewed the emphasis on transatlantic ties [14], the awareness persists in Europe that future US foreign policy could be volatile and focused primarily on Asia and the Pacific region. This factor strengthens the debate on the EU's strategic autonomy, even though not all member states perceive it in the same way. For Eastern European countries, especially Poland and the Baltic states, the US presence in Europe remains an irreplaceable security guarantee, while France and to some extent Germany are more willing to accept the idea of a stronger European defence identity.

The current geopolitical context of the EU cannot be reduced solely to its relationship with the US and Russia. The rapid rise of China's influence, which has become not only an economic partner but also a systemic rival, poses new dilemmas for the EU. On the one hand, member states are economically linked to the Chinese market and dependent on the supply of critical raw materials, while on the other, there is growing concern about technological dependence and Beijing's geopolitical ambitions. For European defence policy, this presents a dual challenge: to reduce dependence on Chinese supplies in sensitive sectors and to prepare for a scenario in which transatlantic attention is focused primarily on Asia, leaving Europe to bear a greater share of the responsibility for its own security [15,16].

The regional dimension is equally important. The European Union is surrounded by an unstable neighbourhood—from the Western Balkans, where ethnic and political tensions persist, to North Africa and the Middle East, and the Eastern Partnership with countries like Moldova and Georgia, which are exposed to strong pressure from Russia. The EU's ability to respond to these challenges is directly linked to its own capabilities and industrial base. If the Union fails to consolidate its resources and strengthen its defence readiness, its influence in the neighbourhood will continue to wane [17,18].

The geopolitical context of today's European Union is therefore characterised by a triple challenge: restoring credibility towards Russia by strengthening deterrence, maintaining strong transatlantic ties during a period of global transformation, and simultaneously defining its own role in a multipolar world where China and other actors are increasingly dominant. Historical experience and institutional development have provided the EU with a foundation for building a security identity, but the current era demands rapid adaptation, the overcoming of internal fragmentation, and a willingness to invest in capabilities that will enable it to become a genuine strategic actor.

3. Fragmentation and the Limits of the European Defence Industry

One of the most significant obstacles to the development of European defence policy has long been the persistent fragmentation of the defence industry [19]. The most pronounced manifestation of this fragmentation is the duplication of defence systems. Currently, more than 170 types of weapon platforms are used across the EU, while the US armed forces rely on approximately 30 main systems. This means that European armies operate dozens of different types of tanks, armoured vehicles, and aircraft that are not mutually compatible, which increases the costs of maintenance, logistics, and

training. At the same time, it dramatically limits member states' ability to conduct joint operations and achieve effective interoperability. This fragmentation is not limited to large systems; it also affects basic equipment like ammunition, where various calibres and standards cause complications in securing supplies and during joint missions [20].

A second dimension is the lack of joint investment in research and development (R&D). Although the European Defence Fund (EDF) represents the first serious attempt to coordinate R&D at the EU level, the amount of resources is still insufficient compared to global competitors. While the United States invests billions of dollars annually in defence innovation, European projects are often fragmented and conducted at a national level. This leads to a situation where member states rely on their own industrial capacities and protect them from foreign competition, rather than creating joint European projects. The result is the duplication of research programmes and the absence of true European "flagship" projects capable of competing with American or Chinese technologies [21].

Related to this is the issue of joint acquisitions. Despite the stated need to reduce costs and strengthen collective defence capacity, the majority of member states still prefer national procurement. Even during the purchase of support for Ukraine, it became clear that EU-level coordination is limited and often runs into political barriers. Attempts at joint ammunition acquisitions under the ASAP initiative revealed that the EU's industrial capacity is limited, and member states often prefer to buy from external suppliers rather than wait for European production to expand. While this approach increases the short-term availability of equipment, in the long run it weakens the EU's ability to build its own self-sufficient industrial base [22].

A fundamental legislative barrier to creating a single European defence market is Article 346 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). This article allows member states an exemption from internal market rules for defence procurement by citing national security concerns. In practice, this means that states can bypass the principles of competition and award contracts directly to national manufacturers. While this mechanism has a legitimate justification, in practice it leads to protectionism and reinforces market fragmentation. The European Commission has repeatedly attempted to limit the scope of this article and encourage cross-border acquisitions, but member states remain highly sensitive on the issue of sovereignty in the defence industry.

In addition to internal barriers caused by fragmentation, the Union also faces a strong dependence on external suppliers. Despite repeated declarations on the need to strengthen European strategic autonomy, the United States remains the dominant source of cutting-edge military technology for many member states. Purchases of American systems such as F-35 fighter jets, Patriot missile defence systems, or Black Hawk helicopters illustrate that member states often prefer the reliability and technological sophistication of the US industry over the complicated process of building joint European alternatives. This trend has deepened even more since 2022, as several countries, in response to the war in Ukraine, have urgently invested in purchasing American systems rather than waiting for the results of European projects [23,24].

Similarly, there is a growing orientation towards other external suppliers, such as South Korea. In recent years, South Korea has established itself as a significant exporter of military equipment to Europe—Poland, for example, has concluded contracts for the supply of K2 Black Panther tanks and K9 Thunder howitzers. This development indicates that European industrial capacities are unable to respond flexibly to the immediate demand for modern weapon systems, which creates an opening for non-EU suppliers. In the long run, however, this weakens the EU's ability to create a self-sufficient and competitive defence base [25].

A key weakness of European defence autonomy is also the dependence on critical raw materials and supply chains. The modern defence industry relies on rare earths, strategic metals, and sophisticated technologies that are largely imported from third countries. China controls a significant portion of the global production of rare earths, which are essential for the manufacturing of missile systems, radars, and advanced electronic components. The European Union is also dependent on supplies of titanium from Russia, cobalt from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and other materials from states that are geopolitically unstable or represent strategic rivals. This dependence creates a vulnerability that can easily be exploited in times of conflict or geopolitical tension [26].

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have shown that European defence supply chains are neither sufficiently diversified nor resilient to external shocks [27]. The shortage of artillery ammunition that became apparent during the intensive support for Ukraine is a direct consequence of the European industry having long operated under a peacetime logic, with limited production capacities and minimal strategic reserves [28]. This situation not only limits the EU's ability to provide long-term support for Ukraine's war effort but also calls into question its own readiness for a larger-scale conflict.

Fragmentation, dependence on external suppliers, and the vulnerability of supply chains thus collectively create a triple weakness that undermines the credibility of European security and defence policy. Although the EU possesses significant financial resources and technological potential, the lack of coordination and a strategic vision means that these capacities are not translated into concrete and effective results. Without a fundamental consolidation of the industrial base and the building of resilient supply chains, the European Union will continue to rely on external partners, which contradicts the goal of strategic autonomy.

4. Current EU Instruments and Initiatives in Defence

In response to the deteriorating security environment and repeated calls to increase strategic autonomy, the European Union has created several instruments and initiatives over the last decade aimed at strengthening defence cooperation. The goal of these measures is to overcome long-standing fragmentation, support the coordination of

investments, and create an industrial base capable of responding to new threats. While these are ambitious projects, their success depends on the ability of member states to align national interests with common European goals.

One of the most important steps was the establishment of the European Defence Fund (EDF) in 2017, which became a fully-fledged instrument funded by the EU budget from the 2021–2027 programming period. The EDF aims to support joint research and development in defence technology and to motivate member states towards cross-border cooperation. The fund has a budget of approximately €8 billion, with funds allocated to projects involving entities from multiple member states [29]. Although the volume of funding is not comparable to US or Chinese investments, the EDF represents a breakthrough moment because for the first time it allows the EU to finance defence research from the central budget. Its significance lies not only in economic support but also in the political signal that European defence is not exclusively the domain of nation-states but also part of the integration process.

Another pillar of European defence cooperation is Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which was launched in 2017. PESCO brings together most EU member states and allows them to participate in specific defence projects—from cybersecurity to the development of weapon systems. Its added value is its flexibility: states can decide which projects to join, which reduces the risk of political disputes [30]. Nevertheless, PESCO has been criticised for its slow progress and the insufficient commitment of member states. Although more than 60 projects have been launched, few have yielded concrete results in the form of deployable capabilities. PESCO thus often functions more as a political platform than as a tool for a fundamental transformation of the European defence environment.

Among the newest initiatives is the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), adopted in 2023 in response to the urgent need for artillery ammunition supplies for Ukraine and for replenishing the stockpiles of European armies. ASAP is conceived as a short-term instrument aimed at increasing the production capacity of European companies and removing bottlenecks in supply chains [31]. Its budget, while relatively modest, is intended to serve as a catalyst for mobilising private and national investments. However, the experience with ASAP also points to the limits of the European approach: production capacity cannot be expanded overnight and depends on long-term orders that member states are often unwilling to guarantee. ASAP can therefore be an impulse, but by itself, it is not capable of solving the problem of chronic ammunition shortages.

An important tool in the process of strengthening European defence cooperation has been the EDIRPA (European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act) legislation, adopted in 2023. Its goal is to support the common procurement of defence products to reduce market fragmentation and increase the efficiency of expenditures. EDIRPA operates on the principle of financial incentives: member states that opt for joint procurement can receive a contribution from the EU budget, which lowers costs and encourages the creation of larger cross-border contracts [32]. Although this instrument has significant potential, its scope is currently limited by a relatively small budget and the voluntary participation of member states. The true effectiveness of EDIRPA will depend on whether it succeeds in overcoming traditional national preferences and reaching a critical mass of joint projects.

Looking towards the year 2030, the ReArm Europe Plan and its operational framework, Readiness 2030, emphasise the need for a comprehensive strengthening of EU defence capabilities. This is an ambitious initiative that aims not only to increase investment but also to shift the logic of cooperation from ad hoc projects to the systematic building of a common defence base. ReArm Europe places emphasis on creating long-term contracts for European companies, which should incentivise the industry to expand production capacities and become more innovative. The plan also includes a focus on critical areas such as ammunition, air defence, and cybersecurity. In the context of the war in Ukraine, ReArm Europe appears to be the most comprehensive attempt to mobilise the European defence industry in the modern history of the EU [33].

In this context, it is essential that, in addition to overcoming fragmentation in the defence industry and military capabilities, a greater emphasis is placed on deepening civil-military cooperation [34]. This dimension is critical for building the European Union's strategic resilience, as threats such as hybrid operations [35], cyberattacks [36], and disruptions to supply chains or energy supplies [37] require a complex and coordinated response that transcends the traditional military domain. By integrating civilian and military capacities, the Union can achieve synergies that would strengthen its ability to respond to a wide range of current challenges.

In recent years, the discussion about creating a "European Defence Union" has also become increasingly intense. This concept represents the logical culmination of previous integration steps, and its goal is to institutionalise EU defence cooperation in a similar way to what happened with the economic or monetary unions in the past [38]. Proponents of this approach argue that only a defence union would enable the EU to act as a genuine global player and free it from its chronic dependence on the USA. Critics, however, point to the differing strategic cultures of member states and the political sensitivity of the sovereignty issue. For this reason, a Defence Union remains more of a vision than a realistically implemented project, but its frequent mention in political documents suggests that it could be a medium-term goal of European integration [39].

When evaluating the effectiveness of these initiatives, it becomes clear that while the EU has created an impressive arsenal of tools, their implementation runs into recurring obstacles. A lack of political will, limited financial resources, and the prioritisation of national interests over common goals prevent these tools from bringing about a fundamental transformation. The EDF has managed to create a framework for joint research, but its budget is small; PESCO includes numerous projects, but with limited results; ASAP and EDIRPA respond to acute needs, but their effect is short-term and conditional on the voluntary cooperation of member states. The most ambitious ReArm Europe Plan remains at the planning

stage and will depend on whether member states can demonstrate a willingness to invest and coordinate their strategies in the long term.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that the Union's initiatives represent important steps towards strengthening collective defence, but they are not yet capable of overcoming the structural barriers. Their added value lies in creating a framework within which cooperation can mature in the future and in strengthening the European Union's legitimacy as a security actor. However, without further political integration and more courageous financing, they will remain more of a supplement to NATO than a true alternative.

5. The Political Economy of European Defence and Prospects for Future Development

The discussion about the future of European defence is necessarily situated within the sphere of political economy, where the differing strategic cultures, economic interests, and industrial capacities of member states converge. This dimension is crucial, as it shows that strengthening defence cooperation is not just a matter of security threats but also of political compromises and economic incentives. If the EU is to achieve a higher degree of strategic autonomy, it will have to overcome barriers rooted not only in geopolitics but also in the structure of the integration project itself.

It is clear that the most significant obstacles are the political barriers stemming from the different strategic cultures of member states. While countries on the eastern flank, such as Poland and the Baltic states, perceive the threat from Russia as existential and are willing to invest in strengthening military capabilities and capacities [40], other member states, particularly in Southern Europe, focus more on threats arising from instability in North Africa or the Middle East [41]. Western Europe, in turn, often approaches defence from a global security perspective, emphasising diplomatic solutions and multilateral frameworks. These differences make it difficult for member states to agree on unified priorities and strategies. Furthermore, the issue of strengthening the European Commission's competencies in defence remains highly sensitive. Several countries refuse to transfer sovereignty in this area to the supranational level, which complicates the building of a truly integrated defence framework.

Beyond political factors, the economic dimension of European defence is a key aspect. The EU's budget has long been limited and primarily focused on policies like cohesion and agriculture. Defence spending remains predominantly in the hands of member states, which limits the EU's ability to finance more ambitious projects. Recently, however, discussions have emerged about the introduction of European defence bonds, which would allow for the joint financing of larger investments [42]. Such a step would represent a fundamental shift in the logic of funding European defence and could provide a stable source for the development of industrial capacities. Sceptics, however, warn of the risk of political disputes and indebtedness that could weaken EU unity.

The future of European defence is also inseparably linked to industrial challenges, which represent both a key limitation and a potential for strengthening strategic autonomy. The European defence industry is still fragmented and dominated by national champions that rarely consolidate into broader projects. The lack of long-term orders also discourages companies from investing in expanding their production capacities. While demand for ammunition, armoured vehicles, and air defence systems has increased since 2022, the industry is running into limitations in terms of labour, supply chains, and the regulatory environment [43]. If European companies are to compete with American or Korean manufacturers, they need a stable and predictable framework that guarantees them a long-term return on investment. Without this, the EU will continue to rely on imported technology, which will weaken its defence autonomy.

In this context, the question of the relationship with NATO is often raised, as it remains the fundamental pillar of European security. The United States provides military capabilities that Europe cannot yet replace, particularly in areas of strategic transport, satellite reconnaissance, and nuclear deterrence [44]. Therefore, the discussion about strengthening the EU's defence dimension should not be understood as an effort to compete with NATO, but rather as a way to complement it. From Washington's perspective, strengthening European capabilities is welcomed, as long as it leads to a fairer distribution of the burden. For the EU, the challenge is to find a balance between building its own autonomy and preserving the transatlantic partnership, which continues to be the guarantor of collective security [45].

From a long-term perspective, there is an increasingly frequent discussion about the possibility of moving towards the aforementioned "European Defence Union." This concept would mean institutionalising existing initiatives, linking them to the European legal framework, and creating a common defence market supported by supranational funding. Such a step would fundamentally deepen integration and allow the EU to act as a unified actor not only in the economic sphere but also in the security domain [39]. The realisation of this vision, however, runs into political and legal limitations, as it would require an amendment to the founding treaties and the consent of all member states. For this reason, a "defence union" is currently more of a medium-term goal, the fulfilment of which will depend on the evolution of the geopolitical situation, political will, and the EU's economic capabilities.

Ultimately, the political economy of European defence is a complex combination of political, economic, and industrial factors that collectively determine the direction of integration. If the current barriers can be overcome and a long-term sustainable model of funding and production can be built, the European Union can take a significant step towards greater resilience and autonomy. However, if member states continue to prioritise specific national interests and short-term solutions, there is a risk that the EU's security and defence policy will remain fragmented and reliant on external partners.

6. Conclusions

The European Union's security and defence policy in the new geopolitical era is shaped by a combination of external threats and internal weaknesses, which together determine the limits and prospects of its future development. The analysis has shown that Russian aggression against Ukraine, the growing pressure from China, and the uncertainty in transatlantic relations have created an unprecedentedly challenging environment in which the European Union has no option but to increase its capabilities and capacities. However, these geopolitical challenges are met by the fragmentation of the defence industry, industrial weakness, and insufficient coordination among member states, which fundamentally limits the EU's ability to respond to new threats in a unified and effective manner.

The main findings suggest that the European security architecture is exposed to four key problems. Firstly, geopolitical threats, which are more pronounced today than at any time since the end of the Cold War, require systematic and rapid adaptation. Secondly, the fragmentation of the defence industry causes duplication, low interoperability, and the inefficient use of resources. Thirdly, industrial weakness combined with insufficient production capacities and dependence on external suppliers limits the EU's ability to ensure long-term defence readiness. Fourthly, insufficient coordination between member states and between EU institutions means that the initiatives adopted—although ambitious—do not achieve their full potential.

From a scientific perspective, this study contributes by analysing the interconnection of geopolitical factors, political barriers, and industrial limitations within a single analytical framework. It shows that the problem cannot be reduced to a single dimension—neither geopolitics, nor economics, nor industrial capacities alone can explain the complexity of European defence policy. On the contrary, only their mutual interaction reveals why the EU is capable of generating a multitude of political initiatives, but with only a limited impact on real readiness. This complex approach provides a new perspective on the debate about the future of European defence and opens the door for further empirical and theoretical research.

The prediction for future development suggests two basic scenarios. In the first scenario, the EU manages to move towards deeper integration, which would include the consolidation of the defence industry, the introduction of new financial mechanisms (such as defence bonds), and the gradual creation of a single defence market. This scenario could lead to the formation of a European Defence Union, which would strengthen the EU's position as a global actor while complementing NATO. The second scenario assumes a continuation of the current fragmentation, where national interests remain decisive and EU initiatives are merely complementary. In this case, the EU would continue to rely on the United States and NATO, thereby preserving collective security, but at the cost of permanent dependence and limited autonomy.

Based on these findings, it is possible to formulate several recommendations for the future of European security and defence policy. First and foremost, it is essential to strengthen the funding of defence initiatives at the EU level. Current mechanisms, while innovative, do not have a sufficient budget to bring about fundamental change. The introduction of European defence bonds or other joint financial instruments could provide a stable basis for investment. Secondly, the EU should create a common defence market that would remove the barriers stemming from Article 346 TFEU and enable a truly competitive environment with more efficient resource utilisation. Thirdly, there is a need to increase the production of ammunition and critical raw materials, which requires long-term orders and investments in the diversification of supply chains. Fourthly, the European Union should develop a realistic partnership with NATO and the USA, which would not be built on the illusion of complete independence, but on a pragmatic division of responsibility and the strengthening of Europe's contribution to common defence.

In conclusion, the European Union stands at a historical crossroads. The new geopolitical era requires more decisive and coordinated steps than it has taken in the past. The success of European security and defence policy will depend on whether current initiatives can be transformed into a systematic and long-term strategy. Only then will the EU be able to face the growing threats, strengthen its resilience, and act as a confident and credible actor in a multipolar world. If this step is not taken, there is a risk that the Union will remain trapped in chronic fragmentation, where individual efforts neutralise one another and its geopolitical weight is limited. Conversely, if member states show the political will and courage to embrace deeper integration, European security policy could become one of the most important pillars of European integration in the 21st century, comparable to the common monetary or trade policies. Such a scenario would fundamentally deepen not only the military but also the political and economic dimensions of the European project.

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