

Security Challenges for Europe in the Era of Great Power Rivalry: Structural Challenges for Sovereign European Defence

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Abstract

This paper critically analyses the escalating security challenges facing the European Union, primarily defined by the Russian Federation's military aggression against Ukraine after 2022 and the return of great power tensions. This transformation of the security environment has definitively ended the era of post-conflict peace on the European continent and exposed deep structural vulnerabilities in assuring sovereign European defence. The analysis identifies three key structural challenges: the critical fragmentation of Member States' defence capabilities and capacities, the limited ability to respond to high-intensity conflict, and the industrial unpreparedness of the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base. It is asserted that the EU's persistent reliance on external guarantees, particularly amid rising transatlantic uncertainty, jeopardises its political sovereignty. To overcome these structural limitations, the paper advocates for a deeper integration trajectory towards the concept of a Total Defence Union. It posits that strengthening European defence is a strategic imperative for maintaining Europe's stability and international standing in an era of increasing great power rivalry.

KEY WORDS: *European Union, security, defence, conflict, threats, challenges.*

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1. Introduction

The current development of human society, not only across the European continent but also globally, is marked by a deterioration of the security environment and situation. This decline is coupled with the proliferation of hybrid and various asymmetric security threats and risks [1-2], which poses numerous challenges for the crisis management capabilities of states and international organisations alike [3-4]. This complexity is further exacerbated by escalating great power rivalry, heightened multipolar competition, and regional [5].

Following 2022, the European security environment underwent its most profound transformation since the end of the Cold War. The armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine not only violated the fundamental norms of international law that underpinned the post-war European order, but also definitively concluded the period in which a major conventional war on the European continent was considered unlikely [6]. The war in Ukraine exposed deep structural weaknesses within the European security architecture, particularly in the domain of defence capabilities and capacities, strategic autonomy, and the ability to respond to a long-term systemic threat emanating from a revisionist state [7].

The Russian aggression has far-reaching implications that transcend the bilateral conflict between Moscow and Kyiv. It challenges the very foundations of the European security architecture, which for decades had been built on the premise of a stable transatlantic partnership, the dominant role of NATO, and a limited necessity for autonomous European defence capacities [8]. It became evident that the European Union, despite the gradual evolution of its Common

Security and Defence Policy, possesses only a constrained ability to independently confront a high-intensity interstate conflict, spanning military, industrial, and political dimensions [7].

Furthermore, the contemporary security situation is shaped by a broader geopolitical context. The relative retreat of the United States from direct responsibility for European security—a trend intensified by internal political developments in the US and the strategic shift towards the Indo-Pacific region—creates an unprecedented level of uncertainty for Europe. This development increases pressure on European states to assume a greater share of responsibility for their own defence and to re-evaluate their long-standing dependence on external security guarantees [9].

In this context, the issue of strengthening the level of European defence becomes not only a technical problem related to insufficient military capabilities and capacities, but also a fundamental political and normative question concerning the future of the European project. Defence ceases to be a peripheral policy and enters the very core of the discussion about sovereignty, the Union's ability to protect its values, and ensure the stability of the European continent. Europe's response to the Russian threat and the continuing war in Ukraine will have long-term consequences, not only for the security of Member States but also for the global standing of the European Union as a political actor [10].

The aim of this contribution is to analyse the need to increase the level of European defence in the context of the fundamental deterioration of the security situation in Europe after 2022, with a specific emphasis on the Russian threat and the consequences of the war in Ukraine. The paper focuses on identifying the main structural weaknesses of the current European defence policy and assessing the arguments in favour of a more pronounced reinforcement of the EU's defence capabilities and capacities, spanning military power, the defence industry, civil preparedness, and political decision-making.

The primary research question of this paper is: to what extent does the current security reality in Europe necessitate a fundamental strengthening of European defence, and what are the main limits and possibilities of this process within the EU framework? This main question is supplemented by subsidiary questions concerning the nature of the Russian threat, the EU's capacity to respond to a long-term, high-intensity conflict, the relationship between European defence and NATO, and the role of supporting Ukraine within the broader framework of ensuring European security and defence.

From a methodological perspective, this work is based on a qualitative analysis of relevant strategic documents, policy analyses, and existing academic literature in the fields of security studies, international relations, and European studies. It primarily utilises an analytic-descriptive and normative approach, which allows for not only the analysis of the current state of European defence but also a critical evaluation of its shortcomings and the outlining of possible directions for future development. The paper draws upon secondary sources, including official European Union documents, policy papers from leading European research institutes, and peer-reviewed scholarly publications.

The structure is as follows: The first chapter focuses on the deterioration of the security environment in Europe after 2022 and analyses the main characteristics of the Russian threat in the context of the war in Ukraine. The second chapter identifies the key structural weaknesses of European defence, including the limitations of the Common Security and Defence Policy, the fragmentation of defence capabilities, and the issue of strategic autonomy. The third chapter develops the arguments in favour of strengthening European defence and discusses possible conceptual frameworks for the future development of European defence integration. The final section summarises the main findings of the paper and highlights the implications for European defence policymaking in the coming years.

2. Deterioration of the European Security Environment after 2022

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 represents a fundamental rupture in Europe's post-war security settlement. For the first time since the end of the Second World War, a large-scale conventional aggression by one European state against another took place, with the explicit aim of forcibly changing borders and eliminating the sovereign political existence of the attacked state. This development has not only radically exacerbated the security situation on the European Union's eastern flank but has also called into question the basic assumptions upon which the European security architecture has long been built [11].

The security implications of the Russian invasion extend beyond the scope of direct military conflict. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that high-intensity interstate conflict is once again a realistic scenario in Europe, despite decades of economic integration, institutional cooperation, and the presumed normative transformation of the European space. European states have been forced to confront a reality where classic military threats, large-scale troop movements, mass artillery combat, and attacks on civilian infrastructure are not relics of the past but are integral components of the current security environment [8].

However, Russia's strategy towards Europe cannot be reduced solely to conventional military operations. The conflict in Ukraine is accompanied by a broad spectrum of hybrid, political, economic, and information tools that are systematically employed to destabilise the European environment. Hybrid threats encompass cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, information operations aimed at polarising societies, support for extremist and Eurosceptic political forces, as well as the instrumentalisation of migration and energy dependencies as coercive tools. These activities are conducted over the long term, in a coordinated manner, and with the objective of undermining the internal cohesion of the European Union and its Member States [12].

From a military perspective, Russia has demonstrated a willingness to sustain high material and human losses in pursuit of its strategic objectives. Concurrently, it has shown an ability for the gradual adaptation of military procedures, the mobilisation of its defence industry, and the transition to a long-term conflict regime. For Europe, this signifies a

confrontation with a state prepared to wage a war of attrition while simultaneously combining military power with political and economic coercion. Such a character of threat creates a fundamentally different security reality from that which dominated the period following the end of the Cold War.

One of the most significant consequences of the Russian invasion is the definitive end of the illusion of a so-called 'post-conflict Europe'. The premise that the European continent had entered a period of permanent peace, in which military force had lost its relevance as an instrument of international politics, proved to be erroneous. The war in Ukraine exposed the limits of normative approaches to security, which placed primary emphasis on economic interconnectedness, multilateral diplomacy, and legal obligations, but underestimated the potential of revisionist actors to challenge this order by force [13].

Concurrently, a gradual erosion of multilateral security structures, which were intended to guarantee the stability of the European space, can be observed. International arms control regimes have been systematically weakened or completely degraded in recent years, while mechanisms of collective security have proven inadequate in deterring or halting open aggression. In this context, the capacity of existing institutions to effectively prevent conflict diminishes, and the importance of power factors, including military capabilities and the ability for long-term resource mobilisation, is reinforced [14].

An additional factor deepening European security uncertainty is the strategic ambiguity of transatlantic relations. Although NATO remains the principal pillar of European defence, the increasing uncertainty regarding the long-term commitment of the United States to Europe is escalating pressure on European states to strengthen their own defensive capacity. Shifts in American foreign policy priorities, internal political fluctuations, and the emphasis on transferring greater responsibility to European allies are undermining the long-standing stable assumption of US security leadership in Europe [15].

The strategic uncertainty in transatlantic relations does not signify an immediate weakening of NATO but rather creates an environment in which the issue of autonomous European defence is becoming increasingly pressing. Europe finds itself in a situation where it must anticipate the possibility that, in future crisis scenarios, support from the US may be less extensive, more conditional, or time limited [15]. This uncertainty fundamentally alters the calculus of European security policies.

Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has a long-term destabilising impact on the entire European security space. Irrespective of its specific outcome, it is evident that Russia and Europe will face a prolonged period of tension, distrust, and security rivalry. The possibility of a so-called 'frozen conflict' or a long-term armistice without a comprehensive political solution creates a persistent source of instability along the European Union's eastern border. Such a scenario would entail a continuing threat of escalation, hybrid operations, and political coercion [16].

From this perspective, the war in Ukraine represents not only a regional conflict but a catalyst for a deeper transformation of the European security environment. It compels Europe to re-evaluate the fundamental premises of its own security, the role of military force, and the necessity for a systematic strengthening of its defence capabilities and capacities. Without the ability to respond adequately to these challenges, the European Union risks not only weakening its security but also losing political credibility and its capacity to act as a stabilising actor in the broader international environment.

3. Structural Weaknesses of European Defence

Despite the increasing awareness of the deteriorating security situation in Europe, European defence remains burdened by deeply rooted structural weaknesses that limit its capacity to adequately respond to current and future security challenges. These weaknesses are political, military, industrial, and institutional in nature, and they reflect a long-standing misalignment between the European Union's declared defence ambitions and its actual capabilities [17].

One of the critical problems in European defence is its significant fragmentation, which is a direct consequence of national sovereignty in defence planning and decision-making. Defence remains one of the last areas in which EU Member States are extremely reluctant to delegate competencies to the supranational level. The result is the existence of parallel national armed forces with divergent doctrines, equipment, readiness levels, and degrees of interoperability. This fragmentation leads to the inefficient use of resources, duplication of capabilities, and a limited ability for collective force deployment in the event of a severe security crisis [18].

The fragmentation of European defence is closely linked to a lack of political will to implement deeper defence integration. Although Member States repeatedly declare support for strengthening European defence cooperation, in practice, they often prioritise short-term national interests over long-term collective security. The diverse strategic cultures, historical experiences, and geographical priorities of individual states lead to differing perceptions of threats and an unwillingness to share common risks. This political context significantly restricts the EU's ability to act quickly, uniformly, and decisively [19].

A significant manifestation of this discrepancy between ambition and reality is the limitations of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) [20]. Despite the CSDP having undergone some development in recent years, it remains primarily focused on low-to-medium-intensity crisis management, civilian missions, and limited military operations outside the Union's territory. It is not conceived as an instrument of collective defence nor as a mechanism for deterring a high-intensity state adversary. Thus, the gap between the political rhetoric of a 'geopolitical Europe' and the EU's actual military capabilities remains pronounced [13].

Particularly problematic is the persistent contradiction between the concept of the European Union's strategic autonomy and its factual dependence on NATO and the United States. Strategic autonomy has become an important political concept intended to express Europe's capacity to act independently in the domain of security and defence [21]. However, in practice, the majority of EU Member States continue to regard NATO as the main pillar of their security and the US as the irreplaceable provider of strategic capacities, including nuclear deterrence, strategic transport, intelligence, and command and control capabilities [22].

This dependence is not inherently problematic, provided that the transatlantic partnership remains stable and predictable. However, under conditions of increasing strategic uncertainty, it poses a severe risk. Europe possesses only limited capabilities to conduct large-scale military operations without US support, which significantly restricts its strategic flexibility. The concept of strategic autonomy thus remains more of a normative goal than an empirical reality [23], and the ambiguities surrounding its practical realisation undermine the credibility of European defence policy.

Another fundamental weakness of European defence is inadequate defence spending and its uneven distribution among Member States. Although there has been an increase in defence budgets in response to the war in Ukraine, this increase is often delayed, inconsistent, and in many cases insufficient to address long-term deficits. The result is a situation where a few states bear a disproportionately large share of the defence burden, while others contribute only minimally [24]. This asymmetry undermines internal solidarity and weakens Europe's collective defensive capability.

Insufficient investment in defence is also clearly reflected in the state of the European defence industry. Current European production capacities are not tailored to the requirements of long-term, high-intensity conflict. Fragmentation of national markets, protectionism in procurement, and the absence of coordinated planning led to inefficient production, limited standardisation, and low production volumes. Europe has thus proven unprepared to rapidly replenish stocks of ammunition, weapons, and equipment to the extent required by both the support for Ukraine and the Member States' own defence needs [25].

Finally, European defence faces significant institutional and legal constraints. Decision-making in the area of security and defence within the EU is predominantly based on the principle of unanimity, which severely complicates the adoption of fast and ambitious decisions [26]. The absence of clearly defined powers at the EU level, limited budgetary instruments, and fragmented competencies among institutions create a complex and often ineffective management environment. This institutional framework was not designed to manage long-term systemic security crises, such as the war in Ukraine and the confrontation with a revisionist power.

Overall, it can be concluded that the current architecture of European defence exhibits a marked divergence between political ambitions and the real capacity to act. Without overcoming fragmentation, strengthening political will, removing industrial and institutional limitations, and achieving a realistic understanding of strategic autonomy, the European Union will remain a constrained security actor, incapable of fully responding to the fundamental challenges of the contemporary security environment.

4. Arguments for Enhancing European Defence

The deterioration of the security environment in Europe and the identified structural weaknesses of European defence create a compelling case for the fundamental strengthening of the European Union's defence capabilities. Under conditions of a continuing war in Ukraine, escalating systemic rivalry, and the strategic uncertainty of transatlantic relations, defence ceases to be a secondary policy and becomes a fundamental prerequisite for the functioning of the European political and economic order [27]. Consequently, the strengthening of European defence must be viewed not merely as a technical issue of military capacities but as a complex political project with profound security, economic, and normative implications.

The core argument in favour of raising the level of European defence is the need to restore credible deterrence vis-à-vis a state actor willing to use military force to advance its political goals. Europe is facing a security challenge that is neither short-term nor isolated, but systemic and protracted. Without sufficient military capabilities, readiness, and the capacity to conduct large-scale defensive operations, the European response to this threat remains unconvincing [28]. Thus, a reinforced European defence fulfils not only a protective function but also a stabilising one, as it raises the costs for a potential aggressor and reduces the risk of further conflict escalation.

In this context, the concept of a European Defence Union (EDU) is increasingly gaining traction, expressing the ambition for systematic and deeper integration of Member States' defence policies, capabilities, and industrial resources. This concept extends beyond existing cooperation mechanisms and places emphasis on long-term joint planning, coordinated investments, and the development of capabilities necessary for collective defence. Part of this discussion is also the broader concept of a so-called Total Defence Union, which underscores the necessity of engaging the entire society in defence, including civil infrastructure, industrial production, cyber security, and societal resilience [29].

The integration of the military, civil, and industrial dimensions of defence represents a key prerequisite for increasing Europe's overall defensive capability. The war in Ukraine has shown that modern conflicts are not waged exclusively on the battlefield but affect the energy sector, transport, communication networks, and the information space. Defence thus becomes a complex system requiring coordination between the armed forces, state institutions, and the private sector. Strengthening European defence therefore also implies investment in critical infrastructure, civil preparedness, the protection of supply chains, and technological sovereignty [30].

From a normative standpoint, the strengthening of European defence is intrinsically linked to the protection of the fundamental values upon which the European Union rests. Democratic governance, the rule of law, political pluralism, and human rights are not self-evident but require a secure environment in which they can be sustained and developed. Without the capacity to protect its own political space from external coercion and destabilising activities, there is a risk of gradual erosion of the sovereignty of both the Member States and the Union itself [31]. European defence is therefore not in contradiction with its normative character but is its essential prerequisite.

A significant argument in favour of strengthening European defence is also the support for Ukraine, which can be understood as an investment in Europe's long-term security. Military, financial, and political assistance to Ukraine directly contributes to undermining Russia's ability to continue its aggressive policy and enhances the security of the European Union's eastern border. Furthermore, support for Ukraine allows Europe to gain practical experience in coordinating defence policies, joint procurement, and developing industrial capacities that are also indispensable for the self-defence of Member States [32].

In the long run, strengthening European defence opens up several possible development scenarios. The optimistic scenario anticipates the gradual consolidation of European defence capabilities, deepening cooperation in the defence industry, and a clearer division of labour between the EU and NATO. The less favourable scenario involves the persistence of fragmentation, insufficient investment, and dependence on external actors, which would lead to a weakening of Europe's ability to protect its interests. The realistic scenario will likely navigate between these two poles and will depend on the political will of Member States to overcome existing limitations and adapt to the new security reality [33].

From this perspective, it can be concluded that strengthening European defence is not a choice but a strategic necessity stemming from the changed security environment. The European Union stands at a juncture, facing the decision of whether to remain a reactive actor reliant on external security guarantees, or to gradually transform into an entity capable of actively shaping its own security future. The outcome of this decision will have a profound impact on Europe's stability, sovereignty, and international standing in the coming decades.

5. Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to analyse the necessity of enhancing the level of European defence in the context of the fundamental transformation of Europe's security environment after 2022, with a specific emphasis on the Russian aggression against Ukraine and its wider security implications [34]. The analysis demonstrated that the war in Ukraine does not represent an isolated regional conflict but a systemic challenge that fundamentally questions the previous assumptions of the European security order and reveals deeply rooted weaknesses in European defence.

The first section of the paper established that the Russian invasion concluded the period in which Europe was perceived as a post-conflict space, reopening the question of high-intensity interstate military conflict on the European continent. The nature of the Russian threat, combining conventional military means with hybrid, political, and economic instruments, creates a complex security environment for Europe, to which existing institutional and capacity frameworks only respond with limitations. Concurrently, the strategic uncertainty of transatlantic relations is deepening, increasing pressure on the European Union to assume greater responsibility for its own security.

In the second section, the key structural weaknesses of European defence were identified, which prevent an effective response to the new security challenges. Fragmentation of defence capabilities, divergences in the political will of Member States, the limited ambitions of the Common Security and Defence Policy, persistent dependence on NATO and the United States, as well as inadequate and uneven defence spending constitute a set of factors that undermine the European Union's defensive capacity. These weaknesses were also significantly evident in the defence industry, whose current capacities do not meet the requirements of long-term conflict and systematic support for allies.

Based on these findings, arguments in favour of a fundamental strengthening of European defence were developed in the third section. The reinforcement of the European Union's defence capabilities is shown to be a strategic necessity that transcends narrowly understood military aspects and also encompasses civil preparedness, industrial production, and societal resilience. The concept of a European Defence Union, or the extended model of a Total Defence Union, provides an analytical framework for integrating these dimensions and overcoming existing structural limitations.

The authors also point out that strengthening European defence is not contradictory to the normative identity of the European Union but is its necessary prerequisite. The protection of democratic values, the rule of law, and political sovereignty requires a security environment in which the use of force as an instrument of revisionist policy is effectively deterred. In this context, support for Ukraine is legitimately interpreted as an investment in Europe's long-term stability and security, rather than as an external commitment without strategic return.

In response to the main research question, it can be concluded that the current security reality unequivocally confirms the need for a significant increase in the level of European defence. Without systematic reforms, higher investments, and deeper integration of defence policies, the European Union will remain exposed to strategic vulnerability and a limited ability to respond to crisis scenarios. The risks of inaction, moreover, extend beyond the military sphere and include the weakening of political sovereignty, internal fragmentation, and the loss of international credibility.

In closing, it can be stated that the future of European security will largely depend on the ability of Member States to overcome traditional limitations in the field of defence and adapt to the new strategic environment. The strengthening of European defence does not represent an end goal, but a process that requires long-term political commitment, institutional innovation, and societal support. The outcome of this process will determine whether Europe

remains a secure and stable political space or becomes a passive object of geopolitical dynamics that it is unable to influence itself.

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