
EUROPEAN SECURITY DIMENSION-FROM IDEA TO REALIZATION

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Abstract: The issue of building the strategic autonomy of the defense of Europe, i.e. the European Union, has been developing since the Cold War. During this period, the greatest proponent was the President of France, Charles De Gaulle. When the Cold War ended, several attempts appeared for the strategic autonomy of the European defense mechanism, mainly in the Paris-London-Bonn relationship. However, the European Union was a great hostage of the American military and security leadership, so that every attempt was dismissed by the United States as an "unnecessary attempt to duplicate the NATO Alliance". We wonder what the role of the collective defense of the EU is at this moment, the answer is simple: the European defense and security dimension has a secondary role in this domain. Otherwise, the term defense-security dimension encompasses all military capacities of the EU member states to which they belong individually or jointly in coordination and operability in the territory of the EU or outside it. The modest parameters in the development of the European defense-security dimension could not compete with the superiority of the United States in this field, let alone threaten its supremacy. In interpreting this "success" of the Europeans, which seems to have been first seriously brought to awareness by Donald Trump when he demanded a greater financial contribution from NATO members from Europe plus Canada to increase their participation first to 2% of the national budget and later to an increase to 4-5% annually. The second factor in Europe's awareness was the war in Ukraine and the "potential threat" from Russian aggression towards the Baltics, Poland and the rest of Europe. How to explain Europe's delay in this domain? History was not very kind to the idea of building an autonomous European defense dimension. The idea failed at the first step. The Franco-British rivalry and the personalities who led France (Pierre Mendès France) and Great Britain (Winston Churchill) did not find a consensus on the establishment of the European Defense Community (EDC). The project did not pass the French Parliament on 30.08. 1954, due to the rejection of the Gaullist and Communist currents who believed that France should not give up its sovereignty but also out of fear that Germany would start arming again nine years after the capitulation. Thus, the idea of creating a "European army" failed. Otherwise, the Treaty of 27.05.1952 envisaged the supranational "European Security Community, for which unified institutions, armed forces and a budget were envisaged". This military-operational capacity, under NATO command, was supposed to realize the disarmament of defeated and divided West and East Germany. The deeply buried idea of creating a European army was so unpopular that no one thought of resurrecting it until the fall of communism and the demolition of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The implosion of Yugoslavia and the interethnic wars at the end of the 20th century and especially the 21st century threats that Europe faced on its borders, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the most recent war between the United States and Israel against Iran, especially the geopolitical consequences of the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, mobilized the expert and military-political public in Europe towards returning to the idea of the autonomous defense of Europe. The European Security and Defense Peacekeeping Mission was first inaugurated after the tensions in North Macedonia (2001) under the name EUFOR Concordia starting on 31.03.2003. With the war in Ukraine and Donald Trump's new policy of "First the US and then the rest", the Europeans responded with the slogan "First Europe and then the rest". It seems that Donald Trump's unexpected critical attitude had an educational and mobilizing effect towards the "inability", "stinginess" and lack of interest of Europe to build a "self-sufficient security and defense system" financed by the EU.

Keywords: European Union, European Defense, Security, Autonomy, Ukraine, Russia

1.INTRODUCTION

The first germs of the European defense-security dimension can be located in the post-World War II era marked by the Cold War that began in 1947 and was marked by the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan on the one hand and the escapist doctrine of Stalin and the creation of military-political blocs. Western Europe, exhausted and devastated by possible Soviet expansionism, accepted the leadership of the United States. Given that, as Samuel Huntington put it, "the twentieth century was a century of ideological clashes", it is understandable that the leaders of the United States and Western Europe had identical strategic goals and interests. The only major difference between the Western allies of the so-called "free world" differed in financial capacities and resources. Western Europe depended on the finances and credits of the United States, its daughter, whose discovery started from the European ports led by Christopher Columbus in 1492. After the failure of the European Defense Community (EDC), under pressure from the United States, the Western European Union (WEU) was created, the consensus of which was found in the Treaties of Paris (1954). In essence, the rejected and unrealistic idea of creating a European defense

federation found a certain minimum compensation with the creation of the WEU, which was a materialization of the Western Union established by the Treaty of Brussels (1948). The WEU essentially functioned as a virtual organization of NATO, was reduced to a parliamentary assembly and consultation of military institutions. During the 1980s, the WEU still existed through regular annual sessions of its Assembly in which the other post-communist states also had observer status. Finally, in 2011, the WEU was dissolved. At this time, no one in Europe predicted that Russia would invade Ukraine on the eastern borders of the Old Continent and that the war would enter its fifth year. Europe and its leaders felt threatened by Putin's dangerous Russian ambitions, but also by the great turn of US President Donald Trump. Trump openly told European leaders that in the future "the EU will have to take care of its own defense and security." The war in Ukraine and Donald Trump's policies gave birth to the idea of "European defense." Just like after the end of the Cold War, the concept of an "autonomous defense and security dimension of Europe" was renewed again. This time, the United States did not stand as an obstacle but as a stimulus that caused the determination of the Eurocrats to allocate 800 billion euros for security and defense by 2030. But is such political will real? Will the occasional unity and frequent divisions and misunderstandings on various strategic issues not marginalize this ambitious idea of the German-French couple Merz-Macron, supported by the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, succeed in realizing this strategic plan? Let us not forget that Europe is facing, in addition to the war in Ukraine as the main donor to Ukraine, a shortage of energy resources due to sanctions against Russia and the war in Iran due to the destroyed energy depots in the Gulf and the blocked Strait of Hormuz. At the same time, Europe is experiencing a severe economic recession and a decline in living standards, especially after the imposition of sanctions on Russia, for many years its largest supplier of natural gas. In all this nonsense, the anti-European policy of President Donald Trump imposed itself as an added negative value. Although the first strategic contours of the Trump II administration were visible as early as early 2025, after the speech of Vice President J.D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference, the messages sent to the EU significantly influenced the change in European perceptions. At the same time, the new US National Security Strategy, published in early December 2025, formalized this orientation as a permanent guiding framework for Trump's foreign policy. Of course, it remains to be seen to what extent this strategy will be implemented, given that such documents often serve more as communication tools than as real political plans. However, according to European politicians and experts, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Gonzalez, former French European Commissioner Thierry Breton, and partly French President Emmanuel Macron reacted openly to the hostile tone adopted by Washington towards the European Union. Was this a sign of deeper strategic rethinking of transatlantic relations? The question deepened after the outbreak of the crisis over the Strait of Hormuz (Iran) and Trump's appeal for the engagement of his European allies in the deblockade of the strait and the war he himself provoked. This appeal for help was ignored by both the EU and NATO. Although Washington used such strong language against the Union, Europeans realized that they were faced with a world in which the United States had become a difficult partner that was gradually moving away from their historical partnership. This strategic shift will pose the greatest challenge for European defense and strategy in 2026, and could also generate profound changes on the European side.(ANDERSON, J. J.,2024)

2. A SHORT SURVEY OF EU SECURITY AND DEFENCE

When the Cold War ended, the fear among Europeans of the dangers emanating from the "dangerous Russian Bear" gradually disappeared. The Soviet Union was collapsing, most of the former USSR became independent, and the world stopped fearing a nuclear war between East and West. Thus, the topic of collective defense of Europe faded. Its territory and population lived in prosperity that was occasionally disrupted by wars in the Balkans. Soon, in 1994, Europe turned to a new security architecture personified in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This important multilateral organization inherited the organization that was created in the mid-1970s under the name of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), from which it emerged from the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference (1975), to which the former Yugoslavia was also a signatory. What an absurdity. The state that fought for peace, cooperation, and prosperity was collapsing in interethnic conflicts and finally disintegrated. It was assumed that the division of Europe was a done deal, and that the only thing left to do was to end the chess game with a draw. Optimism was bolstered by several international diplomatic gestures of goodwill that resulted in several significant agreements of friendship and trust between the ideologically divided powers of the Cold War. Russia had ambitions to join NATO with ambitions to become a member of the EU, but European leaders of the 1990s did not have such a vision. During this period, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and Russia (1994) was signed, the partnership cooperation between NATO and Russia, with the adoption of the NATO-Russia Founding Act (1997), and finally the creation of the NATO-Russia Council in 2002. During this period, the wars in the Balkans, the conflict in Bosnia, Kosovo and North Macedonia had already been fought. Although these years marked a major step towards the homogenization of peace on the Old Continent, the EU became aware of the need for an autonomous security and defense dimension. European forces

were supposed to mediate and intervene in Bosnia, where Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats were fighting. The balance of the Balkan wars was devastating. Around 150,000 soldiers and civilians died during the conflicts, which began in Slovenia, spread through Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina and finally ended in North Macedonia (1991-2001). These conflicts ended with peace agreements in Dayton, Kumanovo and Ohrid. What was evident was the devastating conclusion that Europe was not prepared to act independently in its peace operations. Europe relied on the NATO Alliance and the United States. At the same time, the peace agreements were the work of American military-political diplomacy. The Bosnian War ended in 1995 with the Dayton Agreement (USA). (FAURE, S.2022, pp, 13-19) It only showed Europe's inability to resolve the most difficult war since World War II on European soil. The second major war was that of Kosovo. It was NATO's air campaign that helped resolve the Kosovo conflict with the signing of the Kumanovo Agreement (1999) and the recognition of the independence of the Republic of Kosovo. The aforementioned military-diplomatic events raised the awareness of Europeans about the need for a common EU security and defense policy. However, if we look back a little, the EU had several documents that represented the basis for its defense and security dimension. In the Maastricht Treaty (1992), the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) was introduced as an important axis of the EU. With the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), the Common Foreign and Security Policy was expanded and defined as "a kind of common defense policy, (...) from which a common defense would also emerge". In the Petersberg Hotel near Bonn, the Petersberg Declaration on the WEU (1992) was adopted, which imposed several strategic tasks on the EU, such as: humanitarian and evacuation missions, peacekeeping missions and missions of combat forces for crisis management, including peacekeeping missions." (VAN MIDDELAAR, L. 2022, p,96) Regardless of the solidarity clause between EU members (Article 42, paragraph 7) of the EU Treaty, the issue of "strategic defense autonomy" was completely excluded. Moreover, the EU itself, through Article 42, cut down the tree on which it was sitting and emphasized that "the North Atlantic Treaty (...) remains, for its member states, the basis of their collective defense". Has the EU itself not destroyed its dream of autonomous defense? From today's perspective, it seems that this is partly true. NATO remained the main demiurge of the European collective security and defense dimension. The EU simply did not even try to marginalize NATO's role as the main subject of European defense. It is known that During the Cold War, the NATO Alliance focused on collective defense, based on Article 5 of the Washington Treaty (1949). This article, which psychologically represented a guarantor of Europe's security, stipulates that an attack on any member of the Alliance will be interpreted as an attack on the other members of NATO. In history, NATO's Article 5 has only been invoked once, by the United States after the September 11, 2001 attacks. Such an attack would have been reported to the UN Security Council..." In NATO's Strategic Concept (2010), the significance of Article 5 as a firm and binding obligation was once again confirmed. However, with the crisis in Ukraine, this issue was also considered by experts who rightly posed the dilemma: would the United States respect Article 5 of the Alliance if Russia attacked Estonia or Latvia? On June 25, 2025, President Trump relativized Article 5, emphasizing that "this article can be interpreted in different ways." However, the EU is forced to march alone in its defense and security mission in the future. The EU needed a serious crisis like the one in Ukraine and the security challenges arising from a war on the EU to make a slow progress, which to this day remains poorly defined. It is legitimate for the EU to continue building its ambitions until it has fully completed its autonomous defense and security dimension. Optimists believe that this is possible by 2030. Pessimists predict that in today's digitalized world of drone wars and ballistic missiles, it will take at least ten years for the EU to be ranked alongside Russia, China, the United States. (TOJE. A., 2019, pp.109-116)

3. THE EUROPEAN SECURITY DIMENSION – AS A COMPLEMENTARY TO NATO

Nuclear weapons are an integral part of the European defense and security dimension. Among the EU members, only France possesses nuclear weapons. There are even plans to use the French nuclear potential as a defense mechanism to deter other EU member states that feel threatened by Russia. At the same time, solidarity over the security of Europe as a continent has also forced non-EU member states, such as the United Kingdom, to join Europe's defense nuclear capabilities. In this way, France and the United Kingdom have joined the club of nuclear powers on the continent with their nuclear capabilities, regardless of the fact that the United Kingdom has directed the EU. Accordingly, the French and British nuclear capabilities only supplement the nuclear capabilities of the West, where the leading role belongs to the United States in deterring a potential aggressor, which in this case could be Russia. What unites these three nuclear powers is their membership in the NATO Alliance. The war in Ukraine showed that the most important guarantee for Europe's security belongs to NATO's nuclear capabilities. Thus, what was unthinkable after the end of the Cold War, because the collective ideological enemy - the USSR - disappeared, returned to the Alliance's agenda. Did it give fresh blood to the Atlanticists, who treated the Alliance as an "unnecessary remnant of the Cold War" that should be dissolved? The Alliance, for its part, persistently fought to justify its utilitarianism and enriched its tools and mechanisms of action by strengthening collective defense after the New York attacks (2001), crisis management in the Balkan wars and security cooperation in the war on terrorism.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO took on the role of confronting the "aggregates of instability" on its eastern periphery. In fact, NATO and the EU acted in synergy with regard to this conflict. Traditionally, relations between the EU and NATO have been, in a certain way, divided and complementary. (ANDERSON, J. J.,2024)

4. EU-NATO RELATIONS

One of the most significant steps of the EU in terms of interoperability between the EU and NATO was the Franco-British Declaration of Saint Malo of 1998. This document emphasized the military-security capacity of the EU to act "when the Alliance is not engaged in a peacekeeping mission". The aim of this recommendation is to avoid duplication and competition between NATO and EU forces in the field. In doing so, it is necessary to determine appropriate "European military assets identified in the part of European capacities and those within NATO". After all, as previously emphasized, the role of the EU in the field of defense-security operations was initially designed as complementary to the Alliance. With the help of the "Berlin Plus" Agreements (2003), which represent a set of adopted rules and standards, they aimed to consolidate complementarity between the EU and NATO. Thus, the EU acquired the right to use NATO's operational planning and military management capabilities in operations in which the Alliance is not present or has withdrawn and given way to the European defence and security dimension, or if the Alliance was not engaged in managing such a crisis at all. Based on the Berlin Plus Agreement, the EU operation in North Macedonia was implemented, which was succeeded by the NATO-Alliance peacekeeping force in April 2003. This successful operation was followed by the NATO operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2004. At the Lisbon Summit in 2010, the commitment of the Alliance members to strengthen the NATO-EU strategic partnership was emphasized. In the 2010 Strategic Concept, another significant step was taken towards NATO's systemic action. The Alliance, in its activities of preventing, managing and post-conflict calming of crisis situations, initiated action for closer cooperation with other international organizations. In this way, relations between the EU and NATO experienced a renaissance in a new balanced context, and this process was confirmed at the NATO Summit held in Warsaw in 2016.(CHOPIN, T./LEQUESNE Ch., 2022, 3 p) At this summit, several documents were adopted, among which the joint Declaration of the EU and NATO stands out. This document identified 74 joint measures in seven areas of cooperation. These are the following seven domains: cybersecurity, joint defense exercises, military operations, military assistance to third countries, hybrid threats, capacities, research. Despite this relativization of relations, practice has shown that the main structured and operational military-security position still belongs to the NATO Alliance. Three main conclusions can be drawn from this review: a) The collective defense and security dimension falls within the domain of NATO's competences, b) The creation of a single EU army is an impossible mission, c) the duplication of existing NATO command structures will not be allowed. The three aforementioned conclusions grew into "constant references that were systematically repeated almost as "biblical canons" by the NATO Secretary General and the EU High Representatives for Security and Foreign Policy. In this way, the basic framework for cooperation between NATO and the European Union was established." Further areas of cooperation were agreed in late 2017. The act of cooperation was facilitated by the fact that nine multilateral institutions NATO and the EU had twenty-two common members. This figure was increased by the fact that Finland and Sweden gained membership in the Alliance during 2025, while Iceland, which had long resisted joining the EU, is likely to integrate into the European Union during 2026 or 2027. The described register of the "division of labor", which flourished in the military manuals of the two partners, EU-NATO, is still relevant today, when Europe is faced with the greatest geopolitical and geostrategic challenge presented by the war in Ukraine. "Regardless of the fact that the distinctions between collective security defense on the one hand, crisis management on the other, and security and defense cooperation on the third hand are becoming unclear, when it comes to threats to individual states or the entire continent, It is relevant for the EU and NATO to achieve a high degree of interoperability. (ZIMA. A.,2023, p,128,)

5. THE UNITED STATES – PARTNER IN EUROPEAN DEFENSE According to US President Donald Trump, the main donor to the NATO budget is the United States, which provides "90%" of NATO's funding. However, this statement is not correct, given that Washington provides "only" 22.1% of the Alliance's budget, which is still more than the other two main contributors, Germany with 14.7% and France with 10.5% of the Alliance's total budget. (Weber, G. 2026) However, what the US criticizes most about the European allies is that they are not moving fast enough towards meeting NATO's goals planned for 2024. This primarily refers to the allocation of 2% of each member state's GDP for military spending, 20% of which would be allocated for large equipment - which in a way makes them "blind travelers" according to President Trump's epithet. Otherwise, Trump believed that these allocations should be even higher and reach 4% of GDP. The United States, for its part, allocates 3.4% of its GDP for defense, or \$605 billion, which represents two-thirds of the military spending of NATO member states and about a third of the total global military budgets. US defense spending for 2025 reached about \$980 billion. Projections for

2026/2027 predict a significant increase, the defense budget to \$1.5 trillion. For the war in Iran alone, Congress allocated an additional \$200 million in March 2026. For example, after massive increases in the US defense budget began in 2018, President Trump asked Congress to increase defense spending by an additional \$44 billion, which was equivalent to the defense budget of Germany. Within this gigantic US military budget, the costs specifically allocated to the defense of Europe were estimated at \$35.8 billion in 2018, representing 6% of the total, and... almost as much as France's defense budget in 2019, or €35.9 billion. US defense spending is structured as follows: a) Financing the US presence on the European continent (\$29.1 billion), to maintain 68,000 military and civilian personnel distributed across the five branches of the US military. This also includes the maintenance of approximately 35,000 in Germany, where the US European Command (EUCOM in Stuttgart) is located. For comparison, this figure is still much lower than in the 1960s, when 400,000 US military and civilian personnel were stationed in Europe on bases in Western Europe. A decade before the end of the Cold War in the 1980s, this figure had risen to 200,000 American soldiers and civilians. The US contribution outside the NATO budget is \$6.7 billion. Following the events in Ukraine and the seizure of the Crimean peninsula by Russia in 2014, the US increased its military presence in Europe as part of NATO's reassurance measures. This program is implemented through a budget program called the "European Deterrence Initiative" (EDI), which allows it to finance Operation Atlantic Resolve (OAR) for the benefit of Eastern European countries (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania). Funding for EDI has been steadily increasing, from \$1 billion in 2014 to \$6.5 billion in 2019. This budget is intended to strengthen the rotational presence of US forces in Europe, military exercises, improve pre-positioned infrastructure and equipment, and build the capacities of partner countries. These figures, of course, do not include all the means that the US could potentially use to protect Europe. SOUTOU, G-H. ,2019, pp.15-21) Other aspects of the US contribution to the defense of Europe should also be mentioned here. As previously noted, the US plays a special role in NATO's strategic nuclear capability, while the forces of the United Kingdom and France play complementary roles. France has not contributed nuclear weapons to NATO in its activity to date and is not a member of the organization's Nuclear Planning Group. Furthermore, "nuclear sharing" agreements provide for the stationing of US tactical nuclear weapons in several European countries. Although the information is not public, five NATO countries are generally considered to be nuclear weapons host countries. These are Germany, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey. The number of nuclear warheads stored in these countries is estimated at 140. As a reminder, during the Cold War, when the United Kingdom and Greece were also host countries, the estimated number of nuclear warheads on the continent exceeded 7,000. The weapons currently stationed are nuclear warheads. They are intended to be delivered, by agreement between the United States and the host country (according to the principle of a double key), by the host country's air force. At the request of the United States, NATO is gradually deploying a ballistic missile defense system, intended as a response to the Iranian threat, which has contributed to the deterioration of relations with Russia. This system includes a significant American contribution decided in 2009 and is deployed in several locations, namely: a radar in Turkey, sites in Romania and Poland and four AEGIS anti-missile frigates stationed in Spain. (Munster,B./Clark,S.,2025 American superiority is particularly pronounced in certain areas such as strategic transport, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and supply. According to some theoretical assumptions, if the United States decides to leave NATO, the European members of the Alliance will have to significantly increase their military budgets and consolidate their military industries. According to one scenario, the US withdrawal from NATO would threaten the security of European maritime communication routes. To overcome such a gap in terms of capabilities created by this act would force European countries to invest between 94 and 110 billion dollars to ensure their own maritime security. According to the second scenario, which would exclude the implementation of Article 5 in the context of a conflict on NATO's eastern flank (the war in Ukraine and threats to the Baltics, Poland), the EU would have even greater financial costs. Under this scenario, NATO without the US, to deal with such a possibility, European NATO members would have to invest between \$288 billion and \$357 billion to fill the capability gaps created by the US withdrawal. These amounts are not unattainable, since if European NATO countries adhered to the 2% of GDP target, they would spend an additional \$102 billion per year. There is no doubt that European defense capabilities depend on the US. According to Wolfgang Ischinger, president of the Munich Security Conference, "dependence on US military capabilities is absolutely essential for the security of Germany and Europe in the short, medium and long term. We are blind, deaf and incapable without our American partner." (SCHU, A., 2016, pp. 15-22)

6. WHAT MILITARY FRAMEWORK FOR FUTURE OPERATIONS?

As a world is taking shape in which Europeans will have to take greater responsibility for their own security, the potential use of military force is being redefined. In the context of the war and possible negotiations on the future of Ukraine, some European countries – within a coalition of willing and able nations – have proposed the deployment of multinational forces to contribute to the security of Ukraine. While the terms of such a deployment remain

unclear and could be defined later according to the nature of a potential peace agreement, this flexible form of military cooperation would allow European and non-European countries to manage a military crisis in a purely intergovernmental manner. . (AIRIAU, B. 2022) Only willing and able nations would participate in this operation – without being governed by a multinational structure or framework, as is the case with UN or EU missions. Such an approach would allow for crisis management whose success would not be determined by efficient decision-making within institutional procedures. However, this decision-making outside the institutions does not mean that participating countries could completely ignore them. They would still have to take into account the decisions taken by the United Nations Security Council, the resolutions adopted by the UN General Assembly and the debates on the future of Ukraine within the European Union. A new political framework will emerge - in an unprecedented form. Beyond this dimension, another development to watch in 2026 is the European Union's capacity to organise military operations. One of the pillars of the Strategic Compass - the key document for the European defence strategy adopted in 2022 - concerns the strengthening of crisis management capabilities. In this capacity, the Union has created a "Rapid Deployment Capability", a European force of 5,000 soldiers that can be deployed for stabilisation, rescue and evacuation, humanitarian and disaster relief, peacekeeping operations, conflict prevention and capacity-building efforts. Operational since 2025, it is controlled and possibly commanded by the Union's Military Planning and Conduct Capability: it therefore constitutes a true "European force". Although decisions on its deployment are taken unanimously - which implies that the political decision will always be up to the Member States - it will be interesting to observe how this new instrument is integrated into the overall framework of European military cooperation - and whether the Europeans have learned all the lessons from the failure of the Battlegroups³, created in 1999 but never used. Defining expectations for this force will therefore be crucial. Until now, the Union's missions have been limited to stabilisation or training, while intensive combat operations have more often been carried out in an ad hoc intergovernmental framework - such as, for example, the European military engagement in the Sahel. . (GNESOTTO N.,2019, pp.50-55)

7. DEFENCE INDUSTRY IN 2026

In 2025, a host of initiatives were taken to strengthen the European defence industry. 2026 will show whether Europeans are capable of consolidating this industrial and technological base. After two years of ambitious announcements accompanied by numerous acronyms — SAFE, EDIP, ETF, EDIRPA — the central challenge is to translate these instruments into solid contracts, economies of scale and industrial transformation. The SAFE 9 programme, designed to simplify joint procurement and accelerate the development of critical capabilities, is still struggling to generate robust industrial clusters, as member states hesitate to pool their needs, align timelines and specifications, and abandon a purely national industrial approach to return on investment. Similarly, the European Defence Industrial Programme (EDIP) 10 - intended to finance the creation of a competitive European industrial base in the long term - faces complex political trade-offs: how to allocate subsidies, who coordinates the investment and according to what performance criteria, given that national industries defend their historical territories? This implementation deficit raises a second problem: the strategic dilemma between European preference and purchasing from non-European partners using their existing stocks. On the one hand, the Commission advocates European preference in order to consolidate value chains, reduce external dependence and support strategic autonomy; but on the other hand, operational urgency leads many countries - Poland, the Netherlands, Germany and the Nordic countries - to quickly purchase proven American or Israeli systems that are immediately available. Tromparent,P.,2026) This tension undermines the ambition of European industrial consolidation, slows down the emergence of continental champions and increases the risk of structural duplication in key segments – such as medium-altitude drones, long-endurance drones (MALE), air defence and next-generation tanks. Links with the US defence industry, whether as investors or manufacturers, also remain crucial for European production chains. Given these economic dependencies, European countries must find a way to achieve a degree of European industrial autonomy. Adding to these dependencies is the lack of binding mechanisms: neither SAFE nor EDIP really compels countries to buy European products. By 2026, the challenge will be less about designing instruments and more about creating the necessary political, budgetary and regulatory incentives for Member States to fully use them. (VAN MIDDELAAR, L. 2022, p,96) Without these incentives, Europe will remain trapped in a fragmented procurement model and dependent on external suppliers. Ultimately, any European defence effort must be integrated into a broader industrial policy, as the loss of core industries – such as the chemical or metallurgical industries – only exacerbates the risks associated with external dependencies. To strengthen and diversify its relations with third countries, the Union has signed eight security and defence partnerships over the past year. These partnerships can be divided into three categories: those with neighbouring countries that are candidates for accession to the European Union (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia), those with allies that possess advanced capabilities and are also NATO members (Canada, the United Kingdom), and those with allies in the Indo-Pacific (Japan, South Korea). Given the

strategic instability of the Trump administration and its often coercive approach to US allies, the expansion of defence and security partnerships by the Union could be a key tool for the EU in 2026. While concluding such agreements does not immediately imply operational association or automatic defence commitment, it could nevertheless represent a key geopolitical lever for the Union. By expanding its security cooperation network beyond the continent, the Union would seek to build a flexible system of “à la carte” partnerships, based on convergence of interests and complementary capabilities, rather than institutional integration. This approach would allow it to strengthen its strategic footprint, consolidate critical value chains in the defense sector and establish closer political ties with actors that share its security interests. In other words, such partnerships could establish a true European “security network”, offering the Union new avenues of influence, strategic diversification beyond the strictly transatlantic framework and additional leverage to manage the risks associated with American uncertainty.

8. CONCLUSION

From the above review dedicated to the defense-security dimension of the EU, often referred to as European Autonomous Defense, it can be concluded that it is neither a utopia nor a fully realized reality. This dimension has moved according to the principle of “two steps forward-one step back”. The concept, as an old idea and ambition since the Cold War (1947), failed to change the attitude of European politicians who feared the erosion of national sovereignty (Great Britain) and the rearmament of Germany (France). However, the idea and symbolic practice advanced through various unrest, crises, political turmoil and industrial rivalries. For a long time, there was criticism from the United States towards Europeans who shyly spoke about the European defense dimension so as not to duplicate the Alliance. The war in Ukraine gave it a new impetus, but internal divisions, dependence on NATO and strategic disagreements have great weight. Moreover, Donald Trump's blackmail policy and threats regarding financial participation have had a sobering effect on European leaders. In a fragmented world where force and brute power are once again becoming central criteria in geostrategic relations, the question is no longer whether Europe wants to defend itself, but whether it will have the means and coherence to do so. In short, European defense has become an indicator of the continent's geopolitical ambitions, but also of its deep, systemic weaknesses, inherent in the very concept of the issue of the sovereignty of EU members, their diverse policies on important defense issues, the financial dimensions, the large financial meltdowns with aid to Ukraine, the economic, energy and financial crises.(Weber,G. 2025)

European defense is neither a utopia nor a fully realized reality. It is progressing in turmoil, driven by crises, political turmoil, and industrial rivalries. The war in Ukraine has given it new momentum, but internal divisions, dependence on NATO, and strategic disagreements weigh heavily. In a fragmented world where force and brute power are once again becoming central criteria in geostrategic relations, the question is no longer whether Europe wants to defend itself, but whether it will have the means and coherence to do so. In short, European defense is a revelation: of the continent's geopolitical ambitions, but also of its deep, systemic weaknesses, inherent in the very concept of a union of sovereignties.

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