

# CHALLENGES AND CONSEQUENCES OF INCREASING MILITARY CAPACITY IN EUROPE

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With the increasing likelihood of conflict in many parts of the world and the increasing threat capacity of existing tensions, the importance given to the defense appears to be at a new level globally. While everyone was preparing to focus on security vulnerabilities in East Asia due to the intensification of competition, Europe found a major war right next to its borders with Russia's entry into Ukraine in February 2022. This situation caused a significant change of axis for Europe, which believed that guaranteed its security and thus focused on prosperity. Increasing militarization due to security concerns returned to Europe once again and became the main region feeding trend, as military expenditures increased rapidly around the world.

When we look at the world in general, total military expenditures increased in real terms starting from 2022 and broke a record by exceeding 2.2 trillion dollars with an increase of 9 percent in 2023. Military spending in Europe also saw its highest annual increase in at least 30 years period. It is expected that European countries will spend more on defense when the continent's security is believed to face the greatest threat since the Second World War. But privately, they also recognize that current growth is only a starting point which needs to be enlarged significantly if Europe is serious about defending itself.

After 75 years as the continent's primary protection umbrella, it is customary for NATO to be involved in all defense initiatives in the region. According to alliance data, all NATO members in Europe have spent 32 percent more on defense since 2014, while this year 18 of NATO's 31 members are expected to spend 2 percent of GDP on defense in line with a target set for 2024 - a record amount of money spent across the alliance. This would be the strongest increase in more than 30 years and a return to the level of spending (in constant dollars) in 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell.

Despite increased spending, Europe's defense industry is unable to keep up with demand from Ukraine, which is fighting the Russian invasion. Ukraine's demand for more weapons and large quantities of ammunition has depleted NATO member states' stockpiles and fueled fears that the alliance's defense industry cannot produce enough weapons. Eventually, decades of

underinvestment also began to show on the continent: critical capabilities are missing, wartime stocks are low and readiness levels are poor. The main reason for this can be traced to the US purchase of European security.

#### The Challenges to the USA's Role as a Security Provider

It is a fact that the USA has been trying to persuade its European allies to increase their defense budgets for a long time, but it has had limited success. However, the skeptical and obstructive attitude of US towards EU-led defense initiatives for years also fed this failure. Washington sacrificed Europe's defensive self-sufficiency for America's access to the continent's market. Every American arms sale to Europe weakened Europe's defense industrial base and thus contributed to long-term dependence on the United States.

As successor presidents, Barack Obama and Donald Trump agreed on very little issues. However, both former US Presidents criticized NATO allies for “free ride” US military power. Obama said, “free riding annoys me” and pressured the British (seen by many as the US's closest ally) to spend more on defense industry. Trump has threatened that the United States will not fulfill its Alliance responsibilities if NATO allies do not spend at least 2 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defense. As the most likely candidate in the American elections to be held in November 2024, he increased the level of this threat and said that Russia's attack against NATO allies who do not fulfill their material responsibilities will be encouraged. This can undoubtedly be seen as an attack to the foundations and soul of the Alliance. This cold and blunt rhetoric from the former and perhaps future president is painful because at its core there is an uncomfortable truth: Europe is nowhere near ready to defend itself without America.

Europe's new attitude about changes in defense industry should not be attributed entirely to Trump's NATO skepticism. It is no secret that European countries became complacent after the Cold War and fell into a deep sleep with the assumption that America will come to their aid if the worst happens. Moreover, the plans for greater independence in Europe's security is under the consideration for a long time. In Europe, the opinion of a group led by French President Emmanuel Macron indicates that NATO's security vision does not understand Europe is increasing. All these negative comments about NATO reveal a disturbing truth about Europe and its place in the modern world: the monolithic existence of the West has changed. In the post-Cold War order, the

assumption that modern Europe relies on China for cheap labor, Russia for cheap energy, and America for its security is no longer unproblematic, and Europe has no choice but to change according to the current system.

### Strategic Autonomy Steps in Europe

The initial transformation of European defense forces through NATO after 1989 and through the European Union from 1993 was inadequate. This led to further transformation efforts over the next decade, through NATO and a new dedicated “European Security and Defense Policy” (ESDP). Many important NATO and EU initiatives have focused on cooperation and the development of capabilities through this cooperation. Although US officials have expressed concerns about some aspects of these initiatives, it is known that Washington is not against the concept of a stronger and more capable European defense. However, how to make turn this into a reality is the most important issue.

The “European Defense Agency” (EDA) has been preparing a “Capability Development Plan” (CDP) since 2008 in order to find solutions to long-term security and defense problems. While this plan has a reference for developing strategies for continental security, determining policies, planning, and implementing activities in the EU; it represents the basis for all initiatives related to European defense, such as the CARD; PESCO, EDF. With the “Strategic Compass” adopted by the EU Council of Ministers in 2022, the document has become one of the basic texts brings a new perspective within the EU and plans to establish mechanisms with intervention capabilities.

Moreover, with all these similar practices, the EU, which lost a significant military power after the UK left the Union, tried to create opportunities to implement several new initiatives to transform defense cooperation. In addition to the ones determined by the Union decision-making mechanisms; micro-defense cooperations carried out through continental-bilateral agreements such as the Baltic and Scandinavian as well as the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI), in which Turkey will also be included, can be seen as implementation of exclusive future-oriented projects and evaluation of defensive opportunities. All these decisions, initiatives and institutions also point to military capacities planned to be increased in the name of new defense opportunities.

Despite all these detailed initiatives in defense mechanisms, the main problem is the lack of reliable combat forces among European countries. It does not yet seem possible to compensate for the deficiencies in land, naval and air forces required to carry out the maneuvers in any major combat operation to be held in Europe in the coming years, and the dependence on US forces continues for this reason. While Europe's defense expenditures have increased in recent years, these expenditures have not produced more war-capable power. With a few minor exceptions, the number of main battle tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, armored reconnaissance vehicles and self-propelled guns in service remained the same or fell behind 2014 numbers. More generally, European countries have significant gaps in land-naval-air forces, air defense and "decisive ammunition in combat" (artillery ammunition and missiles).

Strengthening defense in Europe requires both immediate and sustained investments from European Allies. Capability development and defense material procurement are years-long efforts, especially when demand from industry is high. However, some of the promised increases in defense spending are one-time additional spending packages, and it is rare that governments' spending priorities stay consistent in the long term. It is inevitable that the outcome of this purchasing and investment process within Europe, which started with the Russia-Ukraine War, will be similarly long-term and ambiguous.

Given the lengthy supply process and deployment distractions, some European allies appear to be turning to off-the-shelf equipment mostly available outside the continent, in the fight to fill urgent capability gaps. While Germany spent its 100-billion-euro special fund, dedicated for a growth-oriented strategic army transformation, on US-made F-35 fighter jet and Chinook helicopter; Poland, on the other hand, purchased tanks, FA-50 warplanes, and howitzers from South Korea. While this situation contributes to the development of European armies, it also opposes the idea of strengthening the European defense industry, which is emphasized many times in strategic documents.

Increasing spendings alone is not solving these problems, and some NATO officials worry that a sudden waste of money can complicate the situation even further if there is no coordination among allies. The European Commission adopted the "Ammunition Production Support Act" (ASAP) to support the European Union industry to increase its ammunition and missile production capacities. ASAP is a direct response to the Commission's call for

Ukraine to urgently deliver ammunition and, if requested, missiles, and to help member states replenish their stocks by implementing targeted measures. The law aims to ensure that the EU can increase its production capacity. However, in this process it also became clear that the benefits of European defense cooperation were difficult to understand. There may still be competition in the manufacture of defense products, and there is no common, complementary command regarding the formation or deployment of armies. Cooperation on European security remains the exception, not the rule.

### Perception and Effects of the Russian Threat

European countries have provided advanced equipment to protect Ukrainians, including air defense, modern battle tanks and long-range missiles. Based in the United Kingdom, the largest multinational military training program since World War II has trained more than 50,000 Ukrainian soldiers. The European Union has created several new mechanisms to support Ukraine, including the Ukraine Allocation, which will provide €50 billion for reconstruction by 2027, and ASAP, which will produce one million artillery shells. By the end of 2023, total European aid (€156 billion) is double the US aid at the beginning of the year (€70 billion). Measured as a percentage of GDP, 14 European allies currently provide more aid to Ukraine than the United States. In general, this situation draws an important framework for the perception of the difference in views of the security threat between Europe and America.

In Europe, in addition to all these measures and defense decisions, the uniformity in the assessment of the threat of imminent

war began to deteriorate. For some European states, the threat began to appear much less urgent, and there was hope of a return to more constructive relations at last. For example, French President Macron repeated warnings that Russia should not be "humiliated" or "crushed" and proposed a new European security architecture in which Russia would have a share. No matter how well-intentioned the statements are, such statements are at odds with how most Eastern European countries view the conflict and how to end it. Similarly, Germany's apparent reluctance to supply weapons (particularly tanks) to Ukraine, despite having become one of the largest providers of military aid in Europe, has led to serious mistrust and criticism in the East. Subsequently, how both France and Germany put themselves at the forefront as loyal protectors of Europe, and most recently Macron's gathering of a group of European leaders to essentially discuss priorities in continental defense, are debatable in terms of their effectiveness in repairing this insecure environment.

As advocates of the "buy from Europe" approaches which have been introduced as an important initiative to support the EU defense industry acknowledge, major international defense purchases have a training and support process that lasts decades. But what these advocates sometimes miss is that the country in need of supply must have confidence that it will receive the needed support from the supplier to sustain the actual use of ammunition, equipment, and vehicles. Many Europeans view Germany's reticence to supply tanks and other weapons to Ukraine as hindering European defense integration. If a country like Poland believes it cannot be trusted on a fundamental point because it does not

share the same view as France or Germany on the Russian threat, then European policymakers are unlikely to prioritize a continental defense industrial policy. This is one of the reasons why Poland's massive post-invasion defense spending focused on purchasing new weapons systems from the United States and South Korea.

### Conclusion

The burden brought to Europe by the Russia-Ukraine War, which has been going on for more than two years, has resulted in increased military expenditures for confused European leaders and policymakers. However, the impact of these expenditures on the expected independence as well as their impact on the defense of the continent is open to debate. Redefining European standards in military procurement processes will be the first fruit of this transformation. However, it will take longer than expected to get the desired results.

Whether it is smaller armies, inadequate weapons, or dwindling ammunition stocks, there is almost no one who would deny that the major crack in the European security architecture has formed long ago, and it was not noticed and acted upon until recently. However, it was a conscious choice to leave the defense of the continent to the USA and allocate the budget to spent on development and welfare. This choice constituted a very important threat to protect the intellectual infrastructure and spirit of Europe, if not its lands.

The supply of defense industry products requires political stability and perseverance, as well as high amounts of expenditure. The long procurement phase may lead to changes in political decisions

regarding the use of relevant military products. As of today, Europe seems to have moved away from welfare-oriented idealist policies with its military expenditures and defense policies. This also means the strengthening and spread of the far right, which has already been on the rise in Europe in recent years. However, it is also possible that this situation will create a local opposition. In such a situation, we can see that political instability in Europe will quickly affect other policies, starting from the field of defense.

The steps planned to be taken for the collective security of Europe, the policies that are tried to be common and the military presence that is cooperated in production may be instrumental in starting a new era of integration for the continent. Europeans may view the common security threat as an opportunity for reunification and freedom from the mercy of American society and administration regarding defense industry. Of course, it should not be forgotten that, for this to happen, leaders need to overcome the uncertainties that Europe face with and ensure its security as well as stability by implementing strategic policies.



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