The Transformation of the EU Security and Defence Policy in a Changing Geopolitical Environment

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Abstract: *This article analyses the structural transformation of the European Union's security and defence policy following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Utilising an integrated analytical framework that synthesises neofunctionalist and intergovernmentalist approaches, the study examines why defence cooperation accelerated rapidly and whether this shift signals a transition toward deeper forms of defence integration. It argues that the post-2022 momentum is driven by the interaction of external geopolitical shocks, shared threat perceptions, institutional adaptation and defence-industrial collaboration. However, empirical evidence regarding defence expenditures and material capacities reveals significant structural limits. While EU institutions have expanded their role in industrial coordination and capability development, national governments retain strict control over core security decisions. The article concludes that European defence cooperation is evolving towards a hybrid form of integration, characterised by closer practical cooperation alongside the preservation of intergovernmental authority.*

Keywords: ***European Union, Common Security and Defence Policy, intergovernmentalism, institutional adaptation, defence integration***

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a watershed in European security. Assumptions that large-scale interstate war had become unlikely on the continent were overturned, while deterrence, military preparedness, defence production and critical infrastructure protection returned to the forefront

of political debate (Casier 2022). The conflict exposed weaknesses that had accumulated over several decades, including limited ammunition stockpiles, fragmented defence markets, dependence on external suppliers and uneven military readiness among European states (Fernández et al. 2023).

Its implications extended well beyond the battlefield. European governments found themselves confronting armed conflict on the Union's eastern border alongside intensifying US-China rivalry, instability in neighbouring regions, cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, energy disruptions and uncertainty regarding the future direction of transatlantic relations. Security policy became closely linked to debates on industrial capacity, technological competitiveness, economic resilience and Europe's position within a contested international environment (De Vos 2024).

Throughout most of its history, the European Union has exercised influence primarily through economic integration, regulatory power, diplomacy, trade relations and enlargement (Smith 2014). Defence has remained largely under national control. Although the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) created mechanisms for civilian and military operations, it did not fundamentally alter the balance between national sovereignty and collective action. NATO continued to provide the principal framework for collective defence, while EU cooperation in security affairs advanced cautiously and remained less integrated than other policy areas (Howorth 2014).

The post-2022 period altered this trajectory. New financial instruments, joint procurement schemes, initiatives supporting defence production, and measures designed to improve military mobility expanded the scope of cooperation among member states. The Strategic Compass provided political direction for many of these initiatives, while debates surrounding strategic autonomy acquired renewed prominence (Biscop 2022). Defence policy, once situated at the margins of European integration, became a more visible component of discussions concerning the Union's future role in international affairs (Tsoukalis 2022; Horak 2026).

Existing scholarship has examined the legal foundations of the CSDP, the evolution of strategic autonomy, the development of the European Defence Fund, and the changing institutional architecture of European defence cooperation (Haroche 2020; Fiott 2025; von Sydow et al. 2026). This literature explains individual instruments, strategic concepts and institutional developments, but it does not fully explain how the post-2022 acceleration emerged from the interaction of external pressures, changing threat perceptions, member-state preferences, institutional adaptation and defence-industrial requirements.

The present study addresses this gap by analysing these elements as parts of a single causal sequence, not as separate dimensions of European defence policy. Its contribution is threefold: it combines neofunctionalist and intergovernmentalist expectations in a common analytical framework; it uses process tracing to examine how geopolitical pressure was translated into political com-

mitments and institutional responses; and it assesses whether the resulting cooperation represents functional integration without a comparable transfer of formal authority. The article examines the new defence instruments created after 2022 and explains why cooperation expanded, through which mechanisms and with what limits.

The research question is: Why has the European Union accelerated the development of its security and defence policy after 2022, and to what extent does this process indicate a movement from strategic autonomy as a political concept towards deeper forms of defence integration?

The theoretical framework combines insights from neofunctionalist and intergovernmental approaches to European integration. Drawing on the neofunctionalist tradition of Ernst Haas (1964) and Sandholtz and Zysman (1989), as well as Sandholtz (2024), the framework provides a useful lens for examining how cooperation in areas such as industrial policy, defence research, procurement and capability development generates pressures for cooperation in related sectors. Concurrently, in line with Stanley Hoffmann's (1966) classic intergovernmentalist argument, these approaches remain essential for understanding why national governments continue to retain authority over core security and defence decisions. The two perspectives address both the expansion of defence cooperation and the political constraints that continue to shape its development (Keohane & Hoffmann 1991; Hooghe & Marks 2019; Udovič & Žipaj 2025).

In this study, neofunctionalism is used to identify functional and institutional spillover arising from growing interdependence among defence-related policy areas. Cooperation in one area is expected to generate additional coordination needs in adjacent areas where national solutions are insufficient to address collective capability, procurement, industrial or technological requirements (Haas 1964; Haroche 2020). Intergovernmentalism is used to identify the continuing influence of national preferences, bargaining and state control in decisions affecting core security and defence interests (Hoffmann 1966; Bickerton, Hodson, and Puetter 2015). The two perspectives are accordingly treated as complementary explanations of the same process.

The distinction between functional integration and supranationalisation guides the analysis. Functional integration is understood as the expansion of practical cooperation, common financing, joint procurement, industrial coordination and capability development across member states. Supranationalisation refers to the transfer of decision-making authority from national governments to EU institutions. The analytical expectation is that post-2022 developments may produce more extensive functional integration without a comparable transfer of authority. Evidence of the former is specifically sought in the expansion and use of common instruments, cross-border procurement and industrial cooperation, while evidence of the latter is assessed through changes in decision-making authority, institutional powers and the persistence of national control over core defence decisions.

Table 1: Analytical Framework for Assessing EU Defence Integration

Theoretical concept	Mechanism	Expectation	Empirical indicator	Evidence in the article	Interpretation
Neofunctionalism: functional spillover	Cooperation in one defence-related area generates functional needs in adjacent areas.	Cooperation should expand from individual policy areas towards related areas where collective solutions offer functional advantages.	Expansion from defence research towards procurement, industrial cooperation, technological development and capability coordination.	EDF, joint procurement initiatives, SAFE-supported common procurement, ammunition production, defence-industrial cooperation and capability development.	Evidence of more extensive functional integration.
Neofunctionalism: institutional spillover	Rising functional interdependence creates demand for common coordination and financing mechanisms.	Increased interdependence should strengthen the role of common EU instruments and coordination mechanisms.	New or expanded EU-level financial and coordination instruments.	Post-2022 increased use and political relevance of EDF, PESCO and CARD, together with ASAP, EDIRPA, SAFE and EDIP.	Evidence of institutional deepening without necessarily implying sovereignty transfer.
Intergovernmentalism: national preferences	Member States retain control over sensitive security interests and negotiate common responses according to national preferences.	Cooperation should reflect differences in national priorities and bargaining among Member States.	Divergent positions, differentiated implementation and national control over defence priorities.	Versailles bargaining, differentiated national spending trajectories, differing strategic preferences, and continued national responsibility for defence planning.	Evidence of persistent intergovernmental constraints.
Intergovernmentalism: national authority	Core defence decisions remain under national political control.	Expanded cooperation should not necessarily produce a transfer of authority over force deployment, defence planning or national security priorities.	Unanimity, national control over force deployment and national defence planning.	Continued national authority over core security and defence decisions and reliance on NATO for collective defence.	Evidence of integration without full supranationalisation.

Theoretical concept	Mechanism	Expectation	Empirical indicator	Evidence in the article	Interpretation
Deeper functional integration	Common financing, procurement and industrial cooperation increase practical interdependence among Member States.	Integration should become visible through more interconnected financial, procurement, industrial and capability arrangements.	Common funding, joint procurement, cross-border industrial cooperation and capability development.	EDF, EDIRPA, SAFE, EDIP and related defence-industrial initiatives.	Evidence of a qualitative deepening of cooperation.
Hybrid integration	Functional pressures for cooperation coexist with persistent national authority.	EU defence cooperation should deepen without creating a fully supranational defence actor.	Expansion of common instruments combined with continued national decision-making authority.	Expanded EU defence instruments alongside national control of core defence decisions and continuing NATO dependence.	Evidence of a hybrid form of European defence integration.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the official EU legislative acts, strategic documents and primary sources cited in the references.

The causal mechanism examined in the article links changes in the external security environment to changes in EU defence cooperation through a sequence of intervening processes: geopolitical shocks and strategic uncertainty alter threat perceptions among member states; changes in threat perceptions affect national preferences; where preferences overlap sufficiently, governments support common responses through intergovernmental bargaining; political agreement activates or adapts EU instruments; cooperation in one policy domain creates functional requirements in adjacent domains, procurement, industrial production, technology, and capability development. This sequence increases practical interdependence among member states without removing national control over core defence decisions (Haas 1964; Hoffmann 1966; Niemann & Ioannou 2015; Beach & Pedersen 2019).

The acceleration of European defence cooperation results from the interaction of four factors: geopolitical pressures generated by a more demanding security environment, convergence in threat perceptions among member states, institutional adaptation within the EU framework and the expanding role of defence-industrial cooperation. The interaction of these factors has produced one of the most extensive expansions of defence cooperation in the history of European integration. They have not, however, produced a fully autonomous European defence actor. Divergent national preferences, intergovernmental decision-making, uneven military capabilities and continuing reliance on NATO remain constraints.

Methodologically, the article combines qualitative document analysis, process tracing and empirical examination of defence expenditure and threat assessments. The document base consists primarily of EU strategic documents, Council decisions, Commission proposals and legislative acts that define, establish, modify or implement defence cooperation instruments. European Defence Agency data on defence expenditure and selected assessments of the European security environment complement these sources. Documents were selected for their direct relevance to the causal sequence examined in the article: changes in the security environment and threat perceptions, political commitments by member states, institutional responses, and subsequent developments in procurement, industrial cooperation and capability development. The selection was purposive, not exhaustive, focusing on documents that provide direct evidence for the transitions specified in the causal mechanism. The empirical period covers the development of EU defence cooperation from the pre-2022 institutional baseline to the post-2022 acceleration of cooperation, with particular attention to developments initiated or substantially expanded after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Bowen 2009; Beach & Pedersen 2019).

Process tracing is used as an explanatory method, not as a chronological description. It examines whether the evidence supports the proposed sequence from geopolitical pressure and changing threat perceptions to shifts in member-state preferences, intergovernmental bargaining, institutional adaptation and expanded functional cooperation. Evidence is assessed at each transition in the sequence. Strategic documents and threat assessments are used to identify changes in the security environment and threat perceptions; Council decisions and legislative acts are examined to identify political commitments, bargaining outcomes and institutional responses; and evidence concerning procurement, industrial cooperation, defence expenditure and capability development is used to assess whether institutional responses generated closer practical interdependence. The analysis distinguishes evidence supporting the proposed mechanism from evidence that merely documents temporal succession. A causal link is considered more plausible where official documents, legislative acts or implementation arrangements connect a preceding condition to a subsequent policy decision or institutional change, while evidence of persistent national control is used to assess the limits of functional integration and the continued relevance of intergovernmental constraints (Beach & Pedersen 2019).

The study uses methodological triangulation to assess the same transformation from different types of evidence. Policy and legal documents provide evidence of political commitments and institutional change; threat assessments provide evidence of changes in the security environment and threat perceptions; and defence expenditure data provide evidence of the material resources available to support the emerging policy trajectory. These sources are not treated as interchangeable measures. Their analytical value lies in their different posi-

tions within the causal sequence: threat assessments illuminate changes in the external and perceptual context, institutional documents capture political and policy responses, and expenditure data indicate whether these responses are accompanied by changes in material capacity. Triangulation helps distinguish changes in political commitment and institutional cooperation from changes in defence capability (Bowen 2009; Beach & Pedersen 2019).

The unit of analysis is the evolution of EU defence cooperation as a policy process, while individual instruments and policy episodes are treated as within-case observations of the transformation. The EDF, ASAP, EDIRPA, SAFE and other instruments are not treated as independent cases. They are examined as linked developments within the same institutional and geopolitical process. The design traces how changes in the external environment and member-state preferences were translated into successive forms of institutional adaptation and practical cooperation.

The design has an explanatory purpose. The analysis does not estimate the causal effect of individual geopolitical shocks or policy instruments, nor does it assume that the temporal association between an external event and an EU policy response establishes causation. Its purpose is to assess whether the observed sequence and documentary evidence are consistent with the proposed causal mechanism and with the theoretical expectations specified in Table 1. The empirical findings are interpreted as evidence supporting, qualifying or limiting the proposed explanation, not as statistical proof of causal effects.

The discussion is organised in three stages. The first chapter examines the geopolitical conditions that altered security perceptions within the European Union. The second analyses how these developments influenced debates on strategic autonomy, the Strategic Compass and defence cooperation initiatives. The third evaluates the relationship between defence expenditure, industrial capacity and the practical limits of defence integration. The conclusion discusses the implications of these developments for the future role of the European Union as a security actor.

Geopolitical drivers of the transformation of EU security and defence policy

The acceleration of European defence cooperation after 2022 cannot be explained solely by Russia's war against Ukraine. The invasion acted as a catalyst, but many of the pressures behind these developments had been shaping the European security environment for more than a decade (Tsoukalis 2022). Geopolitical rivalry, instability along the Union's periphery, hybrid operations targeting democratic institutions, supply-chain disruptions and the weaponisation of economic interdependence had already exposed weaknesses in Europe's security architecture (Karamanlis 2024). What changed after 2022

was the urgency with which these challenges were perceived and the extent to which they were viewed as interconnected.

Threat perceptions among EU member states shifted substantially. For many years, geographical location, historical experience and national security priorities produced differing assessments of security risks. Governments on the eastern flank focused primarily on Russian military capabilities and territorial defence, while southern member states focused on instability in North Africa, migration pressures and developments in the Sahel. Other countries prioritised economic competitiveness, energy security or terrorism. Such differences complicated efforts to establish common priorities within the framework of the CSDP (Schimmelfennig 2018).

The invasion of Ukraine narrowed part of this divide. Although national perspectives remain far from uniform, a broader consensus emerged around the view that Europe faces a more demanding security environment than at any point since the end of the Cold War. The document 2026 Global Risks to the EU survey reflects this trend (Anghel 2025). Interstate conflict, Russian revisionism, military escalation, cyber threats and attacks on critical infrastructure rank among the most serious concerns identified by experts. The ranking of individual risks matters less than the recognition that security threats now transcend national borders and policy sectors.

Convergence in threat perceptions carries political consequences. European integration has often advanced when member states identified sufficient overlap between national interests to justify collective action (Sandholtz & Zysman 1989; Niemann & Ioannou 2015). Security policy follows a similar logic. A more shared understanding of risks reduces political obstacles to cooperation in an area traditionally associated with state sovereignty.

The sequence after 2022 illustrates this mechanism. The Strategic Compass was developed from a threat analysis involving the intelligence services of all 27 member states and was revised during the negotiations in early 2022 to reflect the changing security environment following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The subsequent Versailles Declaration committed member states to substantially increase defence expenditure, strengthen collaborative investment and joint procurement, and reinforce the European defence industry (European Council 2022). These commitments did not reflect full convergence on the meaning of strategic autonomy, but they indicated sufficient overlap in national preferences regarding capability shortfalls, industrial capacity and preparedness to support common action. The Versailles process represents the intergovernmental bargaining stage of the mechanism, while the subsequent adoption of ASAP and EDIRPA represents institutional adaptation to the agreed priorities (European External Action Service 2022; European Union 2023a; European Union 2023b). The sequence is consistent with a mechanism in which a changing threat environment contributed to convergence in threat perceptions, convergence in

selected policy preferences facilitated intergovernmental agreement, and political agreement created demand for new EU-level instruments.

A second source of pressure stems from uncertainty surrounding external security guarantees. Since the end of the Cold War, European defence has developed within a security architecture heavily dependent on American military capabilities. This arrangement reduced incentives for many European governments to invest in autonomous capabilities, while confidence in long-term US engagement remained largely unquestioned (Schneiker et al. 2021).

Today, the debate is no longer centred on the value of the transatlantic partnership. NATO remains the cornerstone of collective defence for most member states. The issue concerns whether Europe can indefinitely rely on a model built upon extensive US military engagement while Washington devotes increasing attention to challenges in the Indo-Pacific. Even without any reduction in American commitments, uncertainty regarding future priorities affects strategic calculations across Europe (Schneiker et al. 2021).

Uncertainty about future US engagement has given new momentum to debates on strategic autonomy. What was once discussed largely as a political aspiration has become connected to practical questions of defence production, procurement, logistics, ammunition stocks, military mobility and technological capacity (Fiott 2018, 2025). The shift reflects a recognition that security policy depends not only on political commitments but also on the material resources required to sustain them.

A third source of pressure originates in the structure of international politics. European security policy has often evolved in response to discrete crises. The post-2022 period differs because policymakers are confronting several mutually reinforcing developments simultaneously. Military conflict, economic coercion, technological competition, cyber operations and attempts to influence democratic processes intersect, blurring traditional boundaries between internal and external security (Michaels & Sus 2025).

Russia's war against Ukraine forms part of this wider picture. Security concerns can no longer be separated from industrial resilience, technological capacity, energy security or the protection of critical infrastructure (Matelly 2026). As these domains become more closely connected, pressures for cooperation extend beyond traditional defence policy and spill over into adjacent sectors. Such dynamics resemble the spillover mechanisms originally conceptualised by Ernst Haas (1964) and later developed in the work of Sandholtz and Zysman (1989) and Sandholtz (2024), whereby cooperation in one functional sector generates integrationist pressures in adjacent policy domains.

The pressures described above have strengthened the rationale for collective action at the European level. While defence remains a national responsibility, many of the challenges confronting member states exceed national capacities. Defence-industrial production illustrates this problem well. Fragmented pro-

curement systems, duplication of weapons platforms, limited interoperability and small production runs have reduced efficiency across the European defence sector for decades. The war in Ukraine exposed these weaknesses more clearly by revealing shortages in ammunition stocks and constraints on production capacity.

The centre of gravity in European defence debates has shifted. Earlier discussions often focused on political ambition and institutional aspirations (Koppa 2022). Current debates focus far more directly on capability generation, industrial output, military mobility, technological development and defence procurement. Political declarations may signal intent, but they cannot compensate for deficiencies in production capacity, logistics or military readiness. Addressing such shortcomings requires coordination mechanisms, common funding instruments and long-term planning.

The institutional response after 2022 did not emerge from scratch. Instruments such as the European Defence Fund (EDF), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) were already in place before the war. What changed was the political environment in which these mechanisms operated. Geopolitical pressures increased incentives for governments to employ existing instruments more actively and to support additional forms of cooperation. External shocks can accelerate cooperation when institutional foundations already exist, as observed in earlier phases of European integration (Niemann & Ioannou 2015).

The distinction between institutional creation and institutional activation matters for assessing the post-2022 transformation. The EDF, PESCO and CARD provide evidence of a pre-existing institutional baseline, not of institutional creation caused by the war. Their increased political relevance after 2022, together with the establishment of instruments such as ASAP and EDIRPA, indicates a combination of institutional activation and subsequent policy expansion. The post-2022 period matters not simply because of the number of new instruments, but because geopolitical pressure increased the use, scope and functional interconnection of existing and newly created mechanisms.

Questions of authority and decision-making remain central to this process. Defence continues to be one of the most intergovernmental areas of EU activity, and national governments retain control over the most sensitive security decisions (Puetter 2014). Recent initiatives have nonetheless expanded the role of EU institutions in capability development, defence-industrial coordination and financial support mechanisms. The expanded role of EU institutions has not produced a transfer of defence policy to supranational institutions. The result is a hybrid arrangement in which member states remain the primary actors while relying more extensively on collective instruments to achieve objectives that are difficult to attain individually (Bickerton, Hodson, and Puetter 2015). The persistence of national control alongside expanding cooperation illustrates the

continuing relevance of intergovernmental dynamics within European defence governance.

The expansion of EU institutional roles creates potential friction over the distribution of influence within European defence governance. As EU institutions take on additional responsibilities in financing, industrial coordination, procurement support and capability development, member states retain authority over the defence priorities and operational decisions that determine how these instruments are used. The resulting tension is not primarily a conflict over formal sovereignty transfer. It concerns the ability of EU institutions to shape national choices through funding conditions, coordination mechanisms and common capability priorities, while governments remain responsible for the underlying defence decisions.

The institutional evolution of European defence can involve an expansion of EU-level influence without a corresponding expansion of formal decision-making authority. The tension became visible in the development of the Readiness Roadmap 2030, when member states insisted that major capability initiatives should remain under member-state leadership, while the European Commission was assigned a facilitating, not directing role. The subsequent European Council support for strengthening the European Defence Agency can likewise be interpreted as an effort to preserve an intergovernmental counterweight to the expanding role of the Commission in defence-industrial policy and financial governance. Institutional adaptation has involved not only the creation of new instruments but also continuing negotiations over which actors should shape their priorities and implementation (von Sydow et al. 2026). From a neofunctionalist perspective, this friction shows how institutional influence may expand through functional interdependence even when formal authority remains intergovernmental (Haas 1964; Haroche 2020).

The acceleration of EU defence cooperation should properly be understood as part of a geopolitical adjustment, not as a temporary response to a single conflict. The war in Ukraine accelerated ongoing trends, but the underlying drivers originate in military competition, geopolitical uncertainty, technological rivalry and the diffusion of security risks across multiple policy domains. Under such conditions, closer cooperation becomes less a matter of political preference and more a practical response to a changing security environment.

Table 2 illustrates this relationship. No single geopolitical shock explains the expansion of EU defence cooperation. Russian revisionism strengthened concerns regarding territorial security, and uncertainty surrounding future US engagement reinforced debates on European capabilities, while hybrid threats, technological dependencies and defence-industrial fragmentation broadened the scope of security policy. Together, these pressures created incentives for new policy instruments and deeper forms of cooperation.

Table 2: Geopolitical Drivers and Illustrative EU Policy Responses

Geopolitical Driver	Security Implication	Illustrative EU Policy Responses
Russian revisionism	Territorial insecurity	Strategic Compass, EDF, ASAP
Uncertainty of US engagement	Capability concerns	Strategic autonomy agenda, SAFE
Hybrid threats	Critical infrastructure vulnerability	Military mobility, resilience initiatives
Defence-industrial fragmentation	Capability shortfalls	EDF, EDIRPA, EDIP
Technological competition	Strategic dependency risks	Defence innovation programmes

Note: *The policy responses shown in Table 2 are illustrative, not one-to-one causal effects; individual instruments typically respond to several interacting geopolitical and policy pressures.*

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the official EU legislative acts, strategic documents and primary sources cited in the references.

Russian revisionism and uncertainty surrounding future US engagement are analytically distinct but strategically interdependent drivers of European defence cooperation. Russia's war against Ukraine increased the immediacy of the territorial threat, while uncertainty about the durability and future orientation of US security commitments increased the perceived costs of continued reliance on external military capabilities. The combination strengthened incentives for European governments to improve their own defence capabilities and reduce selected vulnerabilities without implying a common preference for replacing NATO with an autonomous EU defence system. In this sense, the two pressures reinforced, but did not independently generate the post-2022 demand for further European defence cooperation (Schneiker et al. 2021; von Sydow et al. 2026).

Against this background, strategic autonomy gradually moved from the realm of political aspiration into the sphere of practical policymaking. Understanding how this transition occurred requires closer examination of the Strategic Compass, defence cooperation initiatives, and the institutional evolution of European security policy.

Strategic autonomy, the Strategic Compass and the institutional deepening of European defence cooperation

Debates on European strategic autonomy predate Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They emerged from a mismatch between the European Union's economic weight and its limited capacity to act independently in security and defence matters. The concept gained prominence following a series of crises that exposed European

dependencies, including the financial crisis, migration pressures, disruptions to global supply chains, shifts in US foreign policy and the COVID-19 pandemic. By the early 2020s, strategic autonomy had become one of the most contested concepts in European policy debates (Tocci 2022).

Much of the controversy reflected the absence of a common definition. For some member states, strategic autonomy referred primarily to defence capabilities and operational readiness. Others interpreted it more broadly, linking it to technological sovereignty, industrial resilience, energy security and supply-chain protection (Belan & Šrobárová 2026). These differences mirrored disagreements concerning the future trajectory of European integration and the relationship between the EU and NATO. France generally favoured a more ambitious interpretation centred on Europe's capacity for independent action, whereas several Central and Eastern European governments remained cautious, viewing strong transatlantic ties as indispensable to European security.

Such disagreements reveal a feature of European defence cooperation. Progress rarely depends on consensus regarding long-term political objectives. Cooperation tends to advance when governments identify practical areas in which collective action generates tangible benefits despite persistent differences over strategic preferences (Schimmelfennig 2018). The post-2022 evolution of European defence cooperation follows this pattern. Disputes surrounding the meaning of strategic autonomy have not disappeared; cooperation has expanded in areas where member states perceive common interests.

The Strategic Compass illustrates this process. Adopted in 2022, it sought to provide both a shared assessment of the security environment and a framework for collective action (Clapp 2022). The Strategic Compass matters less for the originality of its individual proposals than for its effort to connect threat perceptions, capability development, crisis management, resilience and external partnerships within a single strategic framework (Biscop 2022). The document reflected a recognition that security challenges could no longer be addressed through fragmented policy responses (European External Action Service 2022). It attempted to strengthen a common strategic culture among member states (Clapp 2022). Divergent historical experiences and security priorities have long constrained defence cooperation within the European Union (Smith 2014).

Although strategic documents cannot eliminate such differences, they can facilitate coordination by providing common reference points, a shared diagnosis of security challenges, and a common vocabulary for discussing policy responses. European integration theory offers a useful lens through which to interpret these developments. In line with Stanley Hoffmann's classic intergovernmentalist argument, defence has traditionally been viewed as a core element of 'high politics' where national sovereignty resists supranational encroachment, making it one of the least likely areas for neofunctionalist spillover (Hoffmann 1966). Developments, however, suggest a more complex dynamic. Cooperation

in defence research, industrial policy, military mobility, technological innovation and procurement has generated pressures extending into adjacent sectors (Haroche 2020). These forms of cooperation have created new patterns of interdependence that shape national decision-making and expand the scope of collective action without replacing national sovereignty (Wessels 1997).

The expansion of defence-industrial cooperation provides a clear example. Instruments such as the European Defence Fund, initiatives supporting ammunition production and programmes promoting joint procurement seek to address long-standing fragmentation within the European defence market (Fiott 2026). Their objective extends beyond increasing defence expenditure. They aim to influence how resources are allocated by encouraging coordination, interoperability and economies of scale. In practical terms, this marks a shift away from a model centred primarily on political declarations towards one focused on capability generation and industrial capacity.

The post-2022 period should not, however, be interpreted as evidence of a straightforward move towards supranational defence governance. Member states continue to control force deployment, defence planning, military commitments and national security priorities. The institutional architecture of the CSDP remains firmly rooted in intergovernmental principles, while unanimity continues to shape collective decision-making (Bicchi et al. 2024; von Sydow et al. 2026). Expanding cooperation has occurred alongside the preservation of national authority.

This coexistence of deeper cooperation and enduring national control represents one of the defining features of European defence governance. EU institutions have acquired a more visible role in agenda-setting, coordination, financing and implementation, while national governments remain the decisive actors. Defence integration has advanced in a manner that reflects the hybrid model conceptualised by the new intergovernmentalist approach, combining expanding collective instruments with the continued predominance of intergovernmental decision-making (Bickerton, Hodson, and Puetter 2015).

The analytical framework distinguishes these developments according to their function and does not treat every new instrument as evidence of integration. An instrument is considered evidence of functional integration when it increases common financing, joint procurement, cross-border industrial cooperation or shared capability development. Institutional deepening is identified where common EU mechanisms acquire new functions or a stronger practical role. By contrast, continued national control over force deployment, defence planning and core security decisions is treated as evidence of persistent intergovernmental authority.

Distinguishing between strategic autonomy as a political ambition and defence integration as an observable process is essential. Strategic autonomy often serves as a vision of Europe's future role in security affairs (Fiott 2025).

Defence integration can be assessed empirically through institutions, budgets, procurement programmes, industrial cooperation and capability development. Evidence from the post-2022 period points to measurable progress in these areas. Whether such progress will ultimately produce a genuinely autonomous European defence capability remains uncertain.

The distinction between political ambition and institutional practice becomes visible in the instruments that have emerged around European defence cooperation (Koppa 2022). Strategic autonomy has attracted considerable political attention; the practical effect of post-2022 developments lies primarily in the gradual construction of mechanisms designed to reduce fragmentation within the European defence sector and strengthen cooperation in areas traditionally dominated by national policies.

Permanent Structured Cooperation, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, and the European Defence Fund occupy a central place in this process. Although these instruments differ in purpose and institutional design, they pursue a common objective: addressing collective-action problems that individual member states have struggled to resolve independently. Their significance does not derive from the transfer of sovereignty to EU institutions. They seek to shape national behaviour by encouraging coordination, information sharing, joint capability development and collaborative investment (European Commission 2023; European Defence Agency 2025; European Union 2026).

Such arrangements reflect the specific character of defence integration within the European Union. Unlike many areas of economic integration, defence cooperation rarely advances through binding supranational rules. Progress usually occurs through mechanisms that promote convergence while preserving national discretion. Although often criticised for their limited coercive capacity, these arrangements remain politically viable because they allow governments to retain control over sensitive security matters while benefiting from collective action.

The Security Action for Europe (SAFE) provides a clear example of this mechanism because its effects have begun to extend from institutional design to implementation. SAFE provides up to EUR 150 billion in loans to member states, with access generally linked to common procurement involving at least two participating countries. By 2026, 19 member states had submitted national defence investment plans, and the first disbursements had been made to several member states, including Poland, Lithuania, Croatia and Cyprus. Lithuania received EUR 956.3 million in June 2026, while Croatia received EUR 255 million in July 2026 as pre-financing under their respective SAFE arrangements (European Commission 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

The first SAFE disbursements provide initial evidence that the instrument is beginning to influence the financing and implementation of national defence investment and is moving beyond its previous status as a prospective policy

instrument. Its macroeconomic effects differ from those of budgetary instruments such as ASAP or EDIRPA because SAFE provides loans to member states, whereas these instruments provide fixed EU budget allocations. The instrument can therefore ease the short-term financing constraints associated with higher defence investment, while creating long-term repayment obligations; SAFE loans may have a duration of up to 45 years, with a possible grace period for principal repayment. The fiscal and macroeconomic effects of this shift will depend on how extensively member states use the additional financing for genuinely additional defence investment and not for expenditure that would otherwise have been financed through national budgets (European Union 2025b; European Defence Agency 2026).

The implementation evidence nevertheless remains insufficient to conclude that SAFE has already produced sustained convergence in defence procurement. The European Defence Agency reports that the fiscal uptake of SAFE and related initiatives remains uneven and that their macroeconomic impact cannot yet be fully quantified. At the same time, the early use of the EDA Government-to-Government platform, including the opening of existing contracts to potential partners, indicates that the financial incentives created by SAFE are beginning to affect procurement behaviour. SAFE is relevant to the neofunctionalist argument because access to its financial assistance is generally linked to common procurement involving at least one participating member state and at least one additional member state, EEA EFTA state or Ukraine. The financial instrument creates a functional incentive for governments to coordinate procurement across national boundaries in order to obtain access to EU-supported financing. This does not transfer authority over defence planning or procurement to EU institutions, but it changes the conditions under which national procurement decisions are made. The available evidence points to an emerging, not yet consolidated, form of functional integration: SAFE changes the incentives surrounding national procurement decisions, but the extent to which these incentives produce durable joint procurement, interoperability and capability convergence remains an empirical question (Haas 1964; European Union 2025b; European Defence Agency 2026).

The European Defence Fund illustrates this approach clearly. For decades, national procurement practices, overlapping capability programmes and support for domestic defence industries contributed to fragmentation across the European defence market. The result was duplication, reduced interoperability and inefficient allocation of resources (European Commission 2024). The EDF seeks to mitigate these problems by supporting collaborative research and development projects involving participants from multiple member states (European Commission 2023). Its importance lies not only in the resources it provides but also in its effort to encourage cooperation across national industrial boundaries (Fiott 2026).

Table 3: Main EU Defence Cooperation Instruments and Their Role in the Post-2022 Transformation

Instrument	Type	Implementation / Validity Period	Financial scale	Main function	Integration relevance
PESCO	Institutional framework	2017–	—	Capability cooperation	Coordination and joint capability development
CARD	Coordination mechanism	2017–	—	Defence planning coordination	Identification of cooperation opportunities
EDF	EU budget programme	2021–2027	€8.0 bn	Defence research and development	Cross-border R&D and industrial cooperation
ASAP	EU budget/ regulatory instrument	2023–2025	€500 m	Ammunition production	Industrial capacity and production cooperation
EDIRPA	EU budget instrument	2023–2025	€310 m	Common procurement	Incentives for joint procurement
EPF	Off-budget financial instrument	2021–	>€17 bn	Military assistance	Support to member-state and partner capabilities
EDIP	EU budget programme	2026–2027	€1.5 bn	Defence industrial capacity	Industrial cooperation and capability development
SAFE	EU loan instrument	2025–	€150 bn	Defence investment and procurement	Financial incentives for common procurement

Note: *The period refers to the period of implementation, validity or availability of the respective instrument; adoption dates are not shown.*

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the official EU legislative acts, strategic documents and primary sources cited in the references.

Table 3 shows that the post-2022 transformation has not resulted from the creation of a single integrated defence policy instrument. Instead, it has involved the accumulation of instruments with different legal, financial and institutional functions. Pre-existing frameworks such as PESCO and CARD provide mechanisms for coordination and capability planning, while the EDF, ASAP, EDIRPA and EDIP address research, industrial production and common procurement through EU budgetary instruments. SAFE adds a distinct financial mechanism based on loans to member states, whereas the EPF operates outside the EU budget and primarily supports military assistance. What matters here is less the number of instruments than their increasing functional interconnection.

The war in Ukraine accelerated the shift towards defence-industrial cooperation by exposing the practical consequences of fragmented procurement systems and limited production capacity. Supporting Ukraine while replenishing

national stockpiles revealed the difficulty of sustaining military commitments without a stronger industrial base. Defence-industrial cooperation moved from a secondary policy concern to a central component of European security debates (Hellemeier 2025; European Commission 2024).

Some observers view these initiatives as evidence of a gradual movement towards more integrated defence integration. Others emphasise the continued dominance of national governments and the limited transfer of authority to EU institutions. Both interpretations capture elements of the landscape. Cooperation has expanded substantially, while the political foundations of European defence remain overwhelmingly national.

The coexistence of these tendencies suggests that European defence cooperation after 2022 cannot be understood through a simple opposition between integration and sovereignty (Hooghe & Marks 2019). Member states have not abandoned control over defence policy. They have become more willing to employ collective instruments when national solutions prove insufficient. Defence integration advances less through centralisation than through coordination, joint investment and industrial cooperation.

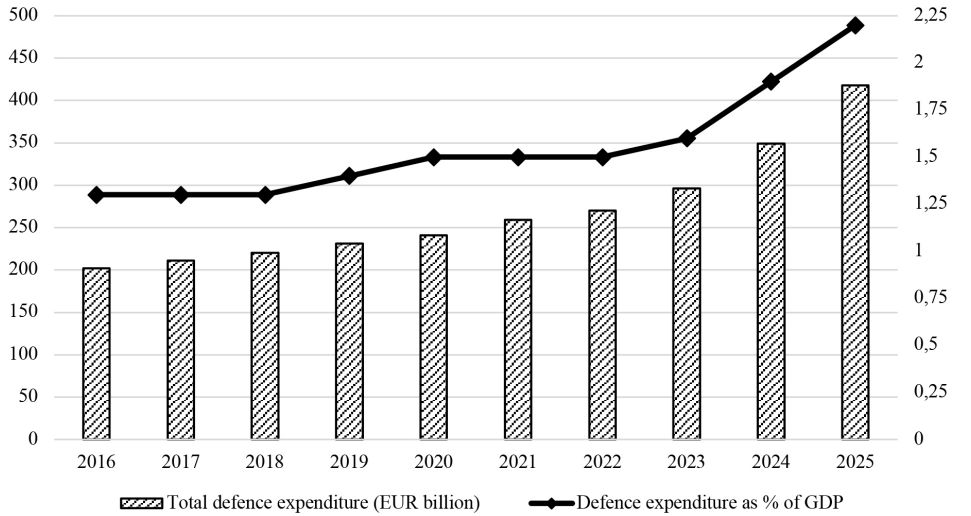
Whether this trajectory will ultimately produce a more autonomous European defence capability remains uncertain. The answer depends less on institutional innovation than on the material resources that sustain it. Defence expenditure, industrial production, technological capacity and military readiness will determine whether the ambitions associated with strategic autonomy can be translated into lasting capabilities.

Defence spending, industrial capacity and the limits of European defence integration

Institutional innovation and political commitment explain only part of the acceleration of European defence cooperation. Defence policy rests on material capabilities. Military readiness, force modernisation, ammunition stocks, industrial production, technological expertise and logistical support cannot be created through political declarations alone. Any assessment of the future trajectory of European defence cooperation must examine whether available resources are capable of sustaining the ambitions associated with strategic autonomy and further integration (Calcagno 2026).

Measured in financial terms, the post-2022 period marks a clear break with previous trends. Defence expenditure across the European Union increased sharply, while defence-industrial issues moved closer to the centre of policymaking. Initiatives that would have appeared politically unlikely a decade earlier—joint procurement, ammunition production, military mobility and collective capability development—became part of mainstream policy debates.

Figure 1: Evolution of Total EU Defence Expenditure and GDP Share (2025–2016)



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the European Defence Agency, 2026. All expenditure figures are expressed in constant 2025 prices.

Table 4: National Variation in EU Defence Spending, 2025

Indicator	2025
EU Member States reaching 2% of GDP	23/27
Member States increasing expenditure in real terms	24/27
Member States increasing expenditure by >10%	15/27
Member States stabilising or reducing expenditure	4/27
EU defence expenditure	€418 bn
Defence expenditure as % GDP	2.2%

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the European Defence Agency, 2026.

The composition of this additional spending matters. Defence investment reached EUR 134 billion in 2025, a 23% real increase from 2024, while defence equipment procurement alone reached EUR 115 billion. At the same time, defence R & D amounted to EUR 17 billion, or 4.0% of total defence expenditure. The rapid expansion of equipment procurement continues to outpace the development of longer-term research and technological capacity (European Defence Agency 2026).

Figure 1 shows a sustained increase in EU defence expenditure, with a pronounced acceleration after 2022. In 2025, defence expenditure reached EUR 418

billion, equivalent to 2.2% of EU member states' combined GDP, representing a 20% real increase compared with 2024 and a cumulative 47% rise (European Defence Agency 2026). The latest EDA data indicate that the acceleration has not been uniform across member states. Twenty-four member states increased defence expenditure in real terms in 2025, fifteen increased spending by more than 10%, while four stabilised or reduced their expenditure. The differences are visible among the largest European defence actors: In 2025, defence expenditure amounted to approximately 2.3% of GDP in Germany, 2.1% in France and 2.0% in Italy. At the same time, several eastern and northern member states recorded substantially higher defence burdens, with Poland and the Baltic states remaining well above the 2% benchmark. The aggregate EU trend conceals substantial differences in national spending trajectories and in the intensity with which governments have responded to the changing security environment (European Defence Agency 2026).

First, defence expenditure followed an upward trajectory throughout the past decade, suggesting that concerns regarding military preparedness predated Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Second, spending accelerated markedly after 2022, both in absolute terms and as a share of GDP. The war did not initiate the transformation of European defence policy; it intensified trends that had already emerged before the conflict.

Rising expenditure, however, should not be confused with rising capability. Defence spending remained overwhelmingly organised through national frameworks, often characterised by fragmented procurement practices, overlapping weapons systems and limited interoperability. Higher investment does not automatically generate improved military effectiveness when resources are distributed across multiple systems pursuing different priorities. The latest EDA data reinforce this distinction: although collaborative defence expenditure accounted for 24% of defence equipment procurement in 2025, European collaborative expenditure represented only 11% of aggregated investment, and reported national shares ranged from 0% to 55%. The EDA notes that national approaches continue to dominate capability development, while procurement initiatives and equipment life cycles remain largely unsynchronised. Rising expenditure has not yet translated into a comparable degree of European coordination, interoperability or long-term convergence (European Defence Agency 2026).

This divergence between national spending and European coordination is consistent with the intergovernmental constraints identified in the analytical framework. Member states may increase defence expenditure substantially while continuing to determine procurement priorities, equipment life cycles and capability development primarily through national decision-making. Differences in spending trajectories and procurement practices remain relevant not only as indicators of material asymmetry but also as evidence of the continuing

influence of national preferences on the direction of European defence cooperation (Hoffmann 1966; Bickerton, Hodson, and Puetter 2015).

Capability generation depends not only on the volume of resources but also on their coordination. A fragmented system may spend more while producing fewer operational capabilities than a more integrated one. Many initiatives introduced during the past decade seek precisely to reduce this gap between expenditure and effectiveness.

Defence-industrial capacity represents a second area where political ambition continues to exceed practical capability. In 2025, member states allocated EUR 17 billion to defence R & D, equivalent to 4.0% of total defence expenditure, while equipment procurement reached EUR 115 billion. The EDA notes that the gap between equipment acquisition and longer-term research and development continues to widen. This imbalance suggests that a substantial part of the spending surge is directed towards addressing immediate capability gaps and not towards building the longer-term technological foundations of European strategic autonomy (European Defence Agency 2026).

The war in Ukraine exposed shortages in ammunition production, stockpile management and industrial responsiveness across Europe. Governments discovered that supporting Ukraine while simultaneously replenishing national inventories required production capacities that had been reduced over several decades (Hellemeier 2025). Expanding output proved more difficult than expected because defence production depends on specialised labour, technological expertise, investment cycles, access to critical materials, and resilient supply chains.

For this reason, strategic autonomy cannot be evaluated solely through institutional reforms or political declarations. Its foundations are industrial and technological. A political actor cannot exercise meaningful autonomy in defence affairs without the capacity to produce critical equipment, sustain military operations, maintain supply chains and develop advanced technologies. Debates concerning European defence now centre on productive capacity, not institutional design alone (European Union 2025c).

The same logic applies to relations between the European Union and NATO. Public discussions occasionally present European defence initiatives as alternatives to the Atlantic Alliance. Such interpretations overlook the continuing complementarity between the two frameworks. Despite the expansion of EU defence initiatives, collective territorial defence remains heavily dependent on NATO capabilities and structures. European cooperation can strengthen the European pillar of security, but it does not eliminate the strategic importance of the transatlantic relationship.

This dependence on NATO highlights one of the central tensions within debates on strategic autonomy. Political discourse often implies a choice between dependence and autonomy. Empirical developments point towards a different outcome. European governments are attempting to reduce vulnerabilities, im-

prove industrial capacity, strengthen military readiness and expand their ability to act collectively. None of these objectives requires separation from NATO. What is emerging is a model based on stronger European capabilities operating alongside a continuing transatlantic security framework.

The period after 2022 produced a significant expansion of defence cooperation, collective investment and defence-industrial coordination. Progress in institutional cooperation has advanced faster than the generation of military capabilities. National governments remain the principal actors, industrial fragmentation persists, and capability development continues to vary across member states. European defence cooperation has entered a new phase, but the gap between political ambition and practical capability remains substantial.

Conclusion

This study has examined the drivers behind the acceleration of EU security and defence cooperation after 2022 and assessed whether these developments indicate a transition from strategic autonomy as a political concept towards deeper forms of defence integration. The post-2022 phase of European defence cooperation cannot be understood solely as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The war served as a catalyst in an environment shaped by geopolitical competition, technological rivalry, external dependencies, changing threat perceptions and uncertainty surrounding the future distribution of power.

Four factors help explain the expansion of defence cooperation. Convergence in threat perceptions reduced political obstacles to collective action. Uncertainty regarding the long-term evolution of transatlantic security arrangements increased interest in strengthening European capabilities. Institutional adaptation within the EU framework provided mechanisms through which cooperation could expand. Defence-industrial capacity emerged as a central component of security policy, linking military preparedness to production, technology, procurement and supply chains.

European defence cooperation has moved beyond the largely declaratory approach that characterised many earlier discussions on strategic autonomy. Security and defence policy have become connected to industrial production, technological innovation, logistics, procurement practices and financial instruments. Defence integration is no longer driven primarily by institutional aspirations; it is shaped by material requirements.

The transformation has also exposed limits. Cooperation has expanded more rapidly than capability generation. Defence expenditure has increased substantially, new instruments have been created, and coordination has intensified across multiple policy areas. Industrial fragmentation, uneven capability development and persistent national differences continue to constrain the effectiveness of these efforts. Higher spending does not automatically produce

higher military capability when resources remain dispersed across national systems with differing priorities.

The findings support neither the expectation of a fully autonomous European defence actor nor the view that defence cooperation remains largely unchanged. The evidence provides support for the functional and institutional spillover expectations specified in Table 1: cooperation has expanded from defence research and capability planning towards procurement, industrial production, financing and related capability development, while common EU instruments have become more relevant in practice. The Versailles process provides evidence of the intervening role of member-state preferences and intergovernmental bargaining, while SAFE provides a concrete example of how financial incentives can encourage cross-border procurement without transferring formal authority to EU institutions. At the same time, the evidence supports the intergovernmentalist expectations concerning national preferences and authority. Large differences in defence spending and procurement patterns persist, national governments continue to determine core defence priorities and force-related decisions, and NATO remains central to collective defence. The resulting pattern is therefore best understood as hybrid integration: functional cooperation and institutional interdependence have deepened without a comparable transfer of formal authority to EU institutions. Process tracing supports this interpretation by linking changes in the security environment and threat perceptions to political commitments, institutional adaptation and subsequent forms of practical cooperation, while the expenditure and procurement evidence qualifies the extent of that integration.

The future of European defence cooperation will depend less on the creation of new institutional frameworks than on the ability to translate political commitments into sustainable capabilities. Industrial production, technological innovation, military readiness, defence planning and supply-chain resilience will play a decisive role in determining whether these ambitions can be converted into long-term strategic capacity. The trajectory identified in this article points towards a European Union that occupies a more prominent position in security and defence affairs than at any previous stage of integration. Whether this evolution ultimately leads to a more autonomous European defence posture will depend on the willingness of member states to narrow the gap between political ambition and practical capability.

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