

The European Army: Ambition without Joint Political Will?

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International Policy Review - Policy of the Month

April 2026

Introduction

Konrad Adenauer once said, “What does Europe live on? It lives on the grace of the United States. That will not last forever either. The day will come, and must come, when Europe can help itself and stand on its own two feet.”¹

In a geopolitical landscape shaped by the war in Ukraine, rising global terrorism, and persistent migration pressures, the European Union is facing a new era of security uncertainty. Long reliant on transatlantic protection, Europe is increasingly confronted with the limits of its strategic independence. As questions grow over the reliability of external guarantees, the idea of a common European army has re-emerged at the centre of political and academic debate.

This article examines whether such a force is truly feasible by analysing the European Union’s legal framework, political constraints, and existing political capabilities. It compares two possible paths: strengthening the European pillar within NATO or building a fully autonomous defence structure. It argues that although the foundations for a common army already exist, the absence of political unity and operational cohesion continues to block its realization. In this context, a gradual move toward limited strategic autonomy appears to be the most realistic first step.

Background

The war between Russia and Ukraine has been going on for 1147 days. The number of casualties on the Russian side alone exceeds one million,² while the Ukrainian civilian casualties amount to some 13,580 people³ highlighting the severe humanitarian implications of the conflict, which in itself poses a security threat for Europe.

Beyond current conflicts, the EU has also faced earlier challenges that have tested its security and crisis management capabilities. Among these, we can mention the migratory pressure that has been recorded since 2015-2016. Frontex has recorded nearly four million illegal crossings at the European Union’s external borders,⁴ which not only poses a humanitarian challenge but also an enormous risk to Europe’s security. We live in an era of terrorism and hybrid warfare. In the Middle

¹ Tim Peter, “Europe must stand on its own two feet,” *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, (2024): <https://www.kas.de/en/event-reports/detail/-/content/europe-must-stand-on-its-own-two-feet>

² Seth G. Jones, Riley McCabe, “Russia’s Battlefield Woes in Ukraine,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, (2025): <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-battlefield-woes-ukraine>

³ Krzysztof Janowski, “Civilian casualties in Ukraine reach three-year high in June, UN human rights monitors say” *United Nations Ukraine*, (2025):

<https://ukraine.un.org/en/297777-civilian-casualties-ukraine-reach-three-year-high-june-un-human-rights-monitors-say>

⁴ Beatrice Tiridimas, „In data: A decade of irregular migration to Europe,” *Context*, (2025): <https://www.context.news/socioeconomic-inclusion/in-data-a-decade-of-irregular-migration-to-europe>

East, the 75-year conflict between Israel and Palestine has still not been officially resolved. More recently, the war between the United States and Iran has not only threatened global security but also has immediate implications for Europe, including energy insecurity, renewed migration flows, and increased risks of radicalization and terrorism.

Does the EU have the foundations?

The current state of the EU's collective defence capability, and the creation of an autonomous European army, rests on three pillars: legal authority, political conditions, and military capabilities. Of the three, the legal framework is the most complete; military capabilities are partially in place. The bottleneck is political.

3.1 Legal

The legal basis for a common European army already exists. The European Union can act within the limits established by the Treaties, and Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) clearly states that the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is an integral part of the Union's foreign and security policy and may progressively lead to a common defence. In other words, if the European Council decides unanimously, the CSDP could evolve into a fully-fledged common defence.⁵

Furthermore, Articles 42(6) and 46 TEU enable deeper defence integration through the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), although it keeps the participation voluntary and the sovereignty over armed forces is retained by Member States.⁶

Given the current circumstances, the legal foundation for establishing a European army already exists. The EU can only act within the limits set by the Treaties, and since the TEU states that the CSDP could lead to a common defence if the Council decides so, it allows for a deeper defence integration. Although this is not an automatic obligation for the Member States.

3.2 Military

At present, the European Union does not possess an independent military base and a permanent command structure, and only conducts peacekeeping and crisis management missions.⁷ Military operations are conducted using the infrastructure of Member States and NATO facilities. Initiatives such as PESCO, which allows Member States to deepen defence cooperation, and the European Defence Fund, have begun to promote the joint development of capabilities. New projects — such as military mobility, joint training, and cyber security — are further strengthening cooperation

⁵ Treaty of the European Union, Art. 42.

⁶ Treaty of the European Union, Art. 42. Art. 46.

⁷ Treaty of the European Union, Art. 43.

among Member States.⁸

Although the foundation for an autonomous European army remains incomplete, as the EU lacks a permanent operational headquarters (EU-OHQ) capable of making rapid decisions and coordinating deployment. Other than this, its defence capabilities are completely reliant on Member States' contributions.

3.3. Political

The CSDP is not only a military matter, but also a complex institutional framework. The most important strategic decisions are taken by the European Council, composed of the Heads of State and Government. Unanimity is required for all major CSDP decisions, which in practice often paralyses collective action. There is no political leadership at the EU level capable of authorizing and executing decisions rapidly; vetoes and risk aversion tend to undermine effectiveness and operational capacity.

Furthermore, diverging national priorities further complicate the definition of a common political and strategic direction.

All in all, the political foundation remains lacking, as Member States tend to prioritise national interests, limiting the development of a coherent and unified approach to defence.

The Two Possible Models

4.1 The NATO pillar

The core idea of the NATO pillar is that the EU should be able to conduct independent operations within its own region while remaining aligned with NATO's overall strategy. This would involve making more coordinated and efficient use of existing capabilities—such as NATO's command structure (SHAPE), communication networks, and strategic transport—while increasing European autonomy.

At the same time, these efforts would be complemented by the EU's own initiatives, including projects under Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), as well as the development of shared capabilities in areas such as drones, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), and logistics, supported by the European Defence Fund. Therefore, the concept of a "pillar" would not imply full independence, but rather complementarity.

Among its advantages, the European pillar would, first and foremost, strengthen the voice of Europe within NATO. In addition, this model would be cost-effective as it would not require the creation of a fully autonomous defence structure. However, it would also maintain Europe's dependence on the United States.

4.2 Autonomous Army

The development of an autonomous European army has two dimensions. The first is institutional, involving decision-making structures, financing mechanisms, and the establishment of a

⁸ Council Decision, (CFSP) 2017/2315 of 11 December 2017 establishing permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) [2017] OJ L331/57.States'lacheadquartersreliese ,headquartersk

common budgetary framework. The second is operational and tactical, requiring a permanent operational headquarters, effective command and control systems (C2/CIS), and the avoidance of unnecessary duplication of existing NATO structures.

Policy Recommendations

In order to move towards a common European defence structure, several concrete steps should be prioritised.

First, the European Union would need to adopt and maintain NATO interoperability standards (such as the Standardization Agreement and Federated Mission Networking). Without them, Member States' weapons systems would not function effectively together.⁹

As a second step, decision-making procedures should be reformed. The current requirement of unanimity in the CSDP significantly limits the Union's ability to act. Introducing qualified majority voting in selected defence areas would enhance responsiveness while preserving national sovereignty in core security matters.

Second, the EU should strengthen its operational structures. The establishment of an EU-OHQ at a level comparable to NATO's SHAPE, and to develop secure command and control, communications, and information systems (C2/CIS). This would require the creation of a comprehensive operational command infrastructure, intelligence and logistics networks, and common funding mechanisms similar to those of NATO.¹⁰

Third, defence capabilities must be further integrated. Expanding joint procurement, increasing investment through the European Defence Fund, and deepening cooperation under PESCO would reduce fragmentation and improve interoperability among Member States.

Fourth, the EU should ensure full interoperability with NATO. The adoption and consistent application of NATO standards must remain a priority, guaranteeing that European forces can operate effectively both independently and within the Alliance. And last but not least, the political commitment must be reinforced.

In this sense, strengthening the EU's role within the NATO framework should not be seen as an alternative to strategic autonomy, but as its necessary first step. Deepening cooperation, enhancing interoperability, and developing joint capabilities within NATO can gradually create the conditions for a more autonomous European defence capacity in the long term.

Conclusion

Europe's strength lies in unity. Collective security requires a shared vision, a common strategy, and firm political will. The European Union already possesses the essential elements to move in this

⁹ NATO. *Federated Mission Networking*. NATO Allied Command Transformation. <https://www.act.nato.int/activities/federated-mission-networking/>

¹⁰ Dick Zandee, Adaja Stoetman., *Realising the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity: opportunities and pitfalls*. (Clingendael, The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2022), 7.

direction: a clear legal basis, effective funding mechanisms, established institutional structures, and interoperable technical standards. The adoption, maintenance, and adaptation of NATO standards to the European context are necessary steps, but not sufficient on their own.

What is missing — and has always been missing — is political will. Without it, there will be no operational integration, no joint command, and no capacity for rapid crisis response. European defence should not be conceived as an alternative to NATO, but as its strategic complement, capable of acting autonomously when European interests so require.

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Treaty of the European Union, Art. 42.

Treaty of the European Union, Art. 43.

Treaty of the European Union, Art. 46.

