

# **As the EU Embraces Hard Power, Candidate States Must Rethink Their Foreign Policy Alignment**

**Steven Blockmans**

**Policy Paper  
May 2025**



საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი  
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS



KONRAD  
ADENAUER  
STIFTUNG







საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი  
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS



---

## POLICY PAPER

### ISSUE #48 | May 2025

**The Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)** is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia. It also encourages public participation in civil society-building and developing democratic processes. The organization aims to become a major center for scholarship and policy innovation for the country of Georgia and the wider Black sea region. To that end, GIP is working to distinguish itself through relevant, incisive research; extensive public outreach; and a bold spirit of innovation in policy discourse and political conversation.

*This publication was produced in cooperation with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), South Caucasus Office. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the Georgian Institute of Politics or the KAS South Caucasus Office.*

## HOW TO QUOTE THIS DOCUMENT:

**Steven Blockmans**, “As the EU Embraces Hard Power, Candidate States Must Rethink Their Foreign Policy Alignment,” Policy Paper No. 48, Georgian Institute of Politics, May 2025.

---

© Georgian Institute of Politics, 2025

13 Aleksandr Pushkin St, 0107 Tbilisi, Georgia

Tel: +995 595 045 144

Email: [info@gip.ge](mailto:info@gip.ge)

[www.gip.ge](http://www.gip.ge)

## Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
INTRODUCTION	4
EVOLVING THREAT LANDSCAPE	5
INDISPENSABLE NATO?	7
EUROPE'S ROADMAP FOR DEFENCE INDUSTRIAL READINESS	8
SECURITY AND DEFENCE PARTNERSHIPS	11
CANDIDATE COUNTRIES: WITH OR AGAINST THE EU?	12
CONCLUDING REMARKS	14
RECOMMENDATIONS	15

## About the Author:

Steven Blockmans is an Associate Senior Research Fellow, and previously Director of Research, at the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) in Brussels. He is also Senior Fellow at the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS) in Tallinn, Visiting Professor at the College of Europe (Bruges, Natolin and Tirana), and Editor-in-Chief of the European Foreign Affairs Review. Steven is a frequent commentator on EU affairs at major media outlets and regularly briefs senior policy-makers from the European Union, its member states and G20 country governments. He has testified at the foreign affairs and international trade committees of the European Parliament and the UK House of Commons. He was also a member of a track 1,5 process between the EU and Russia. He is the author of *Tough Love: the EU's relations with the Western Balkans* (Springer 2007) and *The Obsolescence of the European Neighbourhood Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield 2017).

## Executive summary

As Russia's war continues to rage in Ukraine and NATO's philosophy of deterrence has been eroded by the caprice of the Trump administration, Europe is ramping up its defence spending. By working through the EU institutions, member states aim to harmonise standards in the dual-use sphere, stimulate joint production, and facilitate joint procurement. But can this be done quickly enough to deter Russia from openly attacking EU territory? The fact that forward defence in Ukraine, which is a precondition for the EU's own security, is hampered by internal disagreement is pushing Brussels to promote an "open architecture combined with variable geometry". This is not just creating a polite excuse for member states to join a coalition of the willing outside the EU's structures. It's much more an invitation to non-EU states to strike up defence partnerships with the Union, provided they share the same strategic outlook. In this context, the EU enlargement policy is being infused with a big dose of geopolitical interest promotion, putting a prime on alignment by candidate countries to the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

**Key words:** European strategic autonomy; NATO; defence; EU enlargement

## Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the second Trump administration have sent geopolitical shifts in a tailspin and pushed the EU towards an inflection point for defence integration. Since the end of the Cold War, the risk of being preyed upon by the great powers has never been greater. Several military intelligence agencies of EU countries have warned that Russia could test Europe's readiness to defend itself in three to five years' time. In parallel, the Trump administration has sown doubt as to how much damage it would be prepared to inflict on NATO, by questioning the US commitment to mutual defence and by not ruling out an attack of other NATO members. If European political parties across the spectrum agree on one thing, then it is that the way to address citizens' anxieties is by moving from words to deeds and implementing an agenda that restores a more robust sense of security.

The European policy response has so far primarily consisted of committing more money for defence and the development of instruments to boost joint production and procurement. Yet, as defence industrial integration gets underway, policy developments on the EU's operational side stagnate. This bifurcation has led the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to promote an "open architecture combined with variable geometry" (Joint White Paper 2025). This is not just creating a polite excuse for member states to join a coalition of the willing outside the EU's structures. It's much more an invitation to non-EU states to strike up defence partnerships with the Union, provided they share the same strategic outlook. In this context, the EU enlargement policy is being infused with a big dose of geopolitical interest promotion, putting a prime on alignment by candidate countries to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

This paper charts the evolving threat landscape for Europe, assesses the supposed indispensability of NATO, and the EU's roadmap towards defence readiness by 2030. It argues that the EU's quest for strategic autonomy puts pressure on the governments of those candidate countries that have tried to maintain a multi-vector foreign policy or equidistance between Brussels and Moscow to choose sides.

## Evolving threat landscape

It is a dangerous illusion to assume that the war in Ukraine is just a Russo-Ukrainian conflict and that Putin will stop once he has conquered ‘Little Russia’ (Plokhy and Higgins 2023). The Kremlin has left no doubt about its objectives: to regain control of Central and Eastern Europe and to restore a Yalta-style European order (MFA Russia 2021). To all intents and purposes, neo-imperialist Russia is at war with the EU and NATO. Therefore, Europe’s security is inextricably linked to that of Ukraine.

Russia’s economy is in full war mode. Hit by Western sanctions, it is being propped up by China, which is buying its energy, providing an alternative to the US dollar, and replacing Western supplies, from electronics and other dual-use goods (Sher 2024) to—allegedly—weapons (Malenko et al. 2025). President Putin is spending well over a third of his country’s budget on the military (Cooper 2025). In a period of three months Russia can produce more weapons and more ammunition than the EU member states collectively can in twelve.

Sabotage conducted or ordered by Kremlin operatives happens all over the continent and the low-risk high-reward attacks on critical infrastructures in the Baltic Sea may well be replicated elsewhere. The military intelligence agencies of Germany (Dunlop 2025) and Denmark (Danish Defence Intelligence Service 2025) have publicly warned that Russia could test Europe’s readiness to defend itself in three to five years’ time. This has led EU High Representative Kallas to say that this “heavily militarised country presents an existential threat to all of us” (Kallas 2025). NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte has gone even further: “I am telling you very clearly: we must prepare for war. This is the best way to avoid war” (Bild 2025).

Shoring up Europe’s defences is invariably declared a priority. This sense of urgency is reflected in the European Council’s Strategic Agenda 2024-29 and in the conclusions of a series of extraordinary and regular summits in the first half of 2025: “Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine and its repercussions for European and global security in a changing environment constitute an existential challenge for the European Union” (European Council 2025). Beneath the innocuous reference to “a changing environment” lie deep worries about the US security commitment to Europe.

The sanctity of NATO’s famous Article 5 is being threatened from within the Alliance, by the ‘indispensable nation’ (Albright 1998). For eight decades, the US has provided Europe with a military shield, both nuclear and conventional. However, the arrangements underpinning this Pax Americana are becoming increasingly fragile in view of proposals to withdraw thousands of US troops and kit from the continent (Lubold et al. 2025). Ahead of the June 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague, the US had not yet told its NATO allies how far it intended to pull back its force commitments in Europe, but that it would certainly start later this year and in consultation with allies to avoid leaving any security gaps (Sytas 2025). A recent report suggested that it might take 10 or 12 years for Europe to replace key US military capabilities (Röhl, Bardt 2025).

One doesn't have to share the loathing by top MAGA officials of European 'free-loading' (Roth 2025) to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth that Europeans are not ready to properly defend themselves—let alone others—without American engagement. While the White House has given no indication that it would withdraw the nuclear umbrella, contradictions in President Trump's statements and policies have shaken European leaders' faith in the US commitment to extended deterrence. How else to explain the Polish and German interest in President Macron's offer to spread the French nuclear umbrella to other parts of the EU?

While some of the Trump administration's pronouncements may be softened or reversed, the longer-term direction of travel is clear: Trump wants Europe to not just share the burden for security of the old continent with the US; he wants to shift the burden to Europe so that US capabilities that will have been replaced can be moved to other continents (Hegseth 2025)—mainly to Asia, in an attempt to contain arch-rival China, but also to the border with Mexico, to destroy the drug cartels and other trafficking networks.

Upping the ante, Trump first adopted a more conciliatory approach towards President Putin, raising suspicions about an American alignment with Russia over ending the war in Ukraine. Trump and his acolytes then suspended all military aid to Ukraine, framed President Zelensky in a widely televised dressing-down at the White House and subsequently resumed much-needed intelligence-sharing to cajole Ukraine into making concessions for a separate mineral deal with Washington, supposedly as a step towards a US-brokered ceasefire agreement with Russia, efforts which subsequently abandoned.

In parallel, the Trump administration has sown doubt as to how much damage it would be prepared to inflict on NATO, by questioning the US commitment to mutual defence and by not ruling out an attack of other NATO members like Canada (the so-called 51st state) or Denmark (over Greenland). With allies like these, who needs enemies?

Europe cannot afford to wait another couple of years to see whether Trump's threats will hold. With the concentration of executive power around the Presidency, a purge of the administration to make it loyal to the Make America Great Again (MAGA) agenda, big tech (and thus big investment money) brought to heel, and the American press, academia, and law firms slowly being muzzled, the liberal-democratic US of yesteryear will not return anytime soon, irrespective of whether the Democrats make gains in the mid-term elections of November 2026. Even if Trump is constitutionally blocked from a third mandate as president, his brand of 'competitive authoritarianism' (Levitsky and Way 2002) is expected to be around for the next decade and may still be repowered if a MAGA heir like Vice-President JD Vance assumes the highest office. The editorial board of the Financial Times summarised it aptly: "allies and erstwhile friends must banish (any) self-soothing thoughts. America has turned. Donald Trump's abandonment of allies is real and will endure" (Financial Times 2025).

## Indispensable NATO?

Despite the sharp deterioration in transatlantic relations, there is still a remarkable degree of consensus across Europe that there is no alternative to NATO. In its plans to ramp up Europe's defence readiness by 2030, the European Commission and the High Representative stick with NATO. Even France, standard-bearer of European strategic autonomy, regards the Alliance as the bedrock of collective defence (Kauffmann 2025). No other body has the command structures, the planning capabilities, or the strategic culture of operating together to defend the continent.

In an effort to keep the US wedded to NATO, leaders of European allies are committing to higher defence spending targets and officials from countries that pack the most military punch have begun discussing informally how to shift the burden from the US to Europe in an orderly fashion over the next five to ten years (Financial Times 2025b). Optimists say that if European capitals can over that period provide all the forces required to implement NATO's regional defence plans to bolster its eastern flank, that would automatically lessen America's burden and ease Washington into accepting a stronger European pillar within NATO. But few want to precipitate "the very thing they want to avoid: American disinterest in NATO and disengagement from European defence" (Gnesotto 2025). According to the chair of the NATO Military Committee, a realistic scenario of burden-shifting would entail that Europe takes responsibility for regional deterrence, mainly with conventional and rapid reaction capabilities, while the US continues to provide air power, space capabilities and the nuclear deterrent (Cavo Dragone 2025).

The evolving threat landscape demands that European duplication of NATO capabilities be seen not as inefficiency, but as a necessary buffer against uncertainty. Helpfully, NATO itself no longer views an enhanced European defence capacity as inherently duplicative, but increasingly as necessary burden-sharing—especially if transatlantic cohesion weakens in the coming years (Hooker Jr. and Molot 2025, 8-9). Yet, while many talk breezily about creating a 'European pillar within NATO', few can say what it means in practice or even whether it would be possible without Washington's full consent.





## Europe's roadmap for defence industrial readiness

The incoming German Chancellor Friedrich Merz took everyone by surprise when he said on the night of his election victory on 23 February 2025 that his priority was “independence” from Trump’s America (Politico 2025). The Christian Democrat leader subsequently hatched a game-changing coalition deal with the Social Democratic Party to relax the constitutional debt brake and loosen fiscal rules to allow Berlin to borrow hundreds of billions for defence and infrastructure investment (Financial Times 2025c). Given Germany’s economic heft and its armed forces’ focus on territorial defence, this sea change in fiscal policy could mean that the country becomes the bedrock of European security and defence.

Across Europe, allies have steadily increased their collective investment in defence—from 1.43% of their combined GDP in 2014, to 2.02% in 2024 (NATO 2024). The laggards have all promised to meet the agreed targets (2% of GDP spent on defence and 20% of that on new equipment) before the end of 2025. Meanwhile, a new pledge at The Hague raises the bar to 3,5% spent on defence and 1,5% on wider security-related items. Only Poland and the Baltic states currently meet such spending commitments.

Recognising that Europe’s security is inextricably linked to that of Ukraine, the heads of state or government have at several intervals stressed the need to substantially increase expenditure on Europe’s security and defence and called on the Commission to recommend common actions. Published in mid-March 2025, the Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030, produced by the new High Representative, Kaja Kallas, and Commissioner for Defence and Space, Andrius Kubilius, lays down a roadmap to re-arm Europe through a EUR 800 billion “once-in-a-generation surge in European defence investment” (Joint White Paper 2025).

The reference here is to the Commission’s ‘ReArm Europe’ initiative (von der Leyen 2025), which was endorsed by the European Council on 6 March 2025 and renamed ‘Readiness 2030’ after complaints that the initial label was excessively charged and might alienate citizens (Liboreiro 2025). This plan to complement national defence upgrades is built on five key pillars:

- 1.** A landmark relaxation of eurozone fiscal rules to allow greater defence spending without breaching EU budget constraints.
- 2.** The creation of a new EUR 150bn joint EU loan instrument called ‘Security Action for Europe (SAFE)’ to finance strategic defence capabilities — drones, anti-drone systems, cyber and missile defence (EUR-Lex 2025).
- 3.** A revision of the EU’s cohesion policy and a redirection of post-Covid recovery and resiliency funds towards military investments (European Commission 2025).
- 4.** An expansion of the European Investment Bank’s (EIB) mandate to support the defence industry.
- 5.** The mobilisation of private capital through the Capital Markets Union to fund security-related projects.



These ideas come on top of multiple, but mostly small-scale initiatives made during two earlier rounds of EU defence policy innovations over the past decade. Firstly, the post-2014 creation of a Commission-managed European Defence Fund (EDF), with EUR 8bn allocated under the current multiannual financial framework (MFF; 2021-2027); the launch of 75 industrial and logistical support projects under the most populated of enhanced cooperation formats provided for in the Treaties (permanent structured cooperation—PESCO)(Council of the European Union); and a semester-like Coordinated Annual Review for Defence (CARD) mechanism, also managed by the European Commission, to assess progress in the implementation of member states' capability development plans. Secondly, the post-2022 adoption of the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) and European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), worth EUR 500mn resp. EUR 300mn drawn from the general budget of the EU for a period of two years to co-finance the production of ammunition resp. partially reimburse joint purchases involving consortia of at least three member states.

While the latest initiatives and pledges in military expenditures are dearly needed after years of austerity, Europe cannot simply spend its way out of this crisis. With the large sums of money being committed by member states comes the temptation to spend domestically. But accumulating national defence expenditures does not contribute to a common European defence and does very little to improve the EU's standing on the geopolitical plane. Also, the Commission's proposal to relax fiscal rules will not necessarily help countries with high deficits and debts like France, Italy, or Spain to borrow more. As part of the ReArm Europe initiative, the EUR 150bn loan instrument may in fact be too small and not financially favourable enough for governments to make a big difference to Europe's deeply fragmented defence market (McKinsey & Company 2023).

This raises the question whether the EU needs new institutions with much more firepower to accelerate defence procurement and promote the consolidation and scaling up of Europe's defence industry. But the EU's institutional framework has been reinforced over the past few years and should be able to meet the challenge. Acting under the authority of the High Representative, the European External Action Service (EEAS) has occupied a greater role in the policy initiation and external representation on defence matters. Its managing directorate for peace, security and defence policy has ballooned and the EEAS now also includes a permanent headquarters (euphemistically called Military Planning and Conduct Capability—MPCC) for non-executive CSDP missions and operations under the EU Military Staff (EUMS). The European Commission has added a Directorate General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS), headed by its own Commissioner. On the side of the European Parliament (EP), the relevant sub-committee of the Foreign Affairs Committee was elevated to a fully-fledged committee on Security and Defence (SEDE) at the beginning of 2025.

This institutional upgrade has been accompanied by a regulatory trend. Using its competence to support EU countries' industrial policy, the Commission has employed Article 173(3) TFEU as the main legal basis for the adoption of regulations through the ordinary legislative procedure (with the Council deciding by qualified majority vote—circumventing blockage by Hungary). In 2024, the executive proposed a European Defence Industrial Programme (EDIP) as a gap filler between 2025 and the next MFF (2028-2035), providing EUR 1.5bn in new funding to beef up the European Defence Technological and Innovation Base and that of Ukraine via the EU budget (European Commission 2024). More structurally, EDIP is designed to deepen the Commission's new role

established through the temporary ASAP and EDIRPA, allowing it to intervene in a number of regulatory areas and in defence planning in times of supply crisis, thereby conferring new powers on the Commission like those pioneered under the emergency response Covid-19 vaccine strategy and replicated in the EU's Chips Act and Critical Raw Materials Act. As such, EDIP is intended to:

- Strengthen the European Commission's capacity to support, coordinate and rationalise member states' demand for military equipment vis-à-vis the defence industry.

---

- Enable the Commission to negotiate defence contracts (which it could co-finance) on behalf of groups of member states.

---

- Give the executive an unprecedented role in selecting defence projects of 'common interest' that could be co-financed by the EU.

---

- Authorise the Commission, in exceptional circumstances and under certain strict conditions agreed with the member states concerned, to impose priorities on defence companies in terms of military production and critical components, even going so far as to impose sanctions if necessary.

---

A new Defence Industrial Readiness Board (DIRB) will assist the Commission and be responsible for, inter alia, supply chain surveillance and monitoring, proposing that the Council activate a state of supply crisis, advising and assessing emergency measures, facilitating coordination action between the Commission and the member states, and identifying funding priority areas taking into account member states' capability development plans. The DIRB will operate along supranational lines. Even if it is said to 'complement' the European Defence Agency (EDA), the DIRB would eclipse the Agency in a state of supply crisis—which may come sooner than member states wish for if China, for instance, blocks the supply of certain rare earths and critical materials needed in the European defence industry. Set under the CSDP, the EDA runs along intergovernmental lines, which has dampened its effectiveness. With its limited staff and budget, reluctance of (big) member states' defence ministries to cooperate, and NATO's refusal to exchange information about its planning processes, the Agency has been unable to play an impactful role in terms of fostering more R&D and procurement of military equipment (Scazzieri 2025). Acting under the authority of DG DEFIS, the Defence Industrial Readiness Board may well become the channel through which to functionally spill over and supranationalise certain tasks hitherto managed by the EDA. The rationale to use the Community method in arranging EU support for member states' R&D and joint procurement is indeed strong.

Predictably, the draft regulation has provoked grumblings in some European capitals which see EDIP as a power grab by the Commission to steer defence industrial production, also outside crisis situations for the financing of activities aimed at supporting the deployment of "European defence projects of common interest". But given the sense of emergency over threats to Europe's security, there is little tampering to be expected with the text of the draft regulation. The EP has endorsed it at the end of April 2025 and the member states are expected follow suit.

## Security and defence partnerships

Central to the Commission's White Paper of 19 March 2025 is a 'porcupine strategy' for Ukraine to defend itself and deter Russia – also from attacking EU member states. The surest way of quickly filling critical gaps is indeed to link Ukraine to EU initiatives to develop defence capabilities and integrate the respective industries. Accelerating the candidate country's defence industrial integration isn't just Brussels' geostrategic response to Russia's war of aggression. It also serves the EU's self-enlightened interest:

“Ukraine has become the world's leading defence and technology innovation laboratory. Closer cooperation between the Ukrainian and European defence industries will enable first-hand knowledge transfer on how to best use innovation to achieve military superiority on the battlefield, including on rapidly scaling up production and updating existing capabilities” (Joint White Paper 2025, 12).

The Commission and High Representative are not shy in stating that Ukraine and all EU member states need the capabilities required to conduct the “entire spectrum of military tasks”, ranging from providing a minimum of two million rounds of large-calibre artillery ammunition, air-defence systems, missiles and drones to key enablers like space assets and services to replace American capacities for intelligence-sharing, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

The fact that nuclear capabilities are left out of the document is an understandable omission given the limitations of a nuclear weapon state to share its command and control, neutral states' objections, and the EU's minor civilian competences in this field—Europe's nuclear trilemma (cf. Bell and Hoffmann 2025). Arguably, the extension of France's nuclear umbrella to the rest of the EU will only happen on terms acceptable by Paris (Perot 2025).

The White Paper does not deal in hyperbole. It offers realistic suggestions on how to enhance defence readiness by working through the EU institutions. Indeed, the EU is uniquely placed to harmonise standards (cf. Defence Omnibus Simplification Proposal 2025), stimulate joint production and facilitate joint procurement. Yet, adding up all the elements of the White Paper's shopping list of military capabilities amounts to the creation of—all but in name—a strategically autonomous European defence industrial pillar. Gone are the days of worrying about duplicating capabilities with those on the other side of the Atlantic (Albright 1998b).

While the suggestion that the EU should 'de-risk' from the US would have been politically too explosive to include in the White Paper, it's nevertheless counterintuitive for the Commission and High Representative to suggest that the EU will “continue to build on the deep and extensive transatlantic supply chain” (Joint White Paper 2025, pp. 19-20). Now would have been the moment to push for the rebalancing of the defence industrial relationship and spell out clearly what it means to make it “mutually beneficial”. With the growing weight of an increasingly integrated defence market, from which the US benefits so much, comes the need to renegotiate the terms and conditions of industrial cooperation with Washington, so that Europe (i) when it produces for

US consumption, is no longer subject to American control of its value chain; and (ii) when it buys American, the US can no longer flick a kill switch to deny what Europeans see as the legitimate exercise of their strategic autonomy (cf. Spatafora 2025). Going forward, the transatlantic industrial alliance will have to be imbued with more reciprocity.

Contrary to the Trump administration's isolationist agenda and untrustworthiness towards its neighbours, friends, and allies, the EU is promoting an "open architecture combined with variable geometry" to enhance its security. The White Paper implicitly encourages like-minded states which do not (yet) have a security and defence partnership with the EU (cf. the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and India) to agree one quickly, lest their companies miss out on the fresh subsidies that the EU plans to dole out.

### **Candidate countries: with or against the EU?**

In line with the last observation, the European Commission and High Representative demand strategic clarity from candidate countries: those which currently don't fully align with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, i.e. Georgia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia, are intentionally left out of the list of countries that would be eligible to apply for funding under the EU's brand-new loan instrument for defence (SAFE).

The fact that eligibility has little to do with democratic backsliding is revealed by the inclusion in the list of an increasingly autocratic Türkiye, which is deemed key to the European coalition of the able and willing to police a future ceasefire agreement between Russia and Ukraine. For legal entities owned or controlled by third states that are considered eligible, the SAFE Regulation nevertheless adds the condition that "appropriate mitigation measures" or "guarantees shall provide assurances that the involvement of the contractor or subcontractor in the common procurement does not contravene the security and defence interests of the Union and its Member States as established in the framework of the (CFSP)" Article 16(5). Such guarantees will have to ensure that the (sub)contractor is not subjected to third state control "that restrains or restricts its ability to fulfil the order and to deliver results" (Article 16(6)(a)) and that "access by a third country or by a third-country entity to classified information relating to the common procurement is prevented" (Article 16(6)(b)). These conditions are reminiscent of the eligibility criteria for third country participation in PESCO projects (Council Decision (CFSP) 2020/1639).

More broadly, alignment with the CFSP is being frontloaded in the application of EU pre-accession conditionality. This follows the declaration by the General Affairs Council that "(e)nlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity" (Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, 2024).

Georgia is a clear-cut case. Even if the European Council in October 2024 concluded that Georgia had de facto paused its pre-accession process by reneging on the fundamental values and principles that unwrite EU membership, there is currently no way for the Georgian Dream government to resuscitate its candidacy without openly and unreservedly, in words and through its actions, turning away from Russia and aligning with the EU (cf. Council of the European Union 2024 conclusions on enlargement, para. 4). Conversely, the EU can no longer expect candidate countries to make such choices without providing the security guarantees needed to deter a Russian military backlash.

Serbia—which is considered by many European governments as key to regional stability in the Western Balkans, which buys French Rafale fighter jets, and which holds some geoeconomic sway over EU in terms of providing access to lithium mines to boost the battery industry—is also blocked from progressing in its membership negotiations (Emerson and Blockmans 2025). The opening of substantive talks on Cluster 3 (competitiveness) has been delayed for more than three years, despite the European Commission’s assessment that Serbia is aligned on the technical standards of it.

The Council has demanded that Serbia first make “substantial further progress (...), in particular in accordance with the areas mentioned in paragraph 29 and in line with the negotiating framework, compared to the assessment set out in the 2024 enlargement report” (Council of the European Union 2024). Paragraph 29 of the document stresses that “Serbia’s progress on the rule of law and the normalisation of relations with Kosovo will continue to determine the overall pace of accession negotiations” (*Ibid.*, italics added).

As such, progressive alignment with the EU’s foreign and security affairs is elevated to be on a par, or indeed part of, the ‘fundamentals’ for membership: opened first and tracked throughout the pre-accession process, and—presumably—closed last. Such a reading chimes with the Commission’s insistence that Serbia “improve, as a matter of priority, its alignment with EU common foreign and security policy (CFSP), including restrictive measures, and avoid actions and statements that go against EU foreign policy positions” (European Commission 2024b).

In today’s security environment, the EU is closing down options for candidate countries to remain non-aligned by running a supposedly non-aligned or multi-vector foreign and security policy. Visiting Belgrade at the end of May, the High Representative effectively demanded that the Serbian President and government make up their mind: choose Europe or stay with Russia. No more delays (Kallas 2025b).

## Concluding remarks

As EU defence integration is powering ahead on the industrial track, governed by the Community method, progress on the intergovernmental track of EU operations is falling behind. A much-needed reassurance force for Ukraine is being cobbled together by a coalition of the willing outside the EU structures, in part because Hungary and Slovakia are opposed and do not wish to constructively abstain from the adoption of a Council decision.

Besides the unanimity requirement in Council decision-making, major hurdles in scoping and mobilising CSDP operations include the hitherto strict interpretation of the prohibition to charge the costs for EU operations having military or defence implications to the EU budget (Article 41(2) TEU), and limitations in the EU's integrated command structure, which is in principle limited to non-executive missions and thus incompatible with the functions performed by NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe.

Without a complete overhaul of the way defence is governed, the EU cannot solve the existing trilemma: enabling member states to massively increase defence spending, without (1) substantial impact on other policy areas or triggering tax hikes, (2) ceding any sovereignty over their defence policy, or (3) compromising on what to buy and from whom. Seen through this prism, the Commission's plan to 'ReArm Europe' is high in symbolism and low in substance.

This points to four related shortfalls in the EU's current policy response to the spiralling geopolitical crisis. Firstly, the EU has so far shied away from discussing issues of organisation, personnel, training, leadership and education, which are key to exercise due diligence in determining the acceptability, suitability, and feasibility of a military design change. Secondly, the timeframe for collective action barely goes beyond the EU's current institutional mandate. This is sufficient for standard regulatory approaches, but too short for institutional reform and mandating the EU to engage in territorial defence proper, requiring treaty change and constitutional amendment at the level of the member states. Thirdly, forward defence in Ukraine, which is a precondition for the EU's own security, is hampered by disagreement between member states about operational deployment. This has led to a search for a coalition of the able and willing outside the EU's structures and including NATO allies like the UK and Türkiye. While the White Paper on European Defence Readiness 2030 promotes an open architecture combined with variable geometry to enhance the EU's security, it adopts an inside-out approach. Yet, the Union may have to adapt to organisational realities that serve the wider European security order. And finally, where it concerns candidate countries, the EU is increasingly demanding that they choose sides in the Russo-Ukrainian war: with the EU, and thus Ukraine, or against them. This is not only evidenced in the conditions attached to the Union's new loan instrument for defence (SAFE). It is even more prevalent in the geostrategic approach to enlargement and the prime that the EU is increasingly putting on candidate countries' alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

For common defence to emerge, Europe—member states and candidate countries alike—will sooner rather than later have to bite the bullet.



## Recommendations

### To the European Union:

Strengthen internal capacity for military planning and command: The EU has a roadmap for defence industrial preparedness by 2030 but should urgently address issues of organisation, personnel, training, leadership and education to ensure due diligence in assessing the military design changes that it has embarked upon. This would improve strategic planning and operational effectiveness.

Stand by your future members, in words and deeds: The EU can no longer expect candidate countries to make a strategic choice to choose its side without providing the security guarantees needed to deter a Russian military backlash. This requires the EU to fill the defence partnerships with candidate countries with meaningful military substance that nears the threshold of the EU Treaty's mutual defence clause.

### To candidate countries:

Align pre-accession policy with security objectives: Candidate countries should swiftly and unequivocally align with the Common Foreign and Security Policy, ensuring that their aspiration to join the EU meets the Union's broader geostrategic goals. This requires unity on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Reform on the fundamentals needs to be real and sustained: The EU now considers alignment with the CFSP to be on a par with reform on the 'fundamentals' for membership: respect for democracy, fundamental rights, and rule of law. Potemkin alignment is no longer tolerated and will result in pre-accession negotiations being frozen. Candidate countries need to show a track record of sustained and irreversible reforms through the entire pre-accession process.

## References

- Albright, Madeleine. 1998. Interview on NBC-TV "The Today Show" with Matt Lauer. Available at: <https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/1998/980219a.html>
- Albright, Madeleine. 1998b. The right balance will secure NATO's future. *Financial Times* 7, no. 1998 (1998): 16.
- Bell, Mark S. and Hoffmann, Fabian R. 2025. Europe's Nuclear Trilemma. The Difficult and Dangerous Options for Post-American Deterrence. *Foreign Affairs*. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/europe/europes-nuclear-trilemma>
- Bild. 2025. Nato-Boss: Deutschland wird mehr zahlen müssen. Available at: <https://www.bild.de/news/ausland/nato-generalsekretaer-rutte-bereit-fuer-krieg-um-frieden-zu-sichern-679be76e08bc756e749d2966>
- Cavo Dragone. 2025. Paris Defence and Strategy Forum 2025. YouTube. Uploaded by Académie de défense de l'École militaire. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYusmXaA6yQ>
- Cooper, Julian. 2025. Preparing for a Fourth Year of War: Military Spending in Russia's Budget for 2025. SIPRI. *Insights on Peace and Security* No. 2025/04 April 2025;
- Council Decision (CFSP) 2020/1639. 2020. EUR-Lex. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2020/1639/oj/eng>
- Council of the European Union. 2024. Council conclusions on Enlargement. Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-16983-2024-INIT/en/pdf#:~:text=Enlargement%20is%20a%20geo-strategic,which%20the%20Union%20is%20founded>
- Council of the European Union. 2025. EU defence readiness: Council launches 6th wave of new PESCO projects. Available at: [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/27/eu-defence-readiness-council-launches-6th-wave-of-new-pesco-projects/?utm\\_source=brevio&utm\\_campaign=AUTOMATED%20-%20Alert%20-%20Newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_id=3318](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/27/eu-defence-readiness-council-launches-6th-wave-of-new-pesco-projects/?utm_source=brevio&utm_campaign=AUTOMATED%20-%20Alert%20-%20Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_id=3318)
- Danish Defence Intelligence Service. 2025. Opdateret vurdering af truslen fra Rusland mod Rigsfællesskabet. Available at: [https://www.fe-ddis.dk/globalassets/fe/dokumenter/2025/trusselsvurderinger/-20250209\\_opdateret\\_vurdering\\_af\\_truslen\\_fra\\_rusland\\_mod--.pdf](https://www.fe-ddis.dk/globalassets/fe/dokumenter/2025/trusselsvurderinger/-20250209_opdateret_vurdering_af_truslen_fra_rusland_mod--.pdf)
- Defence Omnibus Simplification Proposal. 2025. European Commission. Available at: [https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/-consultation-contribute-defence-omnibus-simplification-proposal-2025-03-25\\_en](https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/-consultation-contribute-defence-omnibus-simplification-proposal-2025-03-25_en)
- Delegation of the European Union to Georgia. 2024. Extracts on Georgia from the Conclusions of the European Council. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/extracts-georgia-conclusions-european-council-0\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/extracts-georgia-conclusions-european-council-0_en)
- Dunlop, Tom. 2025. Germany warns Russia may be preparing attack on NATO. *The UK Defence Journal*. Available at: <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/germany-warns-russia-may-be-preparing-attack-on-nato/>
- Emerson, Michael and Blockmans, Steven. 2025. A Redynamised EU Enlargement Process, but Hovering Between Accession and the Alternatives. SCREEUS Guest Report No. 1, 2025. Available at: <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/a-redynamised-eu-enlargement-process-but-hovering-between-accession-and-the-alternatives/>
- European Commission. 2024. Establishing the European Defence Industry Programme and a framework of measures to ensure the timely availability and supply of defence products ('EDIP'). Available at: [https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6cd3b158-d11a-4ac4-8298-91491e5fa424\\_en?filename=EDIP%20Proposal%20for%20a%20Regulation.pdf](https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6cd3b158-d11a-4ac4-8298-91491e5fa424_en?filename=EDIP%20Proposal%20for%20a%20Regulation.pdf)
- European Commission. 2024b. Serbia 2024 Report. Available at: [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902\\_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf)
- European Commission. 2025. A modernised cohesion policy to boost the EU's strategic priorities. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/-commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_25\\_929](https://ec.europa.eu/-commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_929)
- European Council. 2025. Special meeting of the European Council (6 March 2025) – Conclusions. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/tzkadtec/20250306-european-council-conclusions-en.pdf>
- EUR-Lex. 2025. COUNCIL REGULATION (EU) 2025/1106 of 27 May 2025, establishing the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) through the Reinforcement of the European Defence Industry Instrument. Available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:L\\_202501106](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:L_202501106)
- Financial Times. 2025. America has turned on its friends. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/1511aa42-a9ad-4952-99c8-98bea07d0414>
- Financial Times. 2025b. European military powers work on 5-10 year plan to replace US in Nato. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/939b695c-7df8-412d-a430-df988c98f2ca>
- Financial Times. 2025c. Germany's Friedrich Merz strikes 'game-changing' deal to boost defence spending. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/316ef73e-cf54-4d38-af5b-7166c684a13a?emailId=375202f7-aeaf-44aa-8707-72be179dd8a8&segmentId=488e9a50-190e-700c-cc1c-6a339da99cab>



Gnesotto, Nicole. 2025. Defence 25: thinking outside the box. Institut Jacques Delors. Hegseth, Pete. 2025. Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Defense Contact Group. U.S. Department of Defense. Available at: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4064113/opening-remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-ukraine-defense-contact/>

Hooker, R. D. Jr. Molot, Max. 2025. Building a Stronger Europe A Companion to the Belfer Center Task Force Report on a New Transatlantic Bargain. Harvard Kennedy School. Available at: [https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/Belfer\\_Building%20a%20Stronger%20Europe\\_Companion%20Report\\_1.2.pdf](https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/Belfer_Building%20a%20Stronger%20Europe_Companion%20Report_1.2.pdf)

Joint White Paper. 2025. European Commission. Available at: <https://eda.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/2025/03/19/joint-white-paper-for-european-defence-readiness-2030>

Kallas, Kaja. 2025. Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas at the Annual Conference of the European Defence Agency. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/defence-speech-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas-annual-conference-european-defence\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/defence-speech-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas-annual-conference-european-defence_en)

Kallas, Kaja. 2025b. Kaja Kallas Urges Serbia: 'Choose Europe or Stay with Russia' No More Delays! YouTube. Uploaded by EU Debates. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGtpO6a3o5I>

Kauffmann, Sylvie. 2025. Penser l'impensable – l'OTAN sans les Américains –, c'est le nouvel et troublant exercice auquel se livrent les Européens. Le Monde. Available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2025/04/02/penser-l-impensable-l-otan-sans-les-americains-c-est-le-nouvel-et-troublant-exercice-auquel-se-livrent-les-europeens\\_6589769\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2025/04/02/penser-l-impensable-l-otan-sans-les-americains-c-est-le-nouvel-et-troublant-exercice-auquel-se-livrent-les-europeens_6589769_3232.html)

Levitsky, Steven. Way, Lucan A. 2002. Elections without democracy: The rise of competitive authoritarianism. Journal of democracy 13, no. 2 (2002): 51-65.

Liboreiro, Jorge. 2025. Brussels rebrands 'Rearm Europe' plan after backlash from leaders of Italy and Spain. Euronews. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/21/brussels-confirms-rearm-europe-rebrand-after-backlash-from-italy-and-spain>

Lubold, Gordon. De Luce, Dan. Kube, Courtney. 2025. Pentagon considering proposal to cut thousands of troops from Europe, officials say. NBC News. Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/pentagon-considering-proposal-cut-thousands-troops-europe-officials-sa-rcna199603>

Malenko, Anastasiia. Dysa, Yuliia, and Balmforth, Tom. 2025. Zelenskiy accuses China of supplying Russia with weapons. Reuters. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/zelenskiy-says-ukraine-has-evidence-china-supplying-russia-with-artillery-2025-04-17/>

McKinsey & Company. 2023. Interchangeable parts. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/sustainable-inclusive-growth/charts/interchangeable-parts>

MFA Russia. 2021. Agreement on measures to ensure the security of The Russian Federation and member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Available at: [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en&clear\\_cache=Y](https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en&clear_cache=Y)

NATO. 2024. Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024). Available at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_226465.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_226465.htm)

Perot, Elie. 2025. Revisiting Deterrence: Towards a French Nuclear Umbrella Over Europe? Brussels School of Governance. Centre for Security Diplomacy and Strategy. Available at: <https://csds.vub.be/publication/revisiting-deterrence-towards-a-french-nuclear-umbrella-over-europe/>

Plokhly, Serhii. Higgins, Mike. 2023. Serhii Plokhly: 'Russia thought it was invading the Ukraine of 2014'. Chatham House. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2023-06/serhii-plokhly-russia-thought-it-was-invading-ukraine-2014>

Politico. 2025. Germany's Merz vows 'independence' from Trump's America, warning NATO may soon be dead. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/friedrich-merz-germany-election-united-states-donald-trump-nato/>

Roth, Andrew. 2025. Stunning Signal leak reveals depths of Trump administration's loathing of Europe. The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/25/stunning-signal-leak-reveals-depths-of-trump-administrations-loathing-of-europe>

Röhl, Klaus-Heiner. Bardt, Hubertus. 2025. Mehr Verteidigung mit weniger USA? Geld-, Personal- und Zeitprobleme als sicherheitspolitische Herausforderungen für die deutsche Verteidigungsindustrie. No. 7/2025. IW-Policy Paper, 2025.

Scazzieri, Luigi. 2025. Towards an EU 'defence union'? Policy Brief. Centre For European Reform. Available at: <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2025/towards-eu-defence-union>

Sher, Nathaniel. 2024. Behind the Scenes: China's Increasing Role in Russia's Defense Industry. Carnegie Politika. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-urasia/politika/2024/05/behind-the-scenes-chinas-increasing-role-in-russias-defense-industry?lang=en>

Spatafora, Giuseppe. 2025. Turning money into action: What next steps for European defence? European Union Institute for Security Studies. Available at: <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/commentary/turning-money-action-what-next-steps-european-defence>

Sytas, Andrius. 2025. US to start European troop withdrawal discussions later this year, US NATO ambassador says. Reuters. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-start-european-troop-withdrawal-discussions-later-this-year-us-nato-2025-05-16/>

Von der Leyen, Ursula. 2025. Press statement by President von der Leyen on the defence package. European Commission. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/sv/statement\\_25\\_673](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/sv/statement_25_673)

Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)

---

 13 Alexander Pushkin Str.

0107 Tbilisi, Georgia

 +995 595 045 144

 [info@gip.ge](mailto:info@gip.ge)  [www.gip.ge](http://www.gip.ge)