ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

SECOND CYCLE DEGREE

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS – EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

THE SECOND TRUMP ADMINISTRATION AND EU DEFENCE INTEGRATION

Dissertation in The EU as a Global Actor

Supervisor

Prof. Elena Baracani

Defended by

Aurora Pallucca

Graduation Session: March 2026

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the impact of Donald Trump's second administration on the integration of the European Union in security and defence policy. It addresses the research question of whether and to what extent the re-election of Donald Trump has contributed to EU-level defence integration. By using a qualitative process-tracing methodology, the analysis draws on European Council summit conclusions, strategic documents, official press conferences, policy statements, interviews and relevant news coverage.

The findings reveal an increasing commitment among EU member states toward deeper defence integration. Key policy documents, including the White Paper on Defence and the ReArm Europe plan, emphasise the need to raise defence spending and strengthen EU's strategic autonomy in security and defence. While Russia's war against Ukraine remains a central catalyst for these developments, the analysis suggests that the perceived uncertainty surrounding the US security guarantees under Trump's second administration has also played a significant role in the integration process.

Overall, the dissertation argues that EU defence integration is driven by a combination of external security threats and political dynamics, with Trump's return into office being an additional catalyst, accelerating the defence integration trends.

Keywords: EU Defence Integration, Donald Trump, Transatlantic Relations, European Council, Strategic Autonomy, Foreign Policy, Process Tracing, ReArm Europe.

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Introduction

The process of European Union integration in the field of security and defence policy has recently come under strains due to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the rising tensions within the Transatlantic Alliance that followed the re-election of Donald Trump as president of the United States.

Donald Trump's mottos "America first" and "make America great again" marked a departure from the approach of previous presidents. By prioritising US interest, Trump's administration had an impact not only on the domestic politics of the country, but on third countries as well. As a matter of fact, given that the US is the EU's largest commercial partner, the adoption of protectionism by Trump, mostly through the imposition of tariffs on imports, directly affected the economy of the European Union.

Besides, Trump's foreign policy, characterised by a general disengagement from Europe and NATO, had a significant impact on European security as well. In fact, Donald Trump displayed antagonism and opposition to multilateralism and to international agreements, including the North Atlantic Treaty. During his first term, from 2017 to 2021, he even labelled NATO as "obsolete".

This stance triggered instability, since Europe has historically relied on the United States and on NATO for its defence and security. Indeed, since the end of World War II, the US and NATO have guaranteed security in the continent – even after the EU decided to develop its own security and defence policy following the end of the Cold War. Yet, the Transatlantic Alliance remained a cornerstone of the global order, based on US and Europe's mutual commitment towards the values of freedom, justice, human rights, democracy and free trade (Khan, 2021, pp. 1-2).

Indeed, NATO has been the backbone of European security and has shaped the parameters of the member states' national defence policy. Moreover, it has established facilities and headquarters across the continent and has carried out numerous military exercises on European soil throughout the decades (NATO, 6 June 2025).

Nonetheless, when elected in 2017, Donald Trump put the alliance under strain, by declaring that the United States would defend only the NATO allies who paid their "fair share" – by allocating 2% of their national GDP to defence – whereas those falling behind in their contributions would be branded as free-riders and enemies of the US, thus undeserving of US protection (Khan, 2021, pp. 3-4). Therefore, he made it clear that the US would support NATO only if its member states met the 2% threshold. These threats proved effective: the member states – especially those from Eastern Europe, more exposed to the Russian threat – substantially increased their defence spending and rapidly met the target.

In November 2024, Trump won the elections and got back into office on the 20th of January 2025. His political positions did not change. Indeed, he threatened not to respect article 5 of the Atlantic Charter, enshrining the mutual defence clause, by saying that he would not defend the allies failing to reach the defence spending target (Francesco Bortoletto, 25th of June 2025), which he planned to raise to 5% of the national GDP at the NATO summit taking place in June 2025 (NATO, 27th of June 2025). The establishment of this new goal, pushing once again the members of NATO to increase their defence expenditure, could potentially contribute to increasing the level of defence integration at EU level, exactly as it did during Trump's first mandate between 2017 and 2021.

Therefore, the aim of this dissertation is to investigate how Trump's political priorities in security and defence contributed to the process of integration in the defence sector at EU level, by responding to the question "*How did Trump's reduced commitment to NATO and to European security contribute to influencing EU member states' commitment to deeper integration in security and defence policy*?"

The integration process in security and defence policy in the European Union is slow and irregular and must face the diverging priorities of 27 different

countries. Besides, decision-making in this policy area is constantly divided between member states that support further integration at EU level, and countries that prefer to keep relying on Atlantic solidarity.

For this reason, the process of integration in security and defence has been irregular and characterised by an alternance of periods of progress and setbacks.

Yet, since the launch of the European Movement at The Hague in 1948, guided by Winson Churchill, the countries which later formed the European Union had the ambition to create their own foreign and defence policy institutions, to prevent the outbreak of another world conflict (Hunter, 2002, p. 7).

The first attempt to enhance the level of integration in this field occurred in 1954, when a few Western European countries proposed the creation of a European Defence Community (EDC), built outside of NATO. The European Defence Community project followed the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community three years before. It was the same six founding members - France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg – that expressed the necessity of building a common security and defence policy to defend themselves from external threats. Nevertheless, the plan ultimately failed due to France refusal to give up part of its sovereignty in foreign and defence policy to a supranational organisation (Hunter, 2002, pp.7-8).

Following this failure, the member states pursued defence integration within NATO, with the establishment of the Western European Union, which brought together France, Germany, Italy, the three Benelux countries (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg), and the United Kingdom.

The establishment of the Western European Union brought European defence under NATO's administration and served as a European pillar within the alliance.

The preference for NATO was closely linked to the role played by the United States as Europe's security provider since the end of World War Two and to the fact that an intergovernmental organization, rather than a supranational one, would allow member states to retain their full sovereignty and decision-making

authority in defence policy, without having to give up part of their sovereignty to a supranational institution (NATO, retrieved the 4th of September 2025)

Further steps in European security and defence policy integration would not come until nearly four decades later, with the introduction of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), two policies that finally enabled the EU to play a more significant role on the international stage. However, even after the introduction of the CFSP and CSDP, the EU remained heavily dependent on NATO, notably for its military assets. In fact, the Berlin plus Agreement from 2003 granted the EU direct access to NATO's assets and capabilities, means that the EU could use for its peacebuilding and crises management missions. The Berlin Plus Agreement highlighted how much the EU still depended on NATO, and how much it needed to develop its own capabilities to defend itself and act more autonomously (Keukuleire & Delreux, 2022, pp.190-191).

Nevertheless, over the last decade this dynamic began to change, due to the new geopolitical developments. Indeed, the annexation of Crimea to the territory of Russia in 2014 reignited the concerns about Russia. Moreover, the victory of Donald Trump in the US contributed to increasing the level of insecurity perceived by the EU, since his priorities included reducing American involvement in Europe and limiting its participation in NATO. The EU was thus compelled to find a way to strengthen its role on the global stage and become more strategically autonomous.

Therefore, the EU introduced the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) – already envisaged in the Lisbon Treaty but never formally implemented. PESCO was designed to be the vehicle necessary to move defence to a higher level and to accelerate the implementation of civilian and military missions. It operates through projects, in which member states can voluntarily participate (FINABEL, 14 December 2018, pp. 3-5).

Furthermore, the EU implemented the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence to increase EU military capabilities, whereas the European Defence Fund was adopted to support the expenses for both civilian and military missions.

At the end of Trump's mandate in 2021, Joe Biden became the new president of the United States, and the relationship between the EU and the US became more relaxed. In fact, Biden decided to be more invested in NATO than his predecessor and maintain close relations with Europe (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, p.72). Nevertheless, the significant geopolitical changes of the last decades, along with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine compelled the Union to further enhance its defence and security capabilities, through the approval of the Strategic Compass, which entailed more strategic autonomy and the reinforcement of the Union's civilian and military capabilities (Council of the European Union, 2022).

Nevertheless, the new American elections at the end of 2024 and the re-election of Donald Trump – whose ambitions regarding security and defence had remained unchanged, if not grown more extreme, with threats to leave NATO and a rejection of multilateralism (van Hooft, 2021) – have once again raised the issue of EU strategic autonomy in security and defence. This debate has been driven in particular by the German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and the French President Emmanuel Macron, both advocating for further integration, and is finding supporters in other member states as well (Press and Information Office of the Federal Government, 18th of March 2025).

Regardless of there being divisions within the EU, with some countries – especially those in Eastern Europe, more exposed to the Russian threat – still being strongly committed to NATO, there seems to be the desire to increase defence spending at national and European level and strengthen the role of the Union in security and defence policy.

This dynamic was already visible during Trump's first mandate, from 2017 to 2021, and is happening again since his return into office in 2025.

Indeed, building on the developments during Trump's first mandate (2017-2021), it is reasonable to expect that his second term will further strengthen cooperation and integration in security and defence policy at EU level, alongside with increased spending and the development of military and civilian capabilities both at national and European level.

As during his first mandate, the member states are considering increasing the level of integration in security and defence, especially at industrial and fiscal level, to facilitate the introduction of new technologies and to cover the expenses.

Therefore, given that the first Trump administration – characterised by the same scepticism toward NATO and by a reduced involvement of the US in the territory of the European Union – contributed to the introduction of new policies that deepened the level of integration of the EU in security and defence policy, it is reasonable to expect that a new four-year mandate would have a similar effect, by encouraging the member states to further increase defence spending and investments in civilian and military capabilities, thereby enhancing the role of the European Union on the international stage.

In order to assess whether there is an integration process underway, aiming for a stronger Europe, strategically autonomous and able to defend itself, we conduct a process tracing analysis and observe how the election of Donald Trump in the United States has contributed to influencing the position of the European Council in security and defence, by convincing its members to increase the EU's strategic autonomy.

Process tracing is a research technique that allows us to qualitatively examine complex multilateral processes, documenting the critical moments leading to a change and evaluating the mechanisms that contributed to that change. According to George and Bennett, who played a leading role in the development of this method, process tracing examines histories, documents and interview transcripts to see whether a hypothesised theory is evident in the sequence of variables that are being analysed (Rauch, 2023, pp. 308-309).

Notably, process tracing analyses the trajectories of change through a careful description of the independent, dependent and intervening variables, and individuates an established pattern in the relationship between the phenomena described by the variables (Collier, 2011, p. 823-824).

Process tracing can show not only whether a change occurred, but also how and why it did. Therefore, we identify the changes that need to be explained. We

then look for the evidence and document the whole process leading to the change, by also considering alternative explanations to the phenomenon.

In the documentation process we develop a timeline or narrative, describing the strategies and documents that have been approved by the EU to increase defence integration, the positions taken by the actors involved in the European Council, the outputs, the resulting changes, and other external events that might have contributed to the change (INTRAC, 1st of January 2017).

In this concrete case, we examine the strength of the evidence linking the decisions adopted by the United States to the integration process taking place within the EU in security and defence.

To craft a research design based on process tracing, we define our theoretical expectations, notably that Donald Trump's foreign policy, characterised by isolationism and by a reduced commitment towards its allies and towards the North Atlantic Alliance, will contribute to increasing the level of integration of the European Union in security and defence, hence convincing the member states to make the EU more independent from the US and NATO for its security and defence (Ricks and Liu, 2018, p. 842). To do so, we observe the new political priorities of the US under Trump, the positions advocated by him and the decisions adopted within NATO during the June summit, to then analyse the impact they had on the European Union, by observing the reaction of the members of the European Council to his political agenda, and the strategic and action plans that have been adopted, or that are planned, to further increase EU integration in defence policy.

Nonetheless, when using process tracing, we must also juxtapose rival explanations as, for instance, the threat posed by Russia, following the beginning of the war in Ukraine, which also led to an increase in defence spending and defence integration within the EU (Ricks and Liu, 2018, p. 843).

The analysis follows a timeline, starting with the election of Trump and the beginning of his mandate on the 20th of January 2025 to the end of the year. Therefore, we analyse Trump's political agenda and observe the reactions of the European Union step by step, by analysing the conclusions of the summits held by the European Council since January, the declarations of the President of the

European Council António Costa, of the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, and the positions expressed by the heads of state and government of the 27 member states throughout the year (Ricks and Liu, 2018, p. 843).

We use the data collected to observe the progress that has been made in EU defence policy, with special attention to the new policies that have been approved in March 2025: the Rearm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030, the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) regulation, the activation of the national escape clause in the Stability and Growth Pact, and the support for Ukraine in its war against Russia. We also observe the preparatory work leading to the summits and the declarations expressed by the member states on the topic.

The sources used in the empirical research are official statements, interviews and speeches given by the members of the European Council, and newspaper articles on the topic.

Therefore, we investigate the European Council conclusions at the formal and informal meetings which have taken place since January 2025, focusing on the declarations on security and defence. Besides, we conduct an examination of the remarks given by the President António Costa, his invitation letters to the Council summits, his speeches during state visits in the member states – always focusing on the declarations surrounding EU defence integration. Moreover, we analyse the speeches held by the Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, her press conferences and other interviews and official statements on the topic.

Ultimately, we investigate the position of the other members of the European Council, namely the heads of state and government of the 27 member states, by looking at their official statements, declarations and citations, reported on the government official websites, on the European Council websites or by national news agencies like, for instance, ANSA in Italy, AFP in France, dpa in Germany, PAP in Poland, or Athens-Macedonian News Agency (AMNA) in Greece. If the access to these websites is limited or doesn't provide the information needed for the purpose of the dissertation, we use the information provided by other national newspapers, or articles published by authoritative

European publications, including Euronews, Reuters, POLITICO.EU, and Euractiv.

In a nutshell, the purpose of the research is to investigate whether the European Council and its members have expressed support for further integration in defence at EU level as a response to Trump's political agenda since his election in January 2025.

However, this analysis is not without challenges and limitations. Indeed, leaders can change during the time frame selected for the analysis and alter the country's stance on EU level defence. For instance, Olaf Scholz was the German Chancellor until the election of Friedrich Merz on the 6th of March, Christian Stocker was sworn as Chancellor of Austria on the 3rd of March 2025, and Bart De Wever became the Prime Minister of Belgium at the beginning of February. Furthermore, a country that had been pro-integration could become more sceptic – or vice versa – and some political statements could be ambiguous or inconsistent over time. Besides, the heads of state or government can have a different position from that of the other national institutions, like the parliament, hence failing to properly represent the position of the country. Lastly, the conclusions of the European Council and its official statements are, by their very nature, compromise texts and do not represent the complexity and the variety of the national positions, since decisions are adopted at consensus, meaning that as long as no formal objection is raised, the decision is considered taken (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, p. 80-82).

Nevertheless, the European Council suits the analysis better than any other European institution – despite the gradual strengthening role of supranational institutions in security and defence throughout the years. Indeed, decision-making in security and defence policy remains primarily intergovernmental and must follow the strategic guidelines of the European Council. Furthermore, studying the European Council – which is mainly formed by heads of state and government – provides a clearer view of the position of the member states than any other EU institution.

Moving to the organisation of the dissertation, the first chapter provides a historical reconstruction of the relations between the European Union and the

United States since the end of World War II, underlining the fundamental role played by NATO for security and defence in Europe. The historical reconstruction of the relations traces back to the end of the Second World War, when the United States – thanks to the introduction of the Marshall Plan – began to establish its influence on Europe's politics, by pushing its priorities both in economy and in foreign, security and defence policy.

Indeed, by offering Europe economic support for its reconstruction after the end of the war, and by providing military defence through the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the US started assessing its interests in the area, preventing Russia from doing the same. Besides, although the EU started developing its own defence and security policy, it remains complementary and dependent on NATO and on the US. Therefore, this chapter serves to underline the development of their relationship throughout the years.

On the other hand, the second chapter focuses on how US priorities in security and defence in Europe shifted under Donald Trump's first administration. It delves into Trump's political agenda in security and defence and on his positions towards NATO. Subsequently, the chapter presents how his policies have been, at least partly, responsible for deeper defence integration at EU level, by analysing the policies that were adopted since 2017 to increase the EU strategic autonomy, namely the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), and the European Defence Fund (EDF).

Ultimately, the third chapter presents an empirical analysis and observes how the EU has responded since the beginning of the year 2025 to Trump's new administration, namely to his reduced commitment towards NATO and Europe, by presenting Trump's political priorities since January, and their impact of the European Union's defence integration, by observing the declarations on EU level defence in the European Council summits conclusions, in press conferences, speeches and interviews held by the heads of state and government of the member states, and by the other two members of the European Council – highlighting the connections with Trump's foreign policy.

Moreover, the chapter focuses on the strategic documents that have already been approved since January to increase the level of integration in this field, like, for instance the Rearm Europe/ Readiness 2030 Plan, the White Paper on defence, the SAFE regulation, and the national escape clause.

The chapter underlines the direction of the integration path in security and defence, and the willingness of the member states to implement these policies and to adopt new ones.

1. Chapter 1: EU-US relations: a historical overview

Since the end of World War Two, the United States have been the biggest partner of the European Union.

They cooperate in numerous policy areas. Indeed, they have one of the most integrated economic relationships in the world. Their trade represents almost 30% of the global trade in goods and services and 43% of the global GDP. Additionally, EU and US mutual foreign direct investments in 2022 exceeded $5.3 trillion, accounting for the largest investment in the world.

Moreover, the European Union and the United States have a close cooperation in the energy sector, which has grown deeper since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, after the EU decided to interrupt Russian supply and started looking for new suppliers.

Lastly, the EU and the US cooperate in the security and defence sector as well. Indeed, they work together to tackle global security challenges, such as terrorism, nuclear weapons proliferation, violent extremism, and have invested over $600 billion worldwide through the G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment. Additionally, the EU and the US cooperate to support Ukraine in its war against Russia, by providing political, financial, economic, humanitarian, military and diplomatic support to Ukraine and by adopting sanctions to weaken the Russian economy or by directly targeting individuals, like members of the Russian government, propagandists, or high-ranking officials and military personnel (Council of the European Union, 2 October 2025).

Moreover, the EU and the US both share the same values of multilateralism, peace, freedom, human rights, democracy and rule of law (European External Action Service, 4 October 2023)

Nevertheless, recently the relationship found itself under strains due to a shift in US political priorities under Donald Trump, who rejected multilateralism and decided to reduce cooperation with Europe in different fields, by undermining partnerships and agreements, such as the Paris Climate Agreement, and by planning to leave international organizations, such as the UN Human Rights Council, UNESCO and the World Health Organization (Hüsser, 24 July 2025). Notably, Donald Trump threatened to reduce his commitment to NATO.

To properly understand the impact of Donald Trump's administration on the future of the European Union defence policy, we need to observe the historical ties that connect Europe and the United States, especially the active role played by the US in Europe since the beginning of the process of European integration.

1.1. EU-US relations: 1945-1989

The United States took an increasingly active role in European affairs in the twentieth century and forged deep ties with Europe, notably during the two world conflicts.

World War I had a major impact on Europe, causing the death of at least 8 million soldiers and of an uncertain number of millions of civilians. Besides, it caused the dissolution of four European Empires.

After the end of the conflict, the United States, who had paid a smaller toll in the conflict, decided to avoid taking charge of international cooperation and decided to rather adopt a more isolationist stance, which brought Europe on the verge of a new conflict only a couple of decades later.

As WWII began, the United States tried to avoid being dragged yet into another conflict in Europe. However, as Italy and Germany had taken control of most of continental Europe, and France was forced to surrender, the UK stood alone and vastly outnumbered. Nonetheless, on December 7, 1941, the naval base of Pearl Harbour was attacked by Japan, forcing the US to enter the conflict, changing the destiny of the Allies and bringing them to victory.

After the end of the war, the US was hoping to reduce its commitment in Europe. However, the expansion of the communist ideology, pushed by the Soviet Union, made it clear that the US could not adopt the same isolationist

policy it had adopted after WWI. Therefore, to avoid another major conflict in Europe, it decided to adopt a containment approach, hence starting a decade-long standoff, known as the Cold War. This policy had a direct impact on Western Europe, which became the main recipient of its Cold War strategy (Council on Foreign Relations, 8 February 2025).

1.1.1. The aftermath of WWII and the introduction of the Marshall Plan

World War Two devastated Europe to the point of needing a plan to rebuild itself and rise from the ashes. The help of the United States proved fundamental for this purpose, other than being a great opportunity for the US to push its own interests in the continent.

Indeed, the expansion of the communist ideology in Eastern Europe, predicated by the Soviet Union, threatened the United States, who wanted Western European countries to recover from the crisis that had followed the war, to then become their political and economic partner. Indeed, President Truman realised that American national security required an economically strong Western Europe, and the path to this goal could only be achieved by providing them with economic assistance.

Therefore, in 1947, two years after the end of the war, the Secretary of State, George Marshall, offered American assistance to Western Europe, by providing $20 billion for economic relief, under the framework of the so-called Marshall Plan (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, p. 45), whose goal was to rebuild Western Europe industrial base, hence guaranteeing European prosperity, and reduce the socialist influence spreading throughout Europe, especially in France and Italy. Indeed, the Marshall Plan was also a tool used to contain the spread of Soviet-led Communism. Billions of dollars and tons of American products flew across the Atlantic over the next five years as part of the European Recovery Programme and set the foundation of the Western Alliance and of the international bipolarism that characterised the period of the Cold War.

In order to receive aid, the 16 European countries asking for economic assistance, met in Paris and created the Committee of European Economic Cooperation (CEEC) (Kunz, 1997, pp.162-168).

The activation of the Plan was beneficial not only to the Western European countries, but to the US as well, since only the infusion of aid could stimulate Western European economies and make them consumers of American goods (Kaplan, 2019, p. 12).

Moreover, the United States expressed their support for European integration, both at economic and political level, seeing it as a means to contain German expansionism, prevent another conflict from breaking out in Europe, reduce Soviet influence in the continent, and secure economic and political allies on the other side of the Atlantic.

Moreover, the escalation of Soviet threats in Europe, notably through the blockade of the ground access to Berlin in June 1948 (Kunz, 1997, pp. 165-168), accelerated the entanglement of the United States with Europe, influencing the perception that the survival of Western democracies was strictly related to the United States. Notably, the Truman Doctrine promised economic and military support to those countries resisting subjugation by outside powers, especially if the outside power was the Soviet Union. In this, the Marshall Plan was an extension of the Truman Doctrine, helping Europe, through massive economic aid, to cope with the promises of Communism.

Nonetheless, the Soviets had been invited to join the meeting held in Paris in 1947 but withdrew as soon as they realised that accepting aid from America would weaken their control over Eastern Europe and increase the influence of the CEEC (Kaplan, 2019, pp. 12-16).

1.1.2. The establishment of NATO and the beginning of European integration

The relationship between the US and Europe after the end of the Second World War started as economic assistance to help with Europe's reconstruction, but it soon became a military and defence alliance as well.

Indeed, the Marshall Plan was not the only policy used to deter the influence of the Soviet Union's over Europe. Another means was the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which aimed at forbidding the revival of nationalist militarism in Europe by favouring a strong US presence in the continent, and by encouraging European integration.

Although NATO is often considered a product of American imperialism, it was a European initiative to open the negotiations. Notably, UK Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin and French Foreign Minister George Bidault believed that Europe needed to establish a defence organization and that this organisation would not succeed without the involvement of the United States (Kaplan, 2019, p. 11).

According to Bevin, a defence agreement with the United States would "*give Europeans an incentive to commit themselves to a defence system*" (Kaplan, 2019, p.20). The first step in this direction was the signature of the Brussels Pact in March 1948, which established the Western Union, although it left unclear what role the United States would play in it (Kaplan, p. 22).

As a matter of fact, at the time, the United States had abandoned their isolationism, which had characterised the first post-war period. Notably, in order to guarantee stability in Europe, the US provided economic assistance and military cooperation. It was determined that only a transatlantic security agreement could deter Soviet aggression and prevent the resurgence of European nationalism. Therefore, the North Atlantic Treaty was signed on the 4th of April 1949. The Alliance swiftly gained a military command structure and military headquarters, known as the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) (NATO, 3 June 2022).

After the alliance of the United States with the Brussels Pact countries was signed, there were numerous meetings and sessions, and the participants agreed that American leadership was of utmost importance for the new organization, and agreed on the necessity to develop European integration, to reduce Soviet expansion and prevent the revival of German nationalism (Kaplan, 2019, p. 24).

The North Atlantic Treaty envisaged a military alliance among the countries on the two sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, according to article 5 of the Treaty, an attack against one of member states should be considered as an attack against

them all and each party should take "*such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area*" (NATO, 4 April 1949, art. 5)

Besides, along with the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the United States showed unanimous support for the Schuman Declaration (CVCE. Retrieved 5 October 2025), which was presented by the homonymous French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman as a peace agreement which would put the administration of coal and steel under a supranational institution.

The President of France Jean Monnet was one of the minds behind the implementation of the Marshall Plan in France and his preparatory work paved the way to Robert Schuman's proposal (Keukuleires & Delreux, 2022, p. 46). Coal and steel were essential elements to the national defence and were seen as an indicator of state power. Putting the administration of these two materials under a supranational authority would prevent new German aggressions – by making a new conflict between them not only improbable but materially impossible – and enhance the level of integration at economic and political level. Indeed, the Schuman declaration was soon followed by the signature of the Paris Treaty and hence the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community, formed by France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands (EP Think Tank, 8 May 2025).

1.1.3. The failure of the EDC and the creation of the Western European Union

Thanks to the establishment of NATO, the United States were prepared to strengthen the presence of American forces in Europe, but only as long as European countries increased their defence efforts and their level of integration. Therefore, the president of the French Council of Ministers, René Pleven, declared in a statement that the nations signing the North Atlantic Treaty should station more forces in Europe and that Europe should create its own army, by pooling together human and material components under a single political and military authority, and that the army should be financed by a common budget (Journal Officiel de la République française, 1950, pp. 7118–7119). This plan

was later formalized in the proposal of the European Defence Community (EDC).

Pursued by France and by the Benelux countries to enable German rearmament and to reduce the number of American divisions defending West Germany from the Soviets, the EDC needed a parallel European Political Community to legitimize common defence (Wallace, 2017, pp. 78-79).

The EDC project entailed an unprecedented supranational organization which would pool together the military resources of France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands to create a European Defence Force. Nevertheless, the plan entailed a big leap towards a federation and ended up failing due to France refusal to give up a part of its sovereignty in foreign and defence policy to a supranational institution.

Therefore, as the project failed, these same countries, along with the United Kingdom, decided to favour defence integration at intergovernmental level, within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization by supporting the creation of the Western European Union (WEU), which constituted a European pillar within the Transatlantic Alliance (Bebr, 1955, pp. 169-171).

The necessity to increase the level of integration in this field was the consequence of the geopolitical changes taking place at the time. Indeed, the expansion of the Soviet Union and its growing influence on Eastern Europe compelled Western Europe to enhance its defence capabilities and establish an organization to facilitate cooperation and increase Europe's strength, despite the fear of German rearmament, which would be necessary for a stronger Europe.

As a matter of fact, neutralizing Germany would mean risking Soviet invasion and aggression and risking that West Germany would fall under its influence, as East Germany did. Consequently, in 1950, the US, the UK and France established a collective security guarantee, stipulating that any attack against West Germany, would be considered as an attack against themselves. In return, West Germany committed to contribute its resources to common defence efforts, by participating in an integrated force, thereby avoiding the creation of a national army.

Notably, the Pleven Plan laid the groundwork for the establishment of a European Army and became the foundation of the European Defence Community Treaty. Presented in May 1952, the Treaty proposed a merger of national armies under the administration of a supranational institution. The framework allowed German soldiers to operate within a European army, without needing to create a sovereign German army (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, p. 48).

Preoccupied by the degree of German military autonomy, the UK and the Benelux countries expressed their scepticism. Notably, the Benelux countries were wary of a supranational institution due to the risk of being overruled by France and Germany within the decision-making process. On the other hand, Italy strongly advocated supranationalism.

The remaining players, France, Germany and the US, changed their positions between 1950 and 1954. In fact, in 1950 the US proposal for German rearmament entailed an intergovernmental solution, and was resisted by France, which came up, in the Pleven Plan, with the proposal of a European army. The US later endorsed the plan, along with Germany, although presenting some changes to improve military effectiveness. Under US pressure, the EDC Treaty was ratified by the Benelux and Germany in 1953, whereas Italy moved the parliamentary ratification to early 1954 (Fleischer, 2012, p. 68).

The EDC would have entailed common armed forces and a common budget. Nonetheless, Britain decided not to participate, as it didn't want to undermine its relationship with the US and with the Commonwealth, and didn't want to reduce its national authority in security and defence.

After the UK's withdrawal, France feared that alone, it wouldn't be able to contain a possible German domination of the Community (Bebr, 1955, pp. 171-174). Therefore, the new government of France took a different position from its predecessor, and the Treaty ended up being rejected and substituted by a new intergovernmental treaty, entailing the establishment of the Western European Union. This Treaty was ratified and came into force in January 1955 (Fleischer, 2012, p. 68).

The treaty establishing the Western European Union had less ambitious goals than the EDC treaty. Indeed, it simply provided integration of independent

national armed forces and supervised the armament production. Besides, every mission needed to be financed from a national, instead of a common budget.

Nevertheless, the Modified Brussels Treaty, signed in October 1954, finally allowed West Germany and Italy to join the military alliance. However, to avoid duplicating the military staff of NATO, the Council of WEU had to rely on the military authority of NATO for information and advice on military matters. The responsibility for military affairs was hence passed to NATO, and the European Community gave up the opportunity of developing its own military capacity (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, pp. 48-49).

Indeed, the EDC Treaty would have given the Community the power to recruit candidates for the European Defence Forces, putting them under Community supervision. Besides, the Community would have been able to recruit officers and determine their career advancements. Finally, the member states would have been bound by obligations towards the Community.

Instead, the Western European Union followed the lines of international cooperation, meaning that the member states would retain power over their national armed forces.

According to the Paris Resolution the members of the WEU could place their forces stationed in Europe under the command of Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR). Nevertheless, those forces could not be used to respond to domestic situations without the approval of the Supreme Commander. A more centralized command was established with the creation of the Supreme Headquarters, Allied Powers, Europe (SHAPE). However, under the WEU, member states maintained their recruiting and budgetary powers (Bebr, 1955, pp. 176-180).

The bargaining process of the EDC Treaty before and the WEU Treaty after highlighted how much Europe was dependent on the US for economic, financial and military aid, and how much the US used this leverage at its advantage and for its own purposes.

Moreover, while most member states could benefit from stable domestic majorities, the governmental instability in France and the fragmented positions of its national parties regarding German rearmament made the voting behaviour

of the country unpredictable, thereby leading to the eventual failure of the EDC (Fleischer, 2012, p. 69).

1.1.4. The path towards the creation of the European Political Cooperation

After the failure of the European Defence Community, the institutionalization of a common defence at EU level was abandoned and the integration process was strictly limited to the economic sector, with the creation of the European Economic Community, which evolved throughout the years until the establishment of a single market, the elimination of barriers to commerce, and the implementation of a common currency and common economic policy.

Meanwhile, the only attempt to establish a closer integration in defence policy before the signature of the Maastricht Treaty, and especially the Amsterdam Treaty, was the Fouchet Plan, which was presented between the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s. The aim of the plan was the creation of an intergovernmental organization to coordinate foreign and defence policy. The project was presented by Charles De Gaulle but was never approved due to the differing positions of the Netherlands and France and the impossibility to find a compromise on the project. The differences were so profound that a political union including the two countries was simply impossible (Vanke, 2001, pp. 95-96).

Through the Fouchet plan, Charles De Gaulle hoped to assert the independence of France from both Russia and the US and to unite continental Europe under French leadership. The plan excluded Britain, seen by De Gaulle as a Trojan Horse for American leadership aspirations. De Gaulle hoped to make France first in the world and this configuration would have been the perfect power instrument for that purpose. However, the Dutch wanted a broader membership for themselves, reason why the first Fouchet Plan from 1959 failed.

During his second attempt to promote the Fouchet Plan, De Gaulle decided to turn to West Germany. He wanted Europe to be an independent entity, exercising its activity in world affairs. He wanted it to be more organised in

political, economic and defence domain, and he wanted to reduce the American influence in European affairs. Nevertheless, once again, the Netherlands opposed the creation of a new body, believing that it would weaken transatlantic ties. Indeed, according to Joseph Luns, the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, economic cooperation had to be covered by the European Economic Community, and defence by NATO. Moreover, Adenauer, who didn't want to alienate American commitment to Europe, didn't express strong support for the project. Indeed, he believed that the integration process should put the EEC at the centre, and that, even though there was nothing wrong with discussing more political integration, it was still not the time to implement a project to that end (Vanke, 2001, pp. 96-100).

After the failure of the two Fouchet Plans, De Gaulle's attempt to challenge the American strategic leadership in defence policy – by substituting it with French leadership – and enhance Western European integration was later transformed into a new project, the European Political Cooperation, a framework that held regular meetings of foreign ministers and had a secretariat, separate from the Commission. Nonetheless, closer cooperation was inhibited by issues regarding military engagement and the lack of a shared political culture (Wallace, 2017, p. 79).

This new process of European integration was launched at The Hague summit in 1969. At the time, the new German Chancellor Willy Brandt wanted to improve the relations with Eastern Europe, and the European Communities were busy with the accession negotiations of the UK, Denmark, Ireland and Norway. Notably, the heads of state and government of the member states hoped to achieve a political unification, with the goal of coordinating foreign policies. The objectives were: ensuring regular exchange of information, achieving a better understanding of common problems, strengthening solidarity, and coordinating common positions and common actions. This was achieved through the introduction of the European Political Cooperation, an intergovernmental arrangement where decisions were taken at consensus. The only institution they created – although later in the 1980s – was a secretariat, which, until the approval of the Single European Act, was separated from the other communities and from

the European institutions. The EPC set some objectives and policies and allowed the member states to develop a "European" position in foreign policy (Keukeleire, & Delreux, 2022, pp. 51-55).

At the time, the US was committed to the conflict in Vietnam and its focus on Asia was coming at the expense of the promises made to Europe (Kaufman, 2017, pp. 253-254). However, Nixon, who became president of the United States in 1969, went on a trip to Europe to highlight his commitment to his closest allies in Europe, statement that was endorsed by Kissinger as well, who said that the US relationship with Western Europe was of overriding influence and that a stable world without European contribution would simply be inconceivable (Kaufman, 2017, pp. 254-255).

Nevertheless, this attitude changed throughout his mandate, with the adoption of several decisions in economic and foreign policy, like the new US monetary policy that ended the Bretton Woods economic system. The new monetary system was adopted without consulting with its European allies, who grew more and more frustrated for not being as much part of US foreign policy as they were before. Therefore, they responded to the new US foreign policy by adopting economic and political changes that minimised or excluded the United States (Kaufman, 2017, p. 256).

Nevertheless, although Europe took some important steps towards the establishment of a European security and defence policy, through the creation of EPC, the US kept playing a pivotal role in Europe's security and defence, thanks to NATO.

1.2. EU-US relations: from the Maastricht Treaty to the Lisbon Treaty

It was the dissolution of the Soviet Union, along with the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the reunification of Germany in 1991, and the military conflicts in the Gulf region and in Yugoslavia, what prompted a new phase of European integration. Notably, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in fifteen independent states, which occurred in 1991, generated tensions around the borders of Europe. For instance, Crimea became a contested territory between Ukraine and Russia, after Ukraine declared its independence. Moreover,

the political and economic disarray following Tito's death in 1980 stemmed numerous independent movements in former Yugoslavia, which engendered a sanguinous conflict between the newly independent states, including campaigns of ethnic cleansing.

Moreover, the end of the Cold War put NATO under question. Indeed, the Alliance converted to a military coalition aiming at upholding peace and democratic values in Europe. As a matter of fact, in order to maintain its relevance in a post-Cold War landscape, NATO organized peacekeeping operation outside of its territory (George and Sandler, 2022, p. 784).

Indeed, the Alliance intervened in former Yugoslavia to end the conflict, and the former Soviet Republics submitted their request to enter NATO, afraid that Russia would try to reassert its influence over them. These geopolitical changes forced NATO to reimagine its role (Council on Foreign Relations, 8 February 2025). Besides, they also influenced the decision of the member states of the European Communities to increase European integration in foreign policy and in security and defence, to pursue their internal objectives and manage interstate relations. Therefore, with the approval of the Maastricht Treaty, the European Communities converged in a European Union, which gained more powers, both in economic policy, with the introduction of the Economic and Monetary Union, and in foreign policy, with the establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, pp. 55). The Treaty paved the way to other treaties that further deepened cooperation in these policy areas, through the introduction of the Common Security and Defence Policy and the introduction of new institutions and capabilities for the EU.

Nevertheless, the emergence and development of European policies in foreign, security and defence affairs generated some overlap with other security and defence institutions, notably with NATO, which was further complicated by the overlap in membership, since currently 23 of the 27 members of the European Union are members of NATO as well (Ewers-Peters, 2021, p. 1-2).

In fact, some WEU member states wanted to participate in military actions even without the participation of NATO and the US. Nonetheless, the US and

other allies feared that this would mean a duplication of the military forces and that an independent WEU would weaken NATO (Hunter, 2002, pp.13-14).

1.2.1. The Maastricht Treaty

One breakthrough heading towards the establishment of a common defence policy was the approval of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993.

Stemmed by the geopolitical changes of the previous years – like the Gulf war and the Yugoslav crisis – the Treaty aimed at increasing the power of Europe, by reuniting the communities under a European Union, organized under a pillar structure. The second pillar was the Common Foreign and Security Policy, created to give the European Political Cooperation an operational side. However, the role of the Union in this field remained rather limited, whereas its role grew in other policy areas, like economic and commercial policy.

Besides, the Treaty introduced new aspects related to security and entailed the framing of a common defence policy, which could eventually lead to the establishment of a common defence policy in the future. In fact, at the time of the approval of the Maastricht Treaty, the role of the Union in defence was still theoretical.

The integration process in this domain was slowed down by divisions among the member states. Indeed, some countries, like France and Germany, advocated for enhanced strategic autonomy, whereas other members maintained a strong Atlanticist leaning. These positions were further complicated by the constitutional neutrality of countries like Ireland and by Denmark's decision to opt out entirely from the CFSP (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, pp. 55-60).

Besides, in 1990 the Soviet Union was no longer seen as a threat and NATO's "flexible response" needed to be replaced.

The approval of the Maastricht Treaty didn't have a formal connection to the changing priorities within NATO but could still be related to it. Notably, the member countries of the European Communities were working towards a political Union, and the development of a security identity in Europe would enhance the role and responsibilities of the Western European Union within NATO as well (Taylor, 1994, pp.-1-2).

In fact, in June 1992 the WEU agreed on the Petersberg Declaration to develop operational capabilities in conflict prevention and crisis management, by deploying humanitarian, rescue and peacekeeping tasks (Taylor, 1994, pp. 2-3). Moreover, in 1996 the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) finally emerged, developing a European-led security coalition within the Transatlantic alliance (Kaufman, 2017, p. 257).

Nevertheless, the events taking place in the world, since the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, like the Yugoslav conflict and the Kuwait crisis have shown how Western Europe still depended on NATO for collective defence. In fact, in 1992 France, Germany and the UK brought together 15 tanks, 48 combat aircraft and 6 attack helicopters, whereas the US alone brought 216 tanks, 183 combat aircraft and 103 helicopters (Taylor, 1994, pp. 6-13).

In a nutshell, the Maastricht Treaty contained far-reaching goals but was lacking operational facilities in security and defence (Taylor, 1994, p. 1).

1.2.2. The Amsterdam Treaty

In order to tackle the lack of operational instruments and increase the strategic autonomy of Europe, still strongly dependent on the US for defence, the EU adopted the Amsterdam Treaty, which introduced the High Representative of the CFSP and established the European Common Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

The ESDP was launched to develop the EU's autonomous action, generate its military capacity and tackle the security challenges that the EU did not want to engage with anymore. Indeed, since 1989 Europe was no longer central to the US strategic radar. Besides, the US hoped that the EU would take more responsibility in its own neighbourhood. Nevertheless, the ESDP failed to reach the goal, due to lack of consensus among the member states, insufficient budget, and the parallel existence of NATO (Howorth, 2017, pp. 456-457).

Nonetheless, a first progress in the process to gain more military planning capabilities was partly achieved with the NATO negotiations held in Berlin and Brussels in 1996 between the foreign and defence ministers of the member states. The negotiations aimed at making NATO assets available for WEU operations,

by establishing separable but not separate capabilities (Hunter, 2002, pp. 14-16). Besides, a further step at European level was taken in 1999 with the introduction of the Capability Development Mechanism (CDM).

Thanks to the Amsterdam Treaty, the EU got access to the operational capabilities of the WEU, the so-called Petersberg tasks, and gained its own military dimension. However, the integration process was complicated by the tensions between those who wanted EU's strategic autonomy and those who wanted to prioritize Atlantic solidarity, believing that defence policy should remain within NATO. Moreover, to convince neutral countries to support further integration, the EU promised to complement military tools with civilian tools (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, pp. 60-61).

Yet, the United States feared that, especially in sight of the upcoming Eastern enlargement, a country that was not member of NATO, might join the WEU, and have access to NATO assets. Therefore, the United States adopted a formal position stating that any WEU member would also be a NATO member, meaning that Washington would have a veto power on any country desiring to access the WEU, given that most military assets of NATO are American. The issue had no practical solution and could provoke a clash between NATO and EU. Nonetheless, as long as the issue remained quiescent within the WEU, there was no need to start a debate about it (Hunter, 2002, pp. 21-27).

The new defence mentality in Europe was triggered by the Kosovo crisis and the ongoing conflicts in the Balkans, which had highlighted the weakness of Europe and its dependency on the US for security and defence. Therefore, Germany decided to reverse its post-WWII doctrine by participating in external military missions, and Tony Blair, prime minister of the UK, adapted a more pro-European attitude than the former prime ministers (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, pp. 61-62). Indeed, Britain had always been one of the strongest NATO allies. Nevertheless, the UK, together with France – which had stepped out of the Transatlantic Alliance in 1966 and had always favoured EU over NATO – propelled the EU's new defence dimension and cooperation (Rynning, 2003, pp. 53-54). Notably, in 1998, the two countries met in St Malo to agree on a Declaration, highlighting the necessity to increase EU's capacity for autonomous

action to respond to international crises, while maintaining close ties with NATO, which remained the main defence actor in Europe.

In fact, the development of new organizational capacities at EU level should be understood as a French-British reaction to the EU's political development and to the organizational problems of NATO (Rynning, 2003, pp. 54).

The Amsterdam Treaty, signed in 1997 and entered into force in 1999, established the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), which gave an operational apparatus to the foreign policy of the EU. The Petersberg tasks, part of the WEU, including humanitarian assistance, peace-keeping and peace-making instruments, were transferred to the EU in 1998 (Rynning, 2003, p. 54).

After Kosovo intervention in 1999, the EU wanted to be capable of acting "autonomously" when NATO was not engaged. Indeed, after the summit in Helsinki, the EU came up with the Helsinki Headline Catalogue, the Force Catalogue and the Progress Catalogue to improve force planning and created an interim EU Military Staff (EUMS) to identify the capabilities needed by the EU to implement the Petersberg tasks. While the WEU Planning Cell worked predominantly on humanitarian operations, the new EUMS worked on all Petersberg tasks (Rynning, 2003, pp. 55-58).

Despite gaining an institutional apparatus in security and defence, the Union remained dependent on NATO for military assets. Therefore, the Union decided to increase its own capabilities, since some of its member states, such as Finland, Austria, Sweden and Ireland, were not members of NATO. Nevertheless, in order not to duplicate NATO's capabilities, the two international organizations established the NATO-EU Strategic Partnership, also known as "Berlin plus Agreement", thanks to which the EU gained direct access to NATO planning capabilities and assets.

The necessity to enhance the European strategic autonomy and its capabilities in security and defence was driven by the changing role of the US and NATO since the end of the Cold War. However, the establishment of the ESDP, introduced by the Amsterdam Treaty, could lead the United States to think that such a strong US military presence in Europe would no longer be necessary (van Heuven, 2000, p. 16).

Furthermore, it was also the US limited involvement in the war in ex-Yugoslavia what convinced the EU it was time it developed an independent European action. Besides, the EU was facing its largest enlargement process to date and the consequential institutional changes needed to welcome the new member states. Finally, they felt the need to increase the Union's military and civilian powers (Rynning, 2003, pp. 58-61).

On top of that, NATO planning was rigid and out of touch and it was difficult to predict which countries would participate to an operation, for it depended on political circumstances, whereas EU missions and military contributions would reflect the member states. Moreover, the Berlin plus Agreement stated that the EU military dimension should complement and strengthen NATO and convince the EU to spend more in defence, and more efficiently (Rynning, 2003, pp. 61-64).

After the implementation of the Amsterdam Treaty and of the Berlin plus Agreement, the EU finally started to accumulate experience in civilian and military missions, first in South and East Europe and then in Africa (Wallace, 2017, p. 83). Indeed, as of 2003, the EU took over NATO military missions in North Macedonia, it started two civilian missions in the Western Balkans and a military stabilization mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Nevertheless, the terrorist attack in the United States in 2001 and the ones in Europe in the following years prompted the need to upgrade the Union's foreign, security and defence approaches to deal with the new threats. Indeed, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan undermined the credibility of EU's defence policy, and the US, busy with the conflicts in Asia, was no longer able to maintain the same military presence in the Balkans. Therefore, the EU needed to get ready to increase its commitment there (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, pp. 61-63).

Nevertheless, ever since the creation of the Common Security and Defence Policy, the EU had to determine how it related to NATO, how the institutions should rebalance their powers, and whether the military capabilities of the EU would cause competition or complementarity.

Notably, the relationship between the organizations was asymmetric. Indeed, thanks to the Berlin-Plus Agreement, the EU gained access to NATO capabilities – given the organization's advanced expertise in security and defence and its larger resources – and together they introduced new institutions to support their coordination, such as a non-permanent NATO-EU Capability Group, a NATO Permanent Liaison Team in the EU Military Staff and a EU Cell within the SHAPE (Lachmann, 2010, pp.185-187).

Besides, the EU failed to meet the commitments to create the Headline Goal of 60.000 soldiers deployable within 60 days, given the diverging opinions of the member states, which complicated the negotiations and made it impossible to reach consensus. In fact, although the Saint-Malo Declaration brought together two countries that had always had opposing positions regarding the role of NATO and the role of the EU in security and defence, another country, Denmark, decided to opt out of the CSDP, thus deciding not to participate in any military mission (Lachmann, 2010, pp. 188-189) – in fact, Denmark decided to join CSDP only recently, in July 2022 (Ministry of Defence of Denmark, 20 November 2023).

The changing geopolitical landscape also prompted the adoption of the European Security Strategy (ESS), which was presented by Javier Solana in 2003.

Indeed, the end of the Cold War, the outbreak of the war in the Balkans and the terrorist attacks in Europe highlighted the necessity for the EU to become a more effective actor and to take more responsibility in global security, by getting ready to face the new threats, like terrorism and cyber-attacks; and to build security in its neighbourhood, by making sure the borders are well governed and the EU has close relations with its neighbouring countries.

Nevertheless, the ESS highlighted the importance of multilateralism, and the importance of the transatlantic alliance, which strengthens the international community as a whole.

According to the Security Strategy, the EU should use the over 160 billion euros pulled together to improve its defence, and to increase its military and civilian capabilities, by bringing together the European assistance programmes,

the defence capabilities of the member states, both civilian and military, and the European Defence Fund. Moreover, it should coordinate with other external action policies for better results (Council of the European Union, 12 December 2003).

1.2.3. The adoption of the Lisbon Treaty

After the creation of the ESDP, the Union had to face the accession of 12 new member states, a major enlargement which prompted the signature of the Nice Treaty in the year 2000 – with the purpose of getting the institutions ready to welcome the new members.

The accession of ten Central and Eastern European countries to the European Union in 2004 and other two in 2007 was the biggest foreign policy act of the EU to date, which opened the prospect to further enlargement to the Western Balkans, starting with the accession of Croatia in 2013.

The conditions to access the EU were set by the Union itself and aimed at guaranteeing democratic and liberal reforms in the new member states and at enhancing security in the continent. For the enlargement policies, the Nobel Committee awarded the EU the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012, although some of the requested changes proved unsustainable in the long term, especially in Hungary and Poland, where the rule of law was repeatedly undermined.

The enlargement compelled the EU to establish a European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) to strengthen its security coordination with the new neighbouring countries, notably those bordering with Russia and the countries in the Western Balkans.

Moreover, the accession of ten new countries also affected the tension between European integration in security and defence and Atlantic solidarity, especially for the new Central and Eastern European countries, more exposed to the Russian threat. The security guarantees provided by the United States were indeed essential to deal with Russian unpredictability (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, pp. 64-65).

Other than preparing the EU for the accession of the new countries, the Nice Treaty accomplished several improvements in security and defence, through the

establishment of the Political and Security Committee (PSC), the Military Committee (EUMC) and the Military Staff (EUMS). Nonetheless, the Treaty made it clear that NATO remained pivotal for collective defence and would continue to play a leading role in crisis management. Nonetheless, the developments within the ESDP renewed the Transatlantic relation by establishing a strategic partnership based on consultation, cooperation and transparency (Hunter, 2002, pp. 109-111).

After the approval and implementation of the Nice Treaty, the EU tried to adopt a very ambitious treaty, a treaty establishing a European Union's constitution, a treaty that was eventually rejected by the referenda held in France and in the Netherlands.

Nonetheless, in 2009 the Lisbon Treaty entered into force. It was far less ambitious than the Constitutional Treaty, but still introduced some changes in the EU, the most relevant being the abolition of the pillar system and an enhanced role of the Commission in several policy areas.

Nevertheless, despite the abolition of the pillar system, the CFSP/CSDP remained strictly intergovernmental, as opposed to the external action policies, which became supranational (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, pp. 65-66).

The Lisbon Treaty framed for the first time every aspect concerning external action under a common set of principles and objectives and enhanced the synergy between CSDP operations and other EU instruments in crisis management and between foreign policy priorities and CSDP operations (Lachmann, 2010, pp. 189-190).

The Treaty also deemed increasing autonomous military capabilities as necessary to ensure efficiency in international crisis management. The purpose of the CSDP of the EU is not about collective defence as it is to provide collective security outside of Europe, a task that can only be achieved in partnership with NATO and the US (Lachmann, 2010, p. 191).

A significant innovation introduced by the Lisbon Treaty was the creation of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who also serves as Vice-President of the European Commission (HP/VP). This role merged the position of the High Representative for CFSP, originally

established with the Amsterdam Treaty to that of the Commissioner for External Relations. Besides, the Lisbon Treaty created the European External Action Service (EEAS) to assist the High Representative in the implementation of policies. Furthermore, the Lisbon Treaty broadened the scope of the Petersberg tasks with provisions enhancing flexibility and through the inclusion of the solidarity clause and the formalization of the European Defence Agency (EDA) (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, pp. 66).

However, while the European institutions were granted more power and instruments, national governments retained the responsibility for their use and for the supply of forces (Wallace, 2017, pp. 77-78).

Nonetheless, the terrorist attacks in the US and in Europe at the beginning of the 2000s made NATO and the EU aware of the fact that they had to deal with new threats, including cyber-attacks, piracy, the security implications of the climate change and the interruption of energy supply. Furthermore, the possible accession of Eastern European countries, like Ukraine and Georgia, reignited the fear of an attack from Russia (Lachmann, 2010, pp. 193-199).

The development of CSDP and the geopolitical instability of the period didn't challenge NATO's role as Europe security provider and as strongest military alliance but increased the EU's strategic autonomy in security and defence. In fact, the relationship between NATO and the EU-CSDP is not only determined by the changing geopolitical landscape and by the shifting priorities of NATO, but also by the EU seeking to increase its role and relevance in external action (Lachmann, 2010, pp. 200-201).

The following table summarises the main developments in Europe's security and defence policy and the role played by the US and NATO – which have been analysed in the chapter.

Table 1: The historical evolution of the EU-US relationship

Year	Event	Impact
1947	Marshall Plan	Financial aid granted by the US to guarantee European prosperity and set the

		foundation of the Western Alliance.
1948	Creation of NATO	Establishment of a defence organisation under American administration to guarantee stability and peace in Europe.
1955	Western European Union	After the failure of the EDC, the members of the European Communities and the UK created the WEU, a European pillar within NATO.
1969	European Political Cooperation	After the failure of the Fouchet Plans, the EPC finally allowed the member states to develop a "European" position in foreign policy, independent from the US.
1992	Petersberg Declaration	The WEU obtained its operational capacity in conflict prevention and crisis management.
1993	Maastricht Treaty	It reunited the European Communities under the European Union and introduced the CFSP. Yet, the EU was still lacking operational facilities in security and defence and was still dependent on the US for its defence.
1999	Amsterdam Treaty	Introduced the CSDP, and the High Representative. The Petersberg task was transferred to the EU. Therefore, the EU gained a military dimension but remained dependent on NATO assets.
2003	Berlin plus Agreement	The EU gained direct access to NATO planning capabilities and assets.
2003	Nice Treaty	Prepared the EU for the accession of 12 new member states and introduced the PSC, the EUMC and the EUMS
2009	Lisbon Treaty	Creation of the EEAS and EDA. The Treaty broadened

		EU's security and defence tasks to deal with new security threats, such as cyber-attacks, terrorism and climate change. The EU increased its strategic autonomy but didn't challenge the role of NATO as European security provider.

1.3. EU-US relations: 2010s instability

After the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the security and defence policy of the EU was rapidly challenged by the numerous crises that started to unfold. Along with the financial crisis that quickly moved from the United States to Europe, the EU had to deal with the migration crisis that followed the Arab springs in North Africa and in the Middle East. As a response to the conflicts and the uprisings in the Union's southern neighbourhood, thousands of people started crossing the Mediterranean Sea, looking for a better life in Europe.

Moreover, the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine and the Russian annexation of Crimea increased the level of tension in the Eastern Neighbourhood as well (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, pp. 67-72). Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, Russia and the United States improved their relations and signed an arms control agreement. Nonetheless, the rivalry reemerged after the enlargement of the EU and NATO and reinforced the anti-West sentiment that had characterised Russia during the Cold War. Therefore, under the administration of Putin, Russia invaded the pro-Russian separatist regions in Georgia and in Crimea, prompting the EU and the US to respond with sanctions (Council on Foreign Relations, 8 February 2025).

Lastly, the unprecedented results of the Brexit referendum in the UK generated another crisis in the EU, due to the loss of the UK's considerable capabilities in security and defence and its strategic position in international organizations – it being one of the permanent members in the UN Security Council.

All these changes challenged the European Union and its role in international affairs. Indeed, its response to all these crises wasn't always successful and showed how much the Union's capacity to influence the world order was rather limited, and how much its security and defence still depended on the US.

Indeed, the EU response to the migration crisis proved ineffective and lacked the unity needed to tackle and solve the root causes and to divide equally the responsibilities on the matter; the jihadist attacks in Europe proved once again how unfit the Union was to defend itself from new security threats, like terrorism; and the exit of Britain from the EU showed how much it needed to increase its strategic autonomy in security and defence (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, pp. 67-72).

Therefore, the EU published the European Global Strategy (EUGS) in 2016, which substituted the European Security Strategy from 2003.

The High Representative Federica Mogherini established a strategic plan to respond to a fragmented and unpredictable global landscape. This plan was based on an article from 2015 providing a strategic reflection on the global environment the Union was facing at the time, which was characterized by new threats and crises happening simultaneously, like climate change, resource scarcity, migration crisis, terrorism, cyber threats, economic crises and instability in the neighbourhood.

Regarding the security threats, the EU Global Strategy underscored the necessity for the Union to bolster its resilience and ability to defend itself; develop its civilian and military capabilities; stabilise the neighbourhood; strengthen multilateral governance; and favour transparency, sustainable development and democratic legitimacy, by monitoring the implementation, ensuring accountability, and favouring cooperation between CFSP/CSDP and external action instruments (European External Action Service, 2015).

The purpose of the Global Strategy was to increase the strategic autonomy of the EU, with respect to NATO, which has historically been the main security provider in the continent. Nonetheless, the strategy also advocated the necessity to keep deepening and developing the transatlantic relationship (European

External Action Service, 2015). The goal of the Global Strategy was to favour more equilibrium between the institutions by strengthening cooperation and avoiding subjugation. Besides, the EU should keep cooperating bilaterally, regionally and multilaterally in the field, to guarantee peace and security both within and outside its borders, by adopting principled pragmatism, hence by creating a better world while evaluating realistically the current landscape.

The Union should create structures and introduce initiatives to favour integration in security and defence policy in order to face new hybrid threats, and to guarantee reciprocal assistance and solidarity. To do so, the EU should discuss the implementation of a Coordinated Annual Review on Defence to coordinate expense plans, a European Defence Fund to coordinate research and investments in defence, and a Permanent Structured Cooperation, included in the Lisbon Treaty but still not implemented, to enable binding military commitments and deeper cooperation in defence (Howorth, 2017, pp. 454-455).

Moreover, ten days after the publishment of the Global strategy, NATO held a summit in Warsaw between the 8th and 9th of July and the President of the European Council at the time, Donald Tusk, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, and NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, signed a declaration to intensify cooperation in new sectors to deal with the new threats, favour research and capacity development, and enhance security cooperation (Luci, 2020).

Nevertheless, at the end of the year 2016 the victory of Donald Trump in the US presidential elections and his foreign policy, characterised by a rejection of multilateralism and a weakened commitment towards NATO, raised doubts about how much the EU could keep relying on the US for security and defence, hence convincing the EU to increase the level of integration (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, p. 72).

To respond to the decision of the UK to leave the EU and to Trump's unpredictability in foreign policy, the EU voted in favour of forging a European Defence Union and issued a European Defence Action Plan, to increase defence spending and research (Howorth, 2017, p. 454).

Nevertheless, the impact of the election of Donald Trump on the European Union will be investigated in the following chapter.

2. Chapter 2: The political shift under Donald Trump's first administration

The European Union and the US share a strong security and defence relationship, as illustrated in the historical reconstruction of the previous chapter, which highlighted how much the former has depended on the latter for security and defence.

Notwithstanding, over the last decades, the EU has increased its defence capabilities, by establishing a Common Security and Defence Policy and by introducing new institutions to improve its efficiency. Yet, despite the efforts, the Union kept depending heavily on the US and on NATO, even though numerous US presidents, starting from Eisenhower, pressured the EU to increase its strategic autonomy.

Notwithstanding, the US, while supporting Europe's defence integration, it also feared that increasing the strategic autonomy of Europe would generate discrimination against, diminution of, and duplication of NATO activities – as stated by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in his famous "three D's speech" (Atlantic Council, 2024).

Nonetheless, the election of Donald Trump, with his "America first" and "Make America Great Again" propaganda, undermined the role of the US as security provider for Europe, which, along with the annexation of Crimea to the territory of Russia and the political instability in the Middle East, all contributed to the decision of the EU to increase its strategic autonomy on the international landscape. Moreover, Trump described NATO as "obsolete" and threatened to leave the organisation if Europe kept "free-riding" it.

2.1. Donald Trump's first administration (2017-2021)

The election of Donald Trump caused a shift in US foreign policy and in its relationship with NATO, which had an impact not only on the country itself, but on third countries as well, notably on its European allies.

Donald Trump's foreign policy rhetoric engaged with populism and relied on spreading the perception of living in a permanent sense of crisis, which he used to mobilise political support. During his campaign trial he criticised the incumbent government, in line with the rhetoric of any challenger candidate, and proposed alternative foreign policies to resolve their failures. His rhetoric pushed towards polarisation – us versus them – and kept the themes of fear and crisis even after getting into office, thereby treating his governing period as a permanent campaign (Hall, 2021, pp. 48-51).

Indeed, populism places a moralistic notion of the "people" at the centre and argues that the establishment counters the interests of the people. Besides, it creates a sense of crisis to generate political support. Evidently, Trump adopted a right-wing populistic rhetoric, and presented the world outside and outside groups as hostile and untrustworthy, while proposing his presidency as the only viable solution to the crisis (Hall, 2021, pp. 51-52).

Furthermore, Donald Trump criticised the role played by the US within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

However, Trump wasn't the first US president to undermine the role of NATO or to focus on other geographic areas. Lyndon Johnson and Nixon were both dealing with the Vietnam War while in office. Indeed, the US became more focused on the Asian continent under these presidents. As a result, they paid less attention to the promises made to Europe. Moreover, in 1971 the US implemented a new monetary policy, which concretised the end of the Bretton Woods economic system that had been in place since the end on WWII. This decision was adopted without consulting Europe or any other third country.

In addition to that, other events, like the 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, alleged to be harbouring Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda, also

contributed to shifting the priorities of the US and within NATO, moving the focus further away from Europe (Kaufman, 2017, pp. 253-260).

The election of Donald Trump further accelerated this shifting process, due to his prioritization of national interests and his take on NATO. Besides, his protectionist policies and the abandonment of international agreements casted doubts on the commitment of the US to Europe's economy and security.

Notwithstanding, not all Trump's declarations were followed by corresponding actions and, even though most people refer at the years of his first administration as a period of "chaos", some of the policies he adopted had already been advocated by a substantial part of the government, such as, for instance, the rejection of the nuclear deal with Iran. On the other hand, other decisions in foreign policy were guided and manipulated by the "adults in the room", hence agencies, intelligence, military bureaucracy and neoconservatives. Finally, some of these changes were the result of structural problems, such as the imperial overstretch and the internal social and economic decline (Guerlain, 2018).

2.1.1. Trump's political agenda

Donald Trump's presidency was widely regarded by scholars as the beginning of the end of the liberal international order that had benefitted the United States since the end of World War II. As a matter of fact, Trump promised to "shake the rust off America's foreign policy" – although he ended up maintaining many already existing commitments when he got into office. For him, costs and benefits were more important than ideas and norms (Sperling & Webber, 2019, p. 511).

Trump promoted economic protectionism, international isolationism and aimed to "Make America Great Again", by placing more emphasis on the US, hence less on the security of its allies, including the EU. Besides, the tensions between EU and US were exacerbated by disagreements over trade and by his unpredictability in foreign policy (Kanat, 2018, pp. 77-80). Indeed, he elevated nationalism above global governance (Sperling & Webber, 2019, p. 512).

Donald Trump took distance from his predecessors in a wide range of policy areas and expressed opposition towards several international agreements and international organisations, even the ones he was not a member of.

For instance, Trump expressed indifference for the fate of European integration and even cultivated close relationships with far-right anti-EU political groups in different European Union countries and strained the relationship with the EU by opposing some international agreements, such as the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, whose purpose was to guarantee that Iran's nuclear program would be exclusively pacific. Nonetheless, Trump considered it a major failure and a threat to the US. The decision to back down from the agreement and the decision to impose sanctions against companies that continued to do business with Iran generated tensions in the US-Iran relations, decision that was heavily criticised by the EU.

Besides, the US and the EU found themselves at odds in relation to Russia. Indeed, Trump distanced himself from the policies adopted by his predecessors. Indeed, after the invasion of Crimea, the EU and the US both adopted sanctions to condemn Russia. Nonetheless, once in power, Trump – while criticising Russia for its meddling in different countries, like Syria – refrained from targeting Vladimir Putin directly. At the same time, some members of his government were proved to have close links with Russian businessmen, close to the Kremlin (Kanat, 2018, pp. 81-83)

Moreover, Trump withdrew the US from several international agreements that had been signed by previous administrations, starting with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Besides, he gave notice to the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and decided to relocate the American embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem – regardless of the international consensus – and imposed tariffs on his allies, such as Canada and the EU, and on his rivals, like China.

Furthermore, he criticised the World Trade Organization (WTO), the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and several international bodies the US was not part of, like the EU, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and the International Criminal Court (ICC).

His criticism of almost every international organization was complemented by his disregard for diplomatic decorum. Significantly, he often took aim at the leaders of America's closest allies, while remaining silent on the infractions of international law by authoritarian powers like Saudi Arabia and Russia (Sperling & Webber, 2019, p. 512).

As a result, his administration attracted criticism from all over the world, especially from Europe, and significantly Germany and France, who judged his behaviour as destabilising. On top of that, Trump was also criticised by many national officials, some of them affiliated with his Republican Party (Sperling & Webber, 2019, p. 512).

Nonetheless, not all his declarations, most of them expressed through tweets, were followed by real actions; some of them were only used to create alarmism. Notably, in foreign policy, Trump ended up reaffirming some security guarantees. For instance, he continued some operations in Africa and Pakistan, that had been endorsed by the previous administrations. Indeed, some of his policies diverged from his expressions of intent, in part due to the Congress elections in 2018, which overturned the Republican majority, complicating the adoption and implementation of new disruptive policies. Moreover, even though his "America first" strategy isolated the US on some issues, such as climate change or the relations with Iran and Israel, he could not avoid coordinating with his allies on other issues, especially when dealing with ISIS or North Korea. Finally, despite the United States' military and economic hegemony in the international system, it remains deeply embedded in the liberal order, built on interdependence and institutionalisation (Sperling & Webber, 2019, pp. 513-514).

Therefore, Donald Trump's presidency has been disruptive, but not as much as he promised. Some issues were more complex than he expected, making a radical departure from his predecessors far more difficult to implement.

It goes without saying that some of his actions were followed by unexpected developments, starting with the summit with the North Korean president Kim Jong-un (Macdonald, 2018, pp. 403-404), or his decision to leave the Paris Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (Macdonald, 2018, pp. 422-424).

While fulfilling several of his campaign promises, Trump also maintained continuity with his predecessors in some policy areas, despite his rhetoric of radical departure. Besides, in some instances, he appeared to misinterpret US policy and pledged to do things that were already being done, notably the military campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, which was already into force under Obama and was continued under his leadership (Macdonald, 2018, p. 420).

Although new presidents try to take distance from their predecessors, especially in foreign policy matters, there are factors that push them towards continuity. As a matter of fact, a policy can receive the support of the new administration for enduring national interests. Besides, since international politics can be unpredictable, some presidents might be afraid to depart from their predecessors. Finally, bureaucracies play a pivotal role in the adoption of policies, by resisting new ones or by generating domestic constraints. For instance, some policy changes require the approval of the Congress (Macdonald, 2018, pp. 406-408).

2.1.2. Trump's stance on NATO and Europe

Donald Trump's priorities in foreign policy, guided by the slogan "America First", had repercussions on the transatlantic alliance as well.

The night before receiving his party's nomination for the presidency, Donald Trump declared in an interview that, if Russia attacked one of the Baltic states, he would decide whether to help them or not, only after reviewing their national obligations, thus promising to help only the countries who paid their fair share within the Transatlantic alliance. Furthermore, he promised to withdraw the American forces from Europe and Asia if they refused to pay for US protection (Kaufman, 2017, p. 263).

Trump mainly criticized NATO allies for being free riders and for having reduced defence spending throughout the years. Indeed, since the 1990s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the European allies decided to take advantage of the "*peace dividend*" that followed the end of the Cold War to move some spendings away from defence and towards social welfare (George & Sandler, 2022, p. 784).

Moreover, despite the large buildup in military expenses in Russia from 2000 to 2020, which increased by 183.4%, the defence spending of NATO allies remained smaller than expected, regardless of the agreed upon target. Indeed, at the 2014 Wales Summit, in order to address the Russian expansionism in its neighbourhood, the Transatlantic allies agreed to allocate 2% of their national GDP to defence by 2024 and 20% of the annual defence budget to the purchase of new weapons (George & Sandler, 2022, pp. 785-786).

Nonetheless, some member states delayed the increase in defence spending, thus attracting criticism from Trump himself. Significantly, these countries limited their military spending when the collective allies raised theirs, hence prioritising other policy areas instead of defence (J. George and T. Sandler, 2022, p. 789).

As a result, Trump became the greatest critic of NATO and labelled the alliance as obsolete, threatening to leave it multiple times (Khan, 2021, p.1). Besides, he frequently accused NATO members of being delinquents and free riders, while simultaneously pressuring them to buy American weapons to keep NATO strong and to increase US defence industry revenues (Founta et al., 2025, pp. 146-147).

Evidently, Trump's presidency prioritised American interest, even when it meant discrediting long-standing international values and traditions. Indeed, he started to break the core of the liberal institutionalism that had dominated US foreign policy for decades after the end of WWII. (Khan, 2021, pp. 2-4). For instance, in May 2017, at the Brussels summit, he refused to acknowledge the collective defence clause – Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty – and kept criticising the member state's share, by promising that if they didn't reach 2% of their national GDP by January 2019, "*the United States would go it alone*" – hence stating that if "*you don't pay your bills, you get no protection*" (Founta et al., 2025, pp. 156-158). Significantly, Trump threatened to not acknowledge the collective defence clause from article 5 of the Alliance Treaty, unless the other members reached the 2% defence threshold. Besides, he threatened to leave the alliance, and the fear of abandonment prompted the other members, especially those in Eastern Europe and in the Balkans, more exposed to Russian

interference, to increase their defence spending and quickly reach the threshold. After the sudden increase of defence spending, Trump declared that NATO was no longer outdated (Khan, 2021, pp. 9-12) and ended up endorsing the collective defence clause a few weeks after the Brussels summit, during a press conference in Poland (Khan, 2021, p. 6).

Yet, the alliance remained defined by a power imbalance and was often bent to suit American priorities. Indeed, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) has always been an American, who was also the Commander-in-Chief of US forces in Europe. Besides, as of September 2018, there were still around 64 thousand US service personnel in Europe. Besides, after the end of the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US troops were returned to East Asia and to Europe, mainly Germany and Italy. Indeed, the operations in Bosnia, Kosovo and Libya probably wouldn't have been possible without the intervention of the US, due to the European underinvestment in defence. Therefore, the United States found itself a "prisoner of the European weakness", forced to intervene in conflicts that the continent was unequipped to resolve.

Therefore, the alliance was useful for Europe, who received security and defence, but it was attractive for the US as well, for making the behaviour of its allies' more predictable (Sperling & Webber, 2019, pp. 517-519).

Furthermore, contrary to any expectation, after observing an increase in defence spending in Europe, Donald Trump bolstered its long-term investments in towards NATO, thus strengthening his security relationship with Europe by increasing the budget for the European Deterrence Initiative, a fund established to support the defence of his NATO allies in light of Russia's annexation of Crimea. The budget rose from $4.8 to $6.5 billion in August 2018 thanks to Trump.

Moreover, the US increased the deployment of troops in Europe and kept supporting military exercises and capacity-building activities, especially on the eastern flank. Indeed, NATO gave the US an advantage over its competitors, namely Russia and China, by securing international allies. The new investments were a consequence of Europe's commitments to defence spendings in 2017 and

2018, which, according to Trump, were a direct consequence of his threats to leave the organization (Sperling & Webber, 2019, pp. 523-525).

Trump's endured commitment to the organization communicates that the stakes for leaving the alliance were too high. Therefore, amid all the criticism, he claimed that the alliance was no longer obsolete and that now that he had obtained a more correct burden sharing, he was 100 per cent committed (Sperling & Webber, 2019, p. 525).

2.2. EU's political reaction to Donald Trump

When Donald Trump was elected, the EU was afraid to lose its security provider, which had guaranteed the security of the continent since the end of World War II. Trump's "America First" propaganda undermined US commitments towards Europe, while his pressures on NATO allies to raise their defence spending in exchange for American protection proved that US protection could not be taken for granted. Finally, the withdrawal of some US troops from Germany further emphasised the need to increase Europe's strategic autonomy (Mărcău, 2024, p. 7).

Notably, one former German ambassador to NATO claimed that the American umbrella over Europe was gone forever, and there was a concrete possibility that the US would leave the alliance. Indeed, Trump said multiple times that NATO had become obsolete and that the allies should either "*pay up, including for past deficiencies, or they have to get out*".

These declarations prompted a reaction from Europe, starting from the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who stated that the EU should take its fate in its own hands (Sperling & Webber, 2019, pp. 522-523).

Furthermore, during the EU summit, held in Malta in 2017, several leaders expressed their concerns about Donald Trump due to his anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric, highlighting the necessity to redefine the relations with the US together. Merkel called for a stronger EU defence and for closer cooperation, given that, even though the transatlantic relationship is fundamental for Europe's security, they cannot ignore the many areas of disagreement. Therefore, for Angela

Merkel, the EU should take more matters in its own hands and Germany should invest more in its defence capabilities.

Meanwhile, other European leaders expressed their concerns. The Austrian Chancellor claimed that some of Trump's foreign policies were highly problematic; the French president Hollande criticised Trump's positions as well, stating that he should not pressure the EU, and that, although some member states are leaning towards the US and are free to forge bilateral ties with it, there is no future with Trump without a common position. Indeed, he called for solidarity at EU level and for a European conception of the future, since Trump could prove himself unreliable and unpredictable.

Besides, Malta prime minister, Joseph Muscat, highlighted the necessity to engage with the US as always, while also recognising that the EU cannot stay silent when there are principles and values at stake.

Furthermore, the European Council President Donald Tusk argued that, with Brexit in the future, the EU needed to maintain a strong transatlantic relationship, that continued to integrate the UK (Boffey & Walker, 2017). However, Tusk categorised Trump as a threat to Europe, as much as China, Russia and radical Islam. In his letter to the EU leaders ahead of the Malta summit, he urged them to take decisive steps together to become fully independent from these countries, by boosting cooperation in economy and in security and defence (Agence France-Presse, 2017).

In a nutshell, most European countries didn't trust Trump's administration and pressured the EU to become the defender of international multilateralism and gain more responsibilities in defence (Blanc, 2024, pp. 696-697).

Trump's policies and declarations generated instability within the transatlantic relationship, while indirectly strengthening the EU (Blanc, 2024).

Nevertheless, several Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries reviewed positively the American president. Indeed, these countries were more exposed to the Russian threat and, since the EU could not offer strong security guarantees, the alliance with the United States remained the sole security option for most CEE governments. Besides, Trump was unwilling to criticize them for their level of democracy and lack of respect for human rights. Instead, he kept

cooperating with them in security and defence, despite the transgressions (Ülgül, 2020, pp. 227-228).

Donald Trump asserted that America would give military aid only to the countries increasing their defence spending. Besides, he questioned defending small European states, especially if they could drag the US into a war with Russia. Therefore, in order to ensure protection, these countries started fulfilling their defence spending obligations (Ülgül, 2020, pp. 229-235). As a result, Poland and the Baltic countries became the only non- "*delinquent*" countries that respected the US (Blanc, 2024, p. 694). Trump decided to strengthen its military presence in Poland and continued the construction of the Aegis-Ashore missile defence site, although with some delays, and sent 1000 additional troops. Indeed, Trump maintained an extensive defence cooperation with Poland.

Nonetheless, after noticing the defence efforts of a lot of European countries, Trump guaranteed that NATO would remain crucial for deterring a conflict between great powers in Europe (Ülgül, 2020, pp. 229-235). Additionally, NATO developed a European Readiness Initiative, also known as "Four Thirties", expecting the member states to be able to deploy 30 battalions, 30 battleships and 30 squadrons within 30 days (Ülgül, 2020, p. 240).

During Trump's presidency the equipment expenditure in military spending in Europe grew from 13.48% – data taken during Obama administration – to a 19.8%, and grew mostly in Eastern European countries, like Lithuania, Hungary, Slovakia, and in Italy and Spain (Founta et al., 2025, pp. 149-150).

Since Trump could not surround himself with like-minded people and could not rethink US dynamics with Russia and other rival states, he surrounded himself with traditionalists, who were determined to maintain the American global leadership role and defence and security cooperation, like the CEE nations (Ülgül, 2020, p. 243).

Trump won the elections a year after the publishment of the European Global Strategy (EUGS), which envisaged a lot of changes and developments to make the CSDP of the EU more efficient and more easily coordinated with EU external action and external action instruments. Moreover, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 exacerbated the sense of threat among EU member states,

especially in Central and Eastern Europe. All these aspects contributed to those years' progress in defence and security integration.

Donald Trump's positions on foreign policy and NATO contributed to the integration progress as well, notably to the implementation of the Permanent Structured Cooperation, the introduction of the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, the European Defence Fund and the European Peace Facility – known as Athena mechanism before (Ruiz Díaz, 2021, p.170).

Nonetheless, enhancing its strategic autonomy didn't imply that the EU would operate in isolation. Indeed, the EU sought to cultivate strategic partnerships with like-minded countries and international organizations, that share the same values and principles, such as multilateralism, international peace and security – most notably the United Nations.

Nonetheless, while increasing its strategic autonomy, the Union did its best to preserve its relationship with NATO. The collaboration was regulated by the Joint EU-NATO Declarations from 2016 and 2018, which established 74 common actions in different areas and staff-to-staff contact (Ruiz Díaz, 2021, pp. 172-173).

The first Joint Declaration from 2016 preceded the victory of Donald Trump and had the purpose of giving new impetus to the partnership, in the spirit of full openness and in compliance with decision-making autonomy, thus building a stronger NATO and a stronger EU, which are mutually reinforcing (NATO, 2016).

The second EU-NATO Joint Declaration from 2018 restated the same objectives of the 2016 Joint Declarations to build a stronger NATO and a stronger EU, based on mutual openness and decision-making autonomy, and to respond to the new threats, like terrorism and cyberthreats. The Declaration welcomed the efforts taken within the EU with the establishment of PESCO and the EDF and recognized the commitments undertaken within NATO, notably the efforts to guarantee a more equitable burden sharing, in accordance with the Defence Investment Pledge. Indeed, it aims at guaranteeing coherent, complementary and interoperable defence initiatives of both the EU and NATO (NATO, 2018).

2.2.1. The implementation of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)

One of the policies that the EU decided to implement following the geopolitical changes and the new policy direction of the United States, in order to address its defence needs, enhance its strategic autonomy and strengthen its ability to cooperate with partners, was the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). PESCO was adopted through a Council Decision in 2018 establishing a common set of governance rules (Council of the European Union, 25 June 2018).

The Permanent Structured Cooperation was envisaged in the Lisbon Treaty. Indeed, according to Article 42.6 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU), "*those Member States whose military capabilities fulfil higher criteria, and which have made more binding commitments to one another in this area with a view to the most demanding missions shall establish permanent structured cooperation within the Union framework*" (European Union, 2007, art. 42.6). The details were regulated by article 46 of the same Treaty. The objectives, laid out in Protocol 10 of the Treaty, state that the member states should develop their defence capabilities through their national contributions and by participating in multinational forces and programmes (FINABEL, 2018, pp. 4-5).

It was the Commission President, Jean-Claude Junker, who, in the 2016 State of the Union address, called for a Europe that could protect and defend itself, urging the implementation of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the "*sleeping beauty of the Lisbon Treaty*".

PESCO was ratified in 2017 by 23 member states and was formally established that December with 25 participants. The UK, Denmark and Malta decided to opt out of the framework (FINABEL, 2018, p. 3).

Its awakening started in 2014 and followed the Russian annexation of Crimea, the migration crisis and the terrorist attacks in Europe, and was catalysed by Brexit, and by the shift in US foreign policy that followed the election of Donald Trump. Indeed, the EU could no longer rely on US protection through NATO. With Trump, the US security guarantee became unpredictable (FINABEL, 2018, pp. 5-6).

After several meetings between EU foreign and defence ministers PESCO was finally implemented. PESCO was perceived as a possible vehicle to meet the ambitions of the European Global Strategy (EUGS) (FINABEL, 2018, pp. 4-5), and a complement to the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (AFSJ), aiming to safeguard security in the EU (Ruiz Díaz, 2021, pp. 162-163).

PESCO was created to promote defence cooperation between the member states and to improve their capabilities through the development of national contributions, and the participation in multinational forces, in European equipment programmes and in the activity of the European Defence Agency. PESCO was born from the intensive work of the member states, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Defence Agency (EDA), with the goal of enabling cooperation in security and defence, through the deployment of missions, which are facilitated by the PESCO framework. Moreover, PESCO contributes and reinforces NATO, since the participating members can make their capabilities available to NATO and to the UN at any moment (Ruiz Díaz, 2021, pp. 162-163; FINABEL, 2018, p. 8).

However, PESCO wasn't launched by the EU, but by the member states, who are responsible for the projects they participate in. Besides, they are the coordinators of the European Defence Fund (EDF).

The EDA is part of PESCO Secretariat. It elaborates an annual assessment of the national contributions of the member states; it is responsible for gathering the information for the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD); it engages in bilateral dialogues with the member states; and supports the implementation of the projects. Meanwhile, the EEAS is also part of PESCO Secretariat and supports the operational aspects in cooperation with the EU Military Staff (EUMS) and the Crisis Management and Planning Directorate (CMPD) (FINABEL, 2018, p. 9).

Finally, the High Representative is required present an annual report on the status of PESCO in the member states, and the Council must evaluate whether a member state is fulfilling its commitments or not. Besides, it can suspend a country's membership through qualified majority voting (FINABEL, 2018, p. 11).

One central pillar of PESCO is the commitment to maintain deployable formations that support the operations by providing materiel, personnel and infrastructure. It includes the creation of EU Battlegroups, which are part of the EU military rapid reaction capacity. PESCO organizes both capability-oriented projects and operational projects and can invite a third state to participate, as long as they respect the general conditions laid out by the member states, the High Representative and PESCO Secretariat (FINABEL, 2018, pp. 12-15).

The projects are financed by the participating member states, which might require a significant financial burden for some of them, given the defence obligations to NATO. Nonetheless, the purpose of PESCO is to handle EU current threats and challenges and to anticipate future ones by developing a coordinated, multidimensional response. Nonetheless, while maintaining defence cooperation at EU level intergovernmental, PESCO and CSDP missions require Community funding, which strengthens the role of the Commission in defence affairs (Ruiz Díaz, 2021, pp. 163-164).

Therefore, the Permanent Structured Cooperation works through projects, to which the member states can take part voluntarily. These projects aim at adapting the national forces to respond to the evolving threats. They are guided by the European Defence Agency's (EDA) Capacity Development Plan (CDP) which identifies a list of civilian and military missions with the purpose to address the capability gaps and make the CSDP more credible and effective[1]. The funding framework was first supplemented by the European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP) and the Preparatory Action on Defence Research (PADR) with promising results for a defence industry. However, these funding schemes were later replaced by the European Defence

[1] One project that has contributed to making EU defence more efficient is the Military Mobility project – led by the Netherlands and joined by almost all the member states. The project aimed at enhancing the deployment of forces by optimising the freedom of movement of equipment and personnel, overcoming legal hurdles and infrastructural issues. Other relevant projects are the European Medical Command, which provided medical resources, the European Secure Software for common military radios; and the Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicle/ Amphibious Assault Vehicle/ Light Armoured Vehicle project, which aimed at developing a vehicle to support rapid deployment manoeuvres and combat, logistic and command support (FINABEL, 2018, p. 16).

Fund (EDF). Nonetheless, regardless of the commonly developed military capabilities, PESCO is still a national issue and might always be subject to cuts (Ruiz Díaz, 2021, pp. 168-170).

The European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) provided an inventory of the threats that the EU was addressing, such as terrorism, hybrid threats, organised crime and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Therefore, under the umbrella of the CSDP, the Council adopted a "Winter Package" to strengthen CSDP and enhance the ability of the EU to act as a security provider and to respond to the changing security environment, whereas the Commission contributed to pushing defence and security high on the agenda, while also supporting PESCO and other defence programmes that strengthen resilience (Ruiz Díaz, 2021, pp. 164-166).

The Winter Package, along with the EUGS, paved the way for a long-lasting path towards a renewed European defence policy. Notably, PESCO was instrumental in restructuring the armed forces and in adapting CSDP capabilities to the new security scenarios. Besides, it collaborated with AFSJ actors as well for internal security, and with the European Border and Coast Guard (EBCG) for security beyond the borders of the Union (Ruiz Díaz, 2021, pp. 166-167).

Moreover, the member states approved dedicated PESCO projects to make sure that the CSDP could support a member state in the event of an armed aggression to its territory, a natural or a man-made disaster, through the deployment of the Deployable Military Disaster Relief Capability Package, which complements and reinforces the EU Civil Protection Mechanism; and the Airborne Electronic Attack, that allows European and NATO air forces to operate within EU territories (Ruiz Díaz, 2021, pp. 167-168).

Besides, in November 2016, the European Defence Action Plan was presented to set up financial measures to help the member states move towards deeper cooperation (FINABEL, 2018, p. 7).

2.2.2. The adoption of CARD and the EDF

The Permanent Structured Cooperation was not an isolated policy. It was developed in connection with the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence

(CARD), and the European Defence Fund (EDF), to facilitate security and defence coordination (FINABEL, 2018, p. 8).

Indeed, Federica Mogherini's EU Global Strategy from 2016 underscored a lack of defence coordination among member states, which was addressed in the Council conclusions of November 2016 with the creation of the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, which was approved and implemented in 2017 (European External Action Service, 2017).

While the CARD was implemented before PESCO, the frameworks are closely interlinked and incentivise collaborating projects. The annual review was meant to foster capability development, to address shortfalls, deepen defence cooperation and enhance coherence in defence spending plans. The purpose was "*to develop, on voluntary basis, a more structured way to deliver identified capabilities based on great transparency, political visibility and commitment from member states*" (European External Action Service, 2017; European Council, November 2016).

The European Defence Agency (EDA) works as CARD Secretariat and acts in cooperation with the EEAS. Together they develop a paper on CARD elements, using the advice from the EU Military Committee, the Member States' Defence Policy Directors, Capability Directors and National Armaments Directors (European External Action Service, 2017). The EDA gathers information from the member states, like contributions, and produces an analysis with aggregate data. Besides, it identifies trends and Capability Development Plan (CDP) priorities, as well as opportunities for cooperation. This instrument can be very useful to achieve common objectives but rests on the willingness to participate of the member states (FINABEL, 2018, pp. 17-18).

The Coordinated Annual Review on Defence was shaped by a trial run methodology presented by the EDA in 2017, which used the databases made available by the member states and the information found in NATO's Defence Investment Pledge Report – for the members that are also NATO allies. Additionally, the EDA conducted bilateral dialogues with the member states to validate and complement the information gathered, in consistency with NATO's Defence Planning Process. Through the support of all these data, the EDA

produced an analysis, identifying trends, priorities to implement, opportunities and defence research programmes. The analysis was discussed with the member states and shaped the final report which was submitted to the ministers. The final report presented results and recommendations, which provided valuable insights for the launch of the first CARD cycle in 2019 (European External Action Service, 2017).

CARD was the cornerstone of a more coherent EU defence mechanism but was not intended as a stand-alone tool. It needs to be used in coordination with other tools, notably PESCO and EDF (European External Action Service, 2017).

As a matter of fact, with the emergence of new threats, the member states realised that they could not afford to face them on their own. In fact, the lack of cooperation between member states cost between €25 billion and €100 billion per-year, and since most procurement and research are done at national level, it could derive in duplication of military capabilities. Therefore, pooling together part of the procurement would save up to 30% in defence expenditures.

When confronting the EU to the US, we can observe that the EU has 178 different weapon systems, while the US only has 30, and, on top of that, the EU is much less efficient (FINABEL, 2018, p. 19).

Therefore, to improve the efficiency in security and defence, the member states committed to increase their defence budgets. Besides, the EU assisted them in allocating the additional funds in an efficient manner, to increase competitiveness and allow an economy of scale. Yet, to favour more efficiency and develop strategic capabilities more rapidly, the Commission President Junker announced the creation of the European Defence Fund (EDF) with the aim of "*boost*[ing] *the EU's excellence and efficiency in defence equipment and technology by supporting the whole production chain: research, prototype development and ad acquisition*" (FINABEL, 2018, pp. 19-20; European Commission, 2017).

Besides, the Fund contains a Research window that finances collaborative defence research and technology development across Europe, and a Capability window that supports joint development and acquisition of key defence capabilities, consolidating cooperation among member states. One last tool is the

Financial Toolbox, which provides several arrangements that the member states can use voluntarily to address the challenges.

The Commission is responsible for the execution and management of the fund but can delegate some tasks related to the implementation to the EDA (FINABEL, 2018, pp. 21-22; European Commission, 2017).

The Commission allocated €590 million to the EDF until 2020, and, from 2020, it proposed the allocation of a minimum of €1.5 billion each year – without substituting member states' investments. Besides, after 2020, the European Commission proposed a dedicated EU defence research programme of up to €500 million – making the EU the biggest investor in defence research – and a budget of €500 million dedicated to defence and industrial development for 2019 and 2020, aiming at increasing the budget to an annual €1 billion after 2020. Finally, the fund ensures cross border participation of small and medium defence-related enterprises and remains open to potential financial investments by the European Investment Bank (European Commission, 2017).

The EDF was created before PESCO, but they are mutually reinforcing, since the projects can be eligible for EU co-financing, with the fund covering up to 30% of the cost. Therefore, PESCO should always synchronize with EDF and CARD to reach its full potential, to guarantee coherence and complementarity and to avoid duplication (FINABEL, 2018, pp. 22-23).

In a nutshell, CARD, PESCO, EDF and CDP were not meant to be autonomous tools. The priorities identified by the member states in the revised CDP need to be analysed by CARD and the subsequent new projects must be launched by the member states under PESCO, within EDA or within other bilateral and multilateral framework. Finally, they can be co-funded by the EDF (European External Action Service, 2017).

Through the adoption of these tools, the member states of the EU began to take European defence more seriously, moving from rhetoric to reality, and these policies represented a leap forward in terms of defence and security (FINABEL, 2018, pp. 24-26). While NATO remained a cornerstone of European security and defence, the EU took important steps towards strategic autonomy.

2.2.3. Additional defence policies

In addition to the implementation of PESCO, CARD and EDF, the EU adopted other policies and reforms to increase its strategic autonomy.

For instance, in 2020, the EU introduced two new Directorates, the Integrated Approach for Security and Peace Directorate, to ensure continuity and coherence in the Union's response, and the Security and Defence Policy Directorate, to cover a full range of security and defence policies, including cyber-security, hybrid threats, capability developments and partnerships with international organizations. Moreover, in 2019 a new decision amended the 2008 Common Position defining the rules on exports of military technology and equipment, adapting the EU to the Arms Trade Treaty from 2014 (Ruiz Díaz, 2021, pp. 170-172).

Moreover, the 2019-2024 Commission of Ursula von der Leyen established the Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS), responsible for EU defence industry and space policies (Ruiz Díaz, 2021, pp. 162-163).

2.3. The aftermath of Trump 1.0

After four years of Trump's presidency, Biden was elected president of the United States, provoking a major relief in Europe, due to his Atlanticist and pro-European inclination (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, p. 72).

Biden attempted to restore stability to the US foreign policy and rejoined treaties and organizations that had been abandoned by Trump. Notably, Joe Biden set aside Trump's "America First" nationalism and focused on rebuilding his relationship with his allies and with international institutions, starting with NATO. Besides, he rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement and considered rejoining the Iran's nuclear agreement, although he eventually didn't.

Nonetheless, he had to address major developments on the international landscape, starting with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022. Indeed, under Vladimir Putin, Russia tried to reassert its influence over Eastern Europe, starting in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea.

Ukraine used to be the most powerful former Soviet Republic and had developed over the years a strong Western orientation, igniting tensions that eventually led to the Russian full-scale invasion in 2022 (Council on Foreign Relations, 8 February 2025).

The US immediately condemned Russia for its illegal invasion of Ukraine. The Biden administration sanctioned Russia to weaken its economic and financial support. Nonetheless, he refused to send American troops to avoid the escalation of a conflict against Russia, and limited its support for Ukraine to monetary aid, food, medical aid and shelter. However,by the time Biden left office at the beginning of 2025, his administration had given nearly $70 billion in military assistance to Ukraine, including artillery, missiles and military vehicles (Perry, n.d.).

In 2022 the United States and the EU created the US-EU Security and Defence Dialogue, as a platform to discuss the development of different defence projects. The Dialogue was supposed to create a vision of EU defence moving towards more empowerment, and to find areas of cooperation where the EU could become more autonomous (Atlantic Council, 2024).

A first step in that direction was the approval of the Strategic Compass, which envisaged a plan to strengthen EU defence by 2030, in complementarity with NATO, to restore peace in Europe.

The Strategic Compass aims at acting more rapidly and robustly by reinforcing civilian and military missions and by developing an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity, to deploy up to 5000 troops. Moreover, it plans to strengthen command and control structures and to respond to the new threats through an EU Single Intelligence and Analysis Capacity, an EU Hybrid Toolbox, an EU Cyber Defence Policy, an EU Space Strategy and by increasing its maritime presence.

Furthermore, the Strategic Compass underscored the necessity to invest more in defence and make full use of PESCO and EDF jointly to maximise efficiency. Besides, it mandates the creation of a Defence Innovation Hub within the EDA.

Even though the EU should increase its strategic autonomy and defence capabilities, the document also highlights the necessity to favour close partnership with NATO and the UN – which defend the same values. Besides, the EU should develop closer bilateral and regional cooperation with other countries and international organizations and develop an EU Security and Defence Partnership Forum to facilitate coordination and target common challenges (European Union, 2022).

Finally, following a consultation with key stakeholders, the European Commission and the High Representative – in cooperation with the European Defence Agency – introduced the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS). This policy aims at increasing the responsiveness of the European defence industry and strengthening the EU's Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB), by attracting more investments and by deepening cooperation with like-minded partners (European Commission & EEAS, 2024). The EDIS set out a vision for the future of EU defence policy. The goal is to produce more, increase intra-EU defence trade, and reduce the reliance on American resources (Atlantic Council, 2024).

Nonetheless, on the 5th of November 2024 Donald Trump was re-elected President of the United States for the second time. His re-election generated insecurity about the future of EU security that, along with the return of war in Europe and the latest geopolitical developments, contributed to prompting the adoption of new strategies to increase the level of defence integration at EU level.

The following table summarises the shifts in security and defence policy in the United States under the mandate of Donald Trump first, and Joe Biden after, and the resulting acceleration in the EU security and defence integration.

Table 2: The impact of Trump and Biden on EU defence integration

Actor	Policy area	Key actions	EU reaction
Trump	Foreign policy	International isolationism: he opposed the Paris Agreement, JCPOA, TPP, and criticised international organisations, like WTO, NAFTA, OPEC, ICC and the EU.	Most EU leaders called for more cooperation and solidarity at EU level, and for more responsibility in security and defence.
		Economic protectionism: he imposed tariffs against the EU.	
		He cultivated relationships with far-right anti-EU political groups.	
	NATO	Threatened to leave NATO and to not acknowledge the collective defence clause.	The EU implemented new defence policies: PESCO, CARD and EDF.
		Pressured his allies to raise defence spending to 2% GDP in exchange for security and defence.	Most member states reached the 2% threshold, especially in Central and Eastern Europe.
Biden	Foreign policy	Rejoined the Paris Agreement and established a US-EU Security and Defence Dialogue.	Adopted the Strategic Compass to enhance the EU strategic autonomy and introduced the EDIS to increase the responsiveness of the European defence industry.
		Cooperated with the EU to respond to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.	

3. Chapter 3: Tracing the EU's security and defence integration in response to Trump's second administration

On the 5th of November 2024, Donald Trump became the 47th president of the United States, winning 49.8% of the popular vote and 312 Electoral College votes. Trump won mostly among noncollege voters (56% to 42%), people living in rural areas (69% to 29%), religious people and men (Hartig et al., 2025).

Regardless of his attempt to overturn the 2020 elections, his two presidential impeachments, his criminal conviction and other criminal charges, Donald Trump went back to the White House in January 2025, (CNN, n.d.) winning the elections at a time of geopolitical instability. Notably, the EU was grappling with the return of a conflict in Europe and the security situation in the Middle East had deteriorated.

The EU was addressing these developments by introducing new policies to strengthen the level of integration in security and defence, thereby enhancing its strategic autonomy in international affairs.

As a matter of fact, the war in Ukraine accelerated trends already in motion and drove the EU towards a geopolitical awakening (European Union, 2022, pp. 4-5). Indeed, the EU adopted several policies to improve its defence capabilities and become more strategically autonomous.

Furthermore, the re-elected Donald Trump further accelerated the process by assessing that he would put America First in international affairs and move the focus away from Europe. Indeed, after the attempt of Joe Biden to renew the American diplomacy, although not always successfully, Trump reversed all the progress that had been made. His "America First" and "Make America Great Again" agenda, incorporating elements of nativism, libertarianism, isolationism and re-industrialisation, received strong popular support, with a strong impact on the US, and on Europe as well. Indeed, some of his policies addressed the

continent directly, through the imposition of tariffs on exports and by targeting the Transatlantic Alliance (Roberts, 2025, p. 20).

3.1. Purpose, analytical framework, and evidence

This dissertation investigates how the victory of Donald Trump, who got back into office at the beginning of 2025, contributed to enhancing the level of integration in security and defence policy within the EU during the first year of his mandate, and how it is expected to continue in the future.

Indeed, during his first presidency, Trump's unilateral policies, based on the rejection of multilateralism and the prioritization of US interests in foreign policy, generated insecurity within the Transatlantic alliance and urged the EU to re-affirm its international identity and become more strategically autonomous in defence (Blanc, 2024, pp. 685-686). Significantly, a study conducted in 2024 found a robust association between the perception of international threat and the support for European security and defence integration (Mader et al., 2024, pp. 448-450). Indeed, Donald Trump's first mandate was perceived as a significant threat by the EU, which grew increasingly concerned about the reliability of the US as Europe's security provider.

We can expect that his return at the end of 2024 would have a similar effect and thus contribute to further integration in defence policy at EU level.

Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to observe how Trump's disruptive political agenda towards NATO and towards the EU contributed to the Union's increasing level of integration in defence policy, by adopting a process tracing analysis.

We track the declarations and policies adopted by Donald Trump since the beginning of his second mandate in January 2025 and the response of the European Council, formed by the leaders of the 27 member states, the president of the European Council and the president of the European Commission.

We solely focus on defence, and analyse the declarations, the policies that have been adopted, the interviews that have been released, and other official documents, such as the conclusions of the European Council summits, the

preparatory and follow-up documents, along with the documents surrounding the NATO summit held in June.

The goal is to observe the process, by looking not only at the concrete policies that have been adopted or are being discussed, but also by analysing the positions expressed by the members of the European Council on the topic.

We analyse the political agenda of Trump's administration and the expectations of the members of the European Council, observing whether they are pro-integration, sceptics, or opposing defence integration at EU level; whether they still support Atlantic solidarity and think that NATO should keep being the main security provider in Europe; or whether they think that the EU should enhance its strategic autonomy in defence, even if it means autonomy from NATO.

The timeline of the analysis spans from January 2025, when Trump got into office, until the end of the year.

3.2. Initial conditions and key expectations

The re-election of Donald Trump is accelerating the transition from the bipolarity that had characterised the international system since the end of World War Two to multipolarity.

During the first day of his presidency, Trump issued 42 executive orders, including the withdrawal from the UN Paris Agreement – which had been rejoined by Biden – and the World Health Organization. Additional orders were adopted to strengthen the immigration rules, while others strained the relationships with his allies, including the EU (Roberts, 2025, p. 20).

On the one hand, Trump's political agenda is characterised by expansionism, including claims about retaking the Panama Canal, making Canada the 51st state and buying Greenland from Denmark. Trump's expansionistic agenda worries a lot of observers, since it threatens to generate an unchallenged hemispheric dominance. Besides, it could encourage Russian and Chinese ambitions of regional dominance and international power competition (Roberts, 2025, pp. 23-24).

On the other hand, Trump also promises to defend America by keeping it out of unnecessary foreign conflicts. Therefore, he left the Iran Nuclear Deal, he withdrew the troops from countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, he secured ceasefire agreements, and he strengthened its defence spending, to rebuild the American military might, modernize the arsenal and create a Space Force (Trump, n.d.).

His withdrawal from international cooperation alliances is expected to generate a decline in the respect of the rule of law and a decline in human rights' protection, reducing the US capacity of influencing democracies in decline, thus causing disruptions (Roberts, 2025, p. 24). Therefore, the EU could be forced to fill the role of promoter of democracy and human rights in the international system.

Sure enough, some elements of Trump's agenda are straining the relationship with the EU. To begin with, Trump uses tariffs as a threat to influence other countries' actions. Besides, he requests higher defence spending from his transatlantic allies and to play a bigger role in the region – conditions that the EU will probably comply with, given the implications of losing the US as ally (Roberts, 2025, pp. 21-22).

When it comes to the Transatlantic Alliance, Trump wants Europe to take greater responsibility for its defence. His goals are detailed in the Project 2025 agenda, a 920-pages long document that underscores in detail the policies that the Conservative Party, led by Donald Trump, wants to implement in different policy sectors. For instance, when it comes to common defence and to the role of the US within the Transatlantic alliance, the document states that Trump wants NATO to transform. Significantly, he wants his allies to increase their conventional forces to deter Russia and wants the US to reduce its presence in Europe. Nonetheless, he also wants his allies to keep relying on the US for its nuclear deterrent (The Heritage Foundation, 2023, p. 94).

The US has always benefited from the alliance with the EU, since its member states are wealthy and technologically advanced. However, the EU should pay its fair share for its security needs, since the US should not be expected to provide a defence umbrella for countries that are not contributing

appropriately to common defence. On the other hand, transatlantic trade is also fundamental for the countries involved, and the US should strengthen its relationship with EU member states, especially those more vulnerable to Russia (The Heritage Foundation, 2023, pp. 187-188).

Finally, Trump promises to end the war in Ukraine, a war which, according to him, should not have started and could have been avoided. Indeed, he is confident that, if he was president at the time, the war would have never started (Trump, 23 January 2025).

Notably, during the Mar-a-Lago Press Conference from January 7, 2025, Donald Trump argued that Ukraine's exclusion from NATO had long been an immutable principle and that President Biden had disrupted the status quo by advocating for Ukraine's eventual membership, a provocation that would place a rival power directly on Russia's border. Moreover, he alleged that a diplomatic agreement had previously been reached, and was acceptable to all the parties involved, but Biden nullified it by insisting on Ukraine's right to join NATO. (Trump, 7 January 2025).

Besides, Trump blamed former US presidents, notably Bush, Obama and Biden, for the annexation of parts of the Ukrainian territory to Russia, presenting himself as the only president who didn't allow any further occupation (Trump, 14 February 2025)

He was convinced he could solve the conflict quickly, since Ukraine was ready to negotiate peace. As a matter of fact, during his campaign he promised he would achieve a ceasefire within the first 100 days of his term, a prediction which, however, did not come true, especially since he wanted Ukraine to leave part of the occupied territory to Russia, and put off Ukraine membership of NATO for another ten years. Besides, the proposal was rejected by Putin as well (Roberts, 2025, pp. 21-22).

Moreover, Trump asserted that the EU hadn't treated the US properly and believed that they should increase not only their defence spending, but the money they were sending to Ukraine as well. He claimed that the US was in for more than Europe by spending $200 billion more than Europe for Ukraine (Trump, 14 February 2025).

Furthermore, since the moment he got into office, Trump promised to secure an historic agreement within NATO, increasing defence spending to 5% of the GDP, which was long thought impossible (White House, n. d.)

Indeed, in an interview held a few weeks before his presidential inauguration he assessed that he would withdraw the United States from NATO, if its allies refused to "*pay their bills*". Indeed, he stated that if a country didn't pay its part, he would not give them protection. Besides, he even encouraged Russia to "*do whatever the hell they want*" to them (Founta et al., 2025, pp. 145-146).

The need for European countries to spend more on their defence has been mentioned by Trump on several occasions. For instance, at the Mar-a-Lago Press Conference he discussed the reasons behind his desire to increase defence spending within NATO, by accusing the EU of taking advantage of the US. He argued that, if it wasn't for him, they would have never raised their defence budget to over $680 billion during his first term. According to Trump, the US should stop giving billions and billions of dollars to Europe, since the EU can afford to pay more for its defence, given its economic size – which is similar to that of the United States (Trump, 7 January 2025).

Trump also claimed that, during his first administration, as soon as he told Europe: *"If you don't pay, we're not going to protect you",* the money started *"pouring in"* (Trump, 7 January 2025).

Trump advocated for raising the defence spending target to 5% of the GDP, a three percentage points increase from the 2% asked during his first term. Besides, he accused the nations failing to pay their fair share to be delinquents, asserting that he would refrain from protecting those who don't fulfil their financial obligations to the Alliance (Trump, 7 January 2025).

Finally, at the World Economic Forum on the 23rd of January 2025, he argued that the restoration of "common sense" in the United States would bring back strength, peace and stability abroad. He thereby announced his intentions to demand that all NATO member states increase their defence spending to 5% of GDP, since the previous 2% benchmark had become inadequate. Furthermore, he reiterated that the allies increased their defence spending during his first term

due to his insistence. Besides, he argued that the US had been unfairly burdened by paying for Europe's security for far too long (Trump, 23 January 2025).

Therefore, he accused the European Union of taking advantage of the United States, by taking US protection for granted. Notably, during a Cabinet Meeting at the White House, held on the 26th of February, Trump harshly stated that the only purpose of the European Union was to take advantage of the US, activity they were very successful at. Nonetheless, he added that now that he is president again, things will change (Trump, 26 February 2025).

On that account, based on these declarations, we can expect a reaction from the European Union, notably from the members of the European Council, the institution responsible for addressing the geopolitical developments and establishing the political priorities of the EU.

We thus predict that Trump's declarations and his requests for higher defence spending in Europe and for higher responsibility in managing the conflicts taking place in Europe will contribute to enhanced defence integration and strategic autonomy at EU level.

3.3. Chronological process-tracing

3.3.1. EU's initial reactions to Trump's re-election

The response of the European Union to the re-election of Donald Trump and his disruptive foreign policy was immediate.

Indeed, during his first speech to the European Parliament plenary session, which took place two days after Donald Trump's return to the White House, the newly nominated president of the European Council, António Costa, discussed Europe's role in the world, highlighting the need to guarantee a strong transatlantic relationship based on deep bonds, shared values and common interests, by strengthening the cooperation with the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States (Costa, 22 January 2025).

However, since the international system is shifting from the bipolarity that had characterised the Cold War toward a new multipolar era, the EU needs to strengthen its relationship with third countries and become a pillar of the international rules-based order, by supporting the principles of the UN Charter

and by remaining committed to international engagements – frameworks that are being constantly undermined by Donald Trump (Costa, 22 January 2025).

Notably, while not directly mentioning Trump and his foreign policy priorities, Costa reiterated that the EU is a project for peace, and as such should assume more responsibility for its own defence and become more strategically autonomous. Indeed, since 2014, the EU had raised its defence spending and strengthened defence cooperation, notably with the implementation of the Strategic Compass in 2022. Besides, 23 member states that are also members of NATO have already dedicated over 2% of their national GDPs to defence (Costa, 22 January 2025). Simultaneously, the European Commission was discussing the adoption of a Defence Industrial Programme to build a "Europe of Defence".

Finally, Costa called for an informal meeting with European leaders, entirely dedicated to defence, aiming at transforming the EU in a stronger transatlantic partner and at better dealing with the Russian aggression of Ukraine (Costa, 22 January 2025).

Therefore, even though Costa didn't define Trump and his foreign policy agenda a threat for European security, he did express the necessity to discuss defence integration right after his re-election, while also highlighting the necessity to establish bilateral and multilateral partnerships with countries and organizations that share the same values of the EU, starting with the UK.

Meanwhile, during a Conference in Davos, the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, responded to Trump's re-election by asking the EU to be pragmatic when dealing with him, and to always uphold the Union's values, interests and principles (von der Leyen, 21 January 2025) – thus adopting a more assertive position.

Moreover, the heads of state and government of the 27 member states also reacted to Trump's victory, some complimenting him, others expressing their concerns and urging the EU to deepen security and defence integration.

Indeed, on the one hand, some members of the European Council reacted positively to Trump's re-election. For instance, the Baltic state of Lithuania responded to Trump's demand to raise defence spending to 5% of GDP, and his threats to refrain from defending members who fall short, by pledging to raise

defence spending to 5-6% of the GDP, starting from 2026. The president Gitanas Nausėda described the decision as historic, stating that the increase underscores the necessity to strengthen defence and deterrence capabilities (Guilbert, 17 January 2025).

Moreover, the prime minister of Greece, Kryriakos Mitsotakis, welcomed Trump's return to the White House. Significantly, during a conversation with Enrico Letta, former Italian prime minister, held at the Hellenic-American Chamber of Commerce event, Mitsotakis addressed the concerns about the transatlantic relationship by guaranteeing that Greece's relationship with the United States had always been strong and had grown stronger in the last five years. He was thereby convinced that the election of Trump would not change that. As a matter of fact, Mitsotakis shares Trump's opinion that Europe should spend more for its defence and thinks that the threshold should grow higher than 2% of GDP – although believing it should be less than 5%. Besides, Greece was already dedicating 3% of the GDP to defence.

Mitsotakis believes that the EU should increase its fiscal flexibility regarding defence, especially since the EU is dealing with a conflict so close to its borders (Mitsotakis, 21 January 2025).

Other EU leaders decided to be cautious when responding to Trump's re-election.

For instance, addressing Trump's return to power at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Olaf Scholz – then serving as German Chancellor – urged the EU to remain calm, cautioning that: "*Not every press conference in Washington, not every Tweet, needs to plunge us headfirst into agitated existential debate*." Indeed, he asserted that the US remain Germany's most important ally outside Europe – crucial for both regional security and economic development. Scholz emphasised that it would be of utmost importance for Germany to keep a close relationship with Trump. However, he simultaneously advocated for unity among Europeans, assessing that Europeans must be strong and must stand together to build resilience and competitiveness. To this end, he called for the establishment of an integrated European arms industry to replace the current fragmented system of national defence industries (Scholz, 21 January 2025).

Similarly to Scholz, the Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, reacted to Trump's re-election with caution. Notably, despite being directly criticised by Trump for spending less than 2% – more precisely 1.28% of the GDP – on defence, Sánchez did not raise its defence spending, at least not immediately. Indeed, he countered Trump's criticism by assessing that Spain is a reliable partner in defence, even without reaching the 2014 NATO target – thereby citing the 70% defence spending increase over the last decade (Reuters, 22 January 2025).

Nevertheless, most European leaders expressed concerns about Trump's re-election for its implications on Europe's security – thereby urging the EU to increase defence spending.

Denmark emerged as one of the most vocal opponents. Tensions sparked over the territory of Greenland, a semi-autonomous Danish territory, which is home to a large US military base. Trump voiced his desire to buy or occupy the territory for national security reasons, exactly like the Panama Canal. In response, the Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen decided to boost its military presence in the Arctic and North Atlantic region and sought unity with other European allies, notably France and Germany, by reiterating the inviolability of borders as a fundamental principle of international law, that every country should defend (Paternoster, 28 January 2025).

Other leaders expressed the need for Europe to increase defence spending. In fact, in an interview at the end of 2024, right after the Trump's victory, the prime minister of Finland, Petteri Orpo, advocated the necessity for Europe to take more responsibility for its own defence (Krychkovska, 12 December 2024).

Moreover, the French President Emmanuel Macron, at the Conference of ambassadors at the beginning of 2025, called for higher defence spending and enhanced strategic autonomy. He stated that the EU should not depend on the industrial and technological assets of the United States for its defence, and that the Europeans should strengthen their capabilities, and have more ambition. Indeed, although France is part of NATO – which addresses the security threats in the Euro-Atlantic area – Macron advocates for a stronger Union and calls for a massive programme of investments (Macron, 6 January 2025).

Macron described Trump's presidency as a challenge for Europe and called for action to consolidate a united, strong and sovereign Europe, committed to the transatlantic alliance, but also capable of asserting its values, interests and instruments (BFMTV, 22 January 2025). Moreover, on the 22nd of January, two days after Trump's presidential inauguration, Macron reiterated his desire to invest more in European defence, from armaments to space, to become more independent from the US (Brossault, 22 January 2025).

Macron was not the sole leader expressing grave concerns about Trump. Significantly, the prime minister of Poland, Donald Tusk, responded to his victory by calling for a major boost in European defence spending, to ensure that the continent will be able to defend itself against its adversaries, without needing to rely on the US. Therefore, in a speech before the European Parliament, Tusk asserted that Europe must arm itself if it wants to survive. He claimed that, while Poland is a nation that seeks to avoid the repetition of any war, it is also a country that recognises that, in order to avoid the tragic repetition of history, Europe must be strong, armed and determined (Liboreiro, 22 January 2025).

Besides, Europe needs to support Ukraine as well. Therefore, Tusk urged his European allies to address security and to finance military expenditures, even if it means issuing EU-wide debt.

Furthermore, during his presidential campaign, Trump said that he would encourage Russia to "*do whatever the hell they want*" against NATO members paying less than 2% of their GDP for defence. Tusk responded by pushing Europe to do more. Indeed, he asked the EU to stop asking the US what they can do for Europe's security and instead ask itself what Europe can do for its own security (Liboreiro, 22 January 2025). Although nobody in Europe wants a war, according to Tusk, the EU should know that, to avoid it, it must become stronger, by enhancing its military capabilities. For this reason, he expressed support for the 5% target wanted by Trump (ANSA, 22 January 2025).

When Donald Trump was elected, the prime minister of Belgium was Alexander De Croo, who advocated for a more assertive European response to Trump's policies (The Brussels Times, 21 January 2025). De Croo had already addressed the implications of Trump's re-election on European security shortly

after he won the elections in November, by asserting that Europe could no longer outsource its security to the United States (The Brussels Times, 7 November 2024). Furthermore, the Dutch prime minister, Dick Schoof, asserted that Europe needs to stand up to Trump (Dutch News, 24 January 2025) and the Czech prime minister, Petr Fiala, stated that the shift of the United States' focus away from Europe should not be a surprise, and that the EU should now aim at building a strong Europe (Reuters, 24 February 2025).

Therefore, most members of the European Council responded to Trump's return to the Oval Office by asking for more defence spending and defence integration at EU level, in order to make Europe more strategically autonomous and less dependent on the United States or NATO for its security.

As a result, the President of the European Council, Costa, called for an informal meeting entirely dedicated to defence, which was held on the 3rd of February with the participation of the Secretary General of NATO, Mark Rutte, and the Prime Minister of UK, Keir Starmer (Costa, 3 February 2025a).

The meeting addressed the critical gaps in security and defence, hence air and missile defence, missiles and ammunition, military mobility and strategic enablers. The European Council agreed on strengthening the European defence industry, on producing more capabilities and faster, and on increasing their defence spending, as they were already doing since 2021[2].

At the same time, the European members of NATO agreed to focus on reaching the 2% defence target agreed upon in 2014, and the Commission agreed to work on ensuring more national flexibilities and allow more national spending, while also mobilizing private and public investments (Costa, 3 February 2025b).

In the February meeting, the European Council discussed the partnership with NATO, which is key to ensure transatlantic security. In his remarks, António Costa addressed the tensions arisen within the Transatlantic Alliance, following the re-election of Donald Trump. Notably, he presented the United States as a

[2] The defence expenditure of the European Union has risen by 30% between 2021 and 2024.

partner and ally, and the Transatlantic Alliance as a relationship with deep roots that must endure this time of uncertainty. Therefore, the EU should address every problem and difference of view and find long-lasting solutions. Nevertheless, the EU must continue to defend its values and principles and should never compromise on its interests. Therefore, the EU must continue to cooperate with NATO, while also enhancing its role within the Alliance, by spending more on defence and by strengthening its capabilities (Costa, 3 February 2025b).

Besides, after the summit, António Costa said in an interview that, even though the EU has already done a lot in defence policy, it needs to do more, and to do it better, stronger, faster, and together (Reuters, 3 February 2025). Moreover, Ursula von der Leyen told the reporters that the EU needs a surge in defence, and it needs to strengthen its defence industrial base (Reuters, 3 February 2025).

In a nutshell, the European Council recognised the importance of the Transatlantic Alliance. Yet, it also identified the capability gaps of the EU and agreed to address them and build a stronger Europe.

Most member states responded to the decisions taken at the February summit by committing to increase their defence spending and to work together on a European Union defence. For instance, the Danish PM Frederiksen told a reporter at the summit meeting in Brussels that, since the US put tough terms on Europe, now Europe needs to develop a collective and robust response (Cook, 3 February 2025). Significantly, Denmark is now paying to improve its surveillance and sovereignty capabilities in Greenland, thus raising its defence spending. Mette Frederiksen asserted that reducing defence spending over the last decades had been a mistake and announced a €6.7 billion surge in defence spending over the next two years. Raising defence spending was seen as the right response to the Russian threat as well.

Indeed, Denmark plans to spend 3% of its GDP on defence (Sullivan, 19 February 2025), urging the Danish Chief of Defence to buy and buy fast.

Moreover, the Slovenian Prime Minister, Robert Golob, attended the informal meeting and issued a statement, saying that "*the only possible response is a unified one from the European Union, and Slovenia will* […] *support joint*

solutions." (Republic of Slovenia, 3 February 2025). Slovenia is thus committed to achieving the 2% target by 2030 and considers increasing defence spending even more. Golob is also committed to military projects financed by the EIB, although he believes that the EIB was established for other purposes and should primarily focus on the development of infrastructures and on competitiveness. However, Golob won't oppose unified solutions. Slovenia believes that the future of the defence industry is based on advanced technology, from space to cybersecurity (Republic of Slovenia, 3 February 2025).

The prime minister of Croatia, Plenković, while recognising the importance of the US in Europe, he also assessed that the European Union should enhance its strategic autonomy and prioritise its defence. Therefore, he decided to allocate 2% of the GDP to defence and 30% of that budget to modernising the equipment – moving from Eastern to Western technology (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 3 February 2025).

Moreover, while the Greek PM Mitsotakis continues to affirm the importance of the Transatlantic alliance and the relationship with the US, he urged Europe to take greater responsibility in its geopolitical affairs and increase its strategic autonomy in defence. Therefore, he advocated for more flexibility within the European fiscal rule, arguing that the member states should be allowed to spend over 2% of their GDP on defence without incurring in penalties (Greek City Times, 3 February 2025).

The President of Lithuania, who responded to Trump's election by immediately calling for more defence spending at national level, underscored the necessity to establish EU-level defence financing instruments. Notably, he urged the EU to decide as soon as possible and not wait until the next multi-annual financial perspective in 2028. Indeed, Nausėda supports common borrowing for defence and a more flexible approach to deficits when borrowing for national defence (The Baltic Times, 3 February 2025). Notably, Lithuania backs Trump's criticism of NATO and of the allies' free riding and urged Europe to contribute *"at least twice as much as it does now.*" (Anadolu Agency, 21 February 2025). However, Nausėda also recognises that the EU cannot contain Russia and defend itself without the US. Therefore, he pressured the EU to increase its imports of

US weapons and liquefied natural gas, and to acquire US defence equipment (Euromaidan Press, 3 February 2025).

Similarly to Lithuania, Estonia shares its border with Russia and feels directly threatened by its aggressive and expansionary politics towards Ukraine. Therefore, for Estonia, the United States remain a fundamental ally, necessary to guarantee security and protection against Russia. As a result, the Estonian prime minister, Kristen Michal, urged the EU to strengthen its defence capabilities and put pressure on Russia, in order to guarantee American support (Euractiv, 3 February 2025).

Furthermore, the victory of Donald Trump was so disruptive to Europe's security, that it convinced neutral countries to do more for their defence as well.

For instance, Austria, is a neutral non-NATO member. Nonetheless, the former Chancellor, Alexander Schallenberg, expressed support for increasing defence spending at EU level and supported pooling and sharing, which could be mutually advantageous, even for neutral countries (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 3 February 2025).

Similarly to Austria, Ireland is a neutral country. Its Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, stated at the meeting held in Brussels in February that Ireland is and will remain militarily neutral. Nevertheless, its policy of military neutrality does not remove it from the new types of security threats, nor compromise its helping to create a more secure EU. Indeed, Martin expressed his intention to invest and modernise the national Defence Forces. (Department of the Taoiseach, 3 February 2025). Therefore, Ireland decided to get serious about defence amid the rapidly growing apprehension about Trump’s attitude towards European security. The Taoiseach signalled his determination to be active and effective in working with his partners in Europe, assessing that defence, military and security capability are issues that Europe can no longer shy away from (The Irish Times, 7 February 2025).

After the summit, the German Chancellor Scholz became more assertive in his response to Trump’s criticism of Europe for not meeting NATO’s targets, and to his threat to withdraw from the alliance unless the other members raise their defence spending to 5% of the GDP. Significantly, Scholz asked Europe to unite

efforts to develop new weapon systems, secure borders and coordinate the procurement of armaments and military equipment, – by working on an integrated European defence industry, instead of competing national industries. The goal is to make the EU strong on its own, while also becoming an indispensable partner to NATO (Anadolu Agency, 5 February 2025).

Finally, after participating to an informal meeting held by Macron in Paris – which brough together the presidents of the European Council and of the Commission, the leaders of Germany, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark, the United Kingdom and the NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte – the Polish prime minister Donald Tusk argued that there was a broad support for raising the defence budgets among the participating countries. However, he acknowledged the need for a close collaboration with the US, without which security in Europe would be impossible. A close collaboration with the US would also be fundamental to guarantee military support and to achieve a long-lasting peace in Ukraine. Tusk was confident that the following Europe Council meeting, scheduled for March, would generate a plan for using and implementing EU defence funds (Polskie Radio, 18 February 2025).

Nevertheless, not every member state immediately agreed to increase EU defence integration. Indeed, when Donald Trump won the elections and became the new president of the United States, Klaus Iohannis was the president of Romania. He supported the decision to raise defence spending – saying that Romania was setting a good example, devoting 2.5% of the GDP to defence. According to him, defence industries in the EU should work together more and adopt standardization, to avoid the development of dozens of types of weapons (AGERPRES, 3 February 2025). However, Klaus Iohannis rejected the idea of building a separate European defence, parallel to NATO (AGERPRES, 3 February 2025).

Nonetheless, the new geopolitical landscape convinced most countries, even those that had recently cut defence spending, to rush rearmament (Sullivan, 19 February 2025).

Notwithstanding, while agreeing on doing more for defence, the European Council didn’t discuss how to concretely finance defence.

The renewed efforts in defence were fuelled by the uncertainty surrounding the commitment of the US to NATO security and by his constant requests to increase defence spending to prepare for a potential Russian attack. Trump wants Europe to take more responsibility for its security, since the US is now more focused on China than Europe (Strupczewski, 14 February 2025).

Thereafter, at the Munich Security Conference, held on the 15th of February 2025, President Costa reiterated the need for Europe to act better and faster to build a Europe of Defence (Costa, 15 February 2025). At the same Conference, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen expressed her support for a stronger Europe, necessary to guarantee security and defence in Ukraine and in the whole European continent. However, she argued that a stronger Europe should cooperate with the United States to deter threats like Russia. Indeed, "*a failed Ukraine would weaken Europe, but it would also weaken the United States*". Besides, Europe and the US are committed to "*peace through strength*" and, by working together, they can deliver it in Ukraine. Therefore, the EU decided to allocate €134 billion of financial and military support for Ukraine, while also promising to work on its future EU accession.

According to von der Leyen, the EU should increase its defence spending to above 3% of the GDP and increase investments by activating the national escape clause for defence investments in a controlled and conditional way, notably when facing a crisis (von der Leyen, 18 February 2025).

Nonetheless, the sudden increase in defence spending should also meet NATO requirement. Indeed, the announcement came amid the panic caused by Trump's foreign policy shift (Bryant, 19 February 2025), alongside his appeal on Europe to spend more on its defence. Indeed, Trump assessed that it should be Europe to guarantee European security, not the US. Moreover, his position and conflictual relationship with Zelensky, whom he called a "dictator", also contributed to generating tensions in the relationship and convinced European leaders to do more for their and Ukraine's defence (Sullivan, 19 February 2025).

3.3.2. EU's rearmament plan

From the moment Trump got into office in January 2025, most European countries expressed their concerns about the implications his mandate would have on the Transatlantic Alliance, and on security in Europe. Therefore, the President of the European Council called a summit at the beginning of February to discuss defence. The summit revealed an overall positive response to the idea of increasing defence spending and improving Europe's defence capabilities. Nonetheless, some member states, while supporting defence integration, wanted to ensure that it wouldn't undermine the relationship with the United States and with NATO, fundamental for European security – significantly for the countries more exposed to the security threats.

However, while discussing the intention to improve European defence, the summit didn't introduce new policies or investment mechanisms to concretise those expectations. Therefore, on the 26th of February 2025, the President of the European Council, António Costa, invited the leaders to a Special Council, to be held on March the 6th, to discuss the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 Plan, a set of strategies and financial mechanisms to improve Europe's defence (Costa, 26 February 2025).

Several member states issued statements about their expectations for the March summit. Most of them endorsed the rearmament of Europe, while also asserting that the EU should to its utmost to continue cooperating with the US, which remains the main security provider in Europe.

For instance, during the preparation of the summit, the former Austrian chancellor, Alexander Schallenberg, acknowledged the importance of increasing defence integration, while also recognising the importance of maintaining a strong cooperation with the US. Schallenberg argued that Trump cannot solve every crisis alone. Indeed, the US needs Europe as much as Europe needs the US, meaning that they should continue cooperating. Nonetheless, he assessed that the EU should take a clearer and more confident stance (Salzburger Nachrichten, 2 March 2025).

Moreover, at the press conference held the day before the summit, Macron expressed his opinions and expectations about the role played by the United States in Europe's defence and what to do to help Ukraine. Significantly, he assessed that, while wanting to believe that the Unites States would stand by Europe's side, the Union needs to prepare itself for the eventuality that it doesn't. Therefore, to him, the European nations need to prepare to defend themselves and to deter any aggression. They need to be better equipped, improve their defence posture for the sake of peace and for the purpose of deterrence. In that regard, they should remain committed to NATO and to their partnership with the US, but they must improve their independence in security and defence, because the future of Europe cannot be decided by Washington or Moscow. Therefore, Macron looked forward to the March summit, seeing it as the opportunity to finally adopt the policies that France had been suggesting for eight years to ultimately build a "Europe of Defence". To Macron, the EU should allow the member states to raise their military spendings without adding to their deficit, by deciding on large-scale joint funding for the purchase and production of ammunition, tanks, weapons and some of the most innovative equipment that exists. Besides, he asked his administration to make sure that Europe's rearmament would strengthen French military and accelerate the reindustrialization of every region in France.

Macron wants the European countries to be better able to defend and protect themselves, to work together to produce the equipment they need in their own countries, and to cooperate more and reduce their dependence on the rest of the world. Besides, Germany, Poland, Denmark, the Baltic states and many other member states also announced their plans for unprecedented military spending (Macron, 5 March 2025). Finally, President Macron expressed his openness to extend the use of its nuclear deterrence to protect his European allies (Macron, 5 March 2025).

The prime minister of Luxembourg, Frieden, also expressed his concerns about the uncertain role of the US in Europe and its implications for Ukraine. Notably, he asserted, in a national speech, that the United States are no longer on the same path as Europe, not since the 20th of January. Indeed, the US

commitment to defending Ukraine and ensuring that it can negotiate peace from a position of strength seems now less certain. In light of this, Europe must assume greater responsibility. Nonetheless, this doesn't represent a stance against the US, but rather a commitment to Europe. Notably, Frieden wants Luxembourg to stop depending on a single country and develop a strong industrial base. In this regard, he expressed support for the upcoming ReArm Europe plan, while also expressing the necessity to cooperate closely with like-minded partners, such as the UK, Norway and Canada. He reiterated full support for Ukraine, for a just and lasting peace, and guaranteed that the United States will remain an ally, even in challenging times, and that he will continue cooperating within NATO (Frieden, 4 March 2025).

Furthermore, the new prime minister of Belgium, Bart De Wever, who got into office on the 3rd of February 2025, called Trump a real bully ahead of the summit. Yet, he asserted that he won't cut decades-long treaties and ties with the US, which remains Belgium's most important ally within NATO (Clapson, 6 March 2025).

De Wever supported the idea of sending troops to Ukraine, but advocated for caution, arguing that there should be a peace agreement first, with sufficient security guarantees. Besides, he recognised that without American aid, deploying troops would hardly seem realistic (Clapson, 6 March 2025).

Another leader expressing support for EU defence integration is the prime minister of the Czech Republic, Petr Fiala, who urged a boost in military aid to Ukraine, and expressed support for the rearmament of Europe. Nonetheless, the decision wasn't driven, at least initially, by Trump's foreign policy, but was rather seen as an opportunity to guarantee a lasting peace in the continent and to stop Russia from expanding. Therefore, he called for an increase of at least three percent of the GDP (Radio Prague International, 3 March 2025).

Moreover, the Latvian prime minister, while supporting EU defence integration, he urged transatlantic cooperation as well – which should remain central for security in Europe – and promoted diplomatic relations between Ukraine and the United States, believing that the presence of the US would be important for both Ukraine and Europe (LSM, 2 March 2025). Indeed, sharing

borders with Russia, the country feels directly threatened by the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Therefore, when Trump announced the suspension of military aid to Ukraine, Latvia interpreted it as a reminder that Europe needs to invest more in defence and in aid towards Ukraine. As a result, it expressed support for the rearmament plan (LSM, 4 March 2025).

Moving on to the neutral states, the newly elected Austrian chancellor, Christian Stocker, kept similar positions to his predecessor, believing that Europe and the US could still benefit from good transatlantic relations. Besides, he expressed his intention to spend 2% of the national GDP in defence "on neutral ground", and to invest in his national armed forces, since Austria is part of the EU and part of security in Europe (ORF.at., 6 March 2025). Furthermore, the Taoiseach of the Republic of Ireland, Micheál Martin, called for caution regarding the relationship with the US, stressing that the EU needs to act as one, but should also avoid moving prematurely and rather see what happens, assess it, measure it, calibrate the impacts and then develop a response. Martin assessed that he would not stand in the way of other EU member states, if they want to facilitate greater defence spending to respond to Trump administration and to the Russian threat. Martin did not rule out the idea of the EU taking common debt to finance defence spending, stating that he is open to the proposals that will emerge, although he believes that it is some distance down the road for Ireland. Yet, he also recognised that Europe cannot continue like this and needs to improve its capabilities to be able to defend itself (The Irish Times, 3 March 2025).

Meanwhile, the Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni called for Western unity among EU, NATO and US, which share the same goals, notably when it comes to securing a lasting and just peace in Ukraine. Indeed, according to her, division in the West would be "*fatal for everyone*" (Fouda, 3 March 2025). However, Meloni, while favouring rearmament, opposes the idea of a European defence, separated from NATO and the US, and rather advocates for the development of a European pillar within NATO.

These positions were discussed during the special summit at the beginning of March.

At the summit, the European Council leaders agreed that, to enhance the security of Europe, the EU must reinforce its defence readiness, reduce its strategic dependencies, address its capability gaps and strengthen its technological and industrial base. Therefore, the European Council welcomed the activation of the national escape clause under the Stability and Growth Pact, while also asking the Commission to propose new funding sources, hence a new EU instrument to issue loans to the member states, backed by EU budget of up to €150 billion. Finally, the European Council welcomed the support from the European Investment Bank Group for lending to the defence industry, while also stressing the necessity to attract private financing (European Council, 6 March 2025).

These financing instruments must be used to address the capability gaps that have been highlighted by the conflict in Ukraine and must be in coherence with NATO. The gaps are in air and missile defence; artillery systems, including deep precision strike capabilities; missiles and ammunition; drones and anti-drone systems; strategic enablers, including the ones related to space and critical infrastructure protection; military mobility; cyber; artificial intelligence and electronic warfare (European Council, 6 March 2025).

The European Council invited the participation of small and medium enterprises as well and invited the co-legislators to conclude the negotiations on a European Defence Industry Programme, to support research and innovation.

At the summit, the EU agreed on important decisions to increase the EU strategic autonomy and reduce reliance on the US and on NATO. Nonetheless, the leaders agreed that, while working on a better defence, they should also cooperate with the United States, regardless of who the president is. Indeed, the European Council recalled that a stronger EU in security and defence would be complementary to a stronger NATO, which remains the foundation of collective defence. Finally, the European Council invited the member states to coordinate ahead of the NATO summit scheduled for June (European Council, 6 March 2025).

This summit set the basis for the Readiness 2030 plan, which includes different policies and financing mechanisms to improve EU defence. Besides,

the leaders agreed on providing €30.6 billion to Ukraine under the Ukraine Facility. Finally, Macron presented a Franco-British proposal concerning Ukraine, to achieve a truce that can be monitored and verified, and to discuss the conditions for a just and lasting peace (Macron, 6 March 2025).

At the press conference following the summit, Macron reiterated that, since the United States's priorities are not necessarily centred in Europe, the EU should stop delegating its security to them and invest more, produce more and develop its defence capabilities. The necessity for a stronger Europe exists regardless of who sits in the White House, given the other existing threats, such as terrorism and Russian imperialism. Besides, a stronger Europe makes for a stronger NATO. Therefore, Macron pushed all the member states to strengthen their defence capabilities (Macron, 6 March 2025; Rioux, 15 March 2025).

The Spanish prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, also expressed his support for the ReArm Europe plan, showing desire to increase defence spending and EU level integration, along with the necessity to support Ukraine. Indeed, the prime minister, who had initially expressed opposition towards a massive rearmament for the repercussions it would have on the social welfare, ended up adopting a military support package from €1 billion. To him, increasing defence spending became not only necessary to face Russia, but to respond to other threats as well. Besides, it would enhance the strategic autonomy of the country (Office of the Prime Minister of Spain, 6 March 2025). Therefore, Pedro Sáchez pushed back against Trump's criticism of Spain's defence commitments by simultaneously supporting EU-level defence integration, while however advocating for a more moderate defence spending, especially within NATO. Besides, he expressed support for the "ReArm Europe" defence plan, since the arm race would provide an opportunity to reindustrialise Spain and the rest of the continent, thereby generating economic growth (Iniguez De Onzono & Fisayo-Bambi, 13 March 2025).

Similarly to Sáchez, the Portuguese prime minister, Luís Montenegro, sees EU defence investment and defence integration as a window of opportunity as well, improving the industrial capacity and creating new jobs and business opportunities. He pointed out that Portugal had already made a major effort, in

line with both EU and NATO commitments, along with bilateral commitments in support of Ukraine. The decision to invest more in defence, especially following Trump's pressure on NATO allies, was a response to a demanding and unpredictable security environment. Montenegro believes that the development of the defence industry and the investments should be coordinated across EU member states, to align capabilities and expectations. Therefore, he fosters intra-member procurement for defence investment and buying military equipment from other member states (Rodrigues, 6 March 2025).

Portugal has historically been relatively neutral, even within NATO. Yet, the new government decided to respond to the call for rearmament, welcoming the ReArm Europe plan (Rodrigues, 6 March 2025).

The President of Cyprus, Christodoulides, though he doesn't oppose NATO or Trump, he believes that the EU should achieve its strategic autonomy and that the investments in the defence sector should primarily help the defence industry and create new jobs. Furthermore, he believes that the EU should always respect the basic principles of cooperation: autonomy in decision-making, respect for the specificities of each organisation, non-exclusion and transparency (Cyprus Business News, 7 March 2025).

On the other hand, the prime minister of Malta, Robert Abela, opposed, at first, the rise in defence spending within the EU. Indeed, he insisted that Malta would not fight anyone's war (Malta Today, 3 February 2025) and, during the meeting held in Brussels by the members of the European Council, he reiterated that Malta is a neutral state, who believes that the solution to war doesn't rest on buying weapons, but on dialogue instead. Besides, according to Abela, every country should be free to decide where to spend for defence and the EU should not exclude Malta only because it doesn't want to invest in lethal weapons, but rather on cyber security and critical infrastructure. Abela believes it is necessary to build a stronger and sovereign Europe, one that protects its security, while remaining a force for peace. Nonetheless, it need to do it with responsibility, inclusively and respecting the values and the realities of each member state. Moreover, he argued that, while it is important to respond to the war in Ukraine, the EU should also consider the security of other borders (Government of Malta,

7 March 2025). Finally, while supporting EU strategic autonomy in security and defence, PM Abela assessed that it would be a mistake for Europe to distance itself from the US, since its interest in Ukraine's minerals would guarantee long-term security in the country and would give security guarantees to the EU as well (The Malta Independent, 8 March 2025).

As the geopolitical situation across the Atlantic deteriorated following the victory of Donald Trump, Europe needs to take security into its own hands. Therefore, Austria decided to give its contribution, despite its neutrality (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 20 March 2025). Indeed, neutrality alone doesn't protect, and the Chancellor Stocker wants Austria to be part of an EU security and defence policy, by exploring all possibilities for its protection, in accordance with the constitution and the neutrality law[3] (Exxpress, 19 March 2025).

Ireland, which is also neutral, decided to get serious about defence as well, amid the rapidly growing apprehension about Trump's attitude towards European security. Consequently, the Taoiseach endorsed the joint procurement of military hardware as outlined in the White Paper on Defence (Irish Examiner, 20 March 2025).

Ultimately, most Central and Eastern Europe expressed support for the rearmament plan but remained adamant on maintaining close relationship with the US, given its fundamental role in Europe's and Ukraine's defence, and to deter Russian expansionism.

Indeed, increasing defence spending and developing Latvia's domestic military production have become the priorities of Siliņa's government. Significantly, under her administration, the government allocated 3.65% of the gross domestic product to the defence sector, which will keep growing up to 5%, to be in line with the target pushed by Donald Trump. Besides, Siliņa declared that it is essential to have consensus on the need to increase investment in defence throughout the European Union. Indeed, Latvia is one of the countries that has been advocating this issue for a long time and is proud of the measures they adopted at the European Council summit, measures allowing Latvia to make

[3] Austria cannot be part of a European army.

large-scale investments in defence and to strengthen security in Europe as a whole. Besides, she voiced the necessity to reduce bureaucratic obstacles to the development of the military industry (LSM, 13 March 2025).

Latvia is one of the leading countries in Europe and NATO when it comes to defence spending and already made systematic weapons purchases. Besides, it is one of the main providers of military support to Ukraine (LSM, 13 March 2025). Therefore, prime minister Evika Siliņa expressed support for the ReArm Europe plan, stating that it is essential that EU resources and national resources are mobilized for a stronger Europe and to support the Union's defence industry. Moreover, the White Paper on Defence was only the first step to achieve 2030 military capability goals, necessary to respond to a potential Russian invasion (ANSA, 20 March 2025).

The prime minister of Bulgaria, Rosen Zhelyazkov, also expressed support for the ReArm Europe plan adopted by the European Union and proposed to use the unabsorbed and unabsorbable funds from the Recovery and Resilience Facility for defence, instead of endangering cohesion funds. According to Zhelyazkov, Bulgaria has a strong military industry, which needs to be modernised and developed to contribute to pan-European security. Nonetheless, it is important to respect NATO standards as well. About Ukraine, the prime minister declared that he would not send military personnel to Ukraine outside the commitments already made within NATO, the EU or other international organizations. Besides, he expressed support for initiatives even if not in the framework of the EU, as long as they guarantee the security of Europe (The Sofia Globe, 6 March 2025). Nevertheless, he argues that all security formats must include the US, since the EU would be weak without its help. Besides, it would take longer to achieve in the EU, what they achieved with the US within NATO. Therefore, he hopes that Trump will remain committed to NATO collective security (Bulgarian News Agency, 15 March 2025).

While most Eastern European countries expressed support for Europe's rearmament and announced their national plans to increase their defence spending, some Western European member states – while supporting Europe rearmament – expressed some concerns about the financing methods. For

instance, the Dutch Prime Minister Dick Schoof supports the broader goal of enhancing European defence capabilities and investments in the European defence industry, especially if it means reducing the dependence on the US and streamlining joint procurement for military equipment, notably to counter Russian aggression (NL Times, 15 March 2025).

As a matter of fact, the Netherlands expressed support for the defence integration process and the rearmament plan presented by the European Commission, but casted doubts about the financial risks and the threats to the economic stability. Initially, three national parties had opposed the participation to the plan, but they ended up agreeing on a conditional involvement, emphasising financial prudence. Indeed, the Netherlands is part of the EU and cannot simply opt out of European defence discussions. However, it will remain vigilant about financial responsibility. Notably, the Netherlands opposes common debt instruments – such as Eurobonds – to finance common defence. Schoof wants the member states to take individual loans, which they will be responsible for. Besides, he advocates for stricter limits on the relaxed budget rules, which should exclusively apply to defence expenditures, without including unrelated spending (NL Times, 15 March 2025).

Similarly to the Netherlands, the Belgian PM De Wever remained cautious regarding the ReArm Europe/ Readiness 2030 Plan and, at first, he leaned towards no. Indeed, while believing that Trump is a bully and that Europe should become more strategically autonomous, he asserted that the plan contains "*no free money*", and he worries about taking out more loans, notably since the EU is currently in deficit for the Covid-19 recovery fund and has no idea how to repay those loans. De Wever argued that the Readiness 2030 plan is an invitation to the Member States to spend more, but no more than that. For countries with a large deficit like Belgium, "*a euro remains a euro*", and making Europe more flexible doesn't eliminate the deficit (The Brussels Times, 19 March 2025). To summarize, he endorsed the plan, although with some reservations.

In a similar vein, the Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán expressed his willingness to contribute funds to the common European defence policy, but opposed joint borrowing from the EU, claiming that the EU should take part in joint defence

efforts and in common defence policy, and contribute financially to collective defence, but under no circumstances should it use joint borrowing (Reuters, 14 March 2025). Therefore, he proposed that every country used its own budget, rather than relying on joint EU borrowing. (Wiedermann, 20 March 2025). Nonetheless, Orbán took a different position towards Ukraine than the other member states. Indeed, he urged the other members of the EU to support Trump's peace talks, instead of continuing to send weapons to Ukraine, which, according to him, would ruin Europe. To him, if now the US quits financing the war, the other 26 member states would have no chance to take the war to an end. Therefore, he refused to support Ukraine at the summit and followed the US conciliatory stance towards Moscow (Brussels Signal, 7 March 2025). Indeed, Orbán represents an outlier among the EU member states, for his position towards Putin and Zelensky and for opposing Ukraine's membership of the EU. Besides, Orbán is one of the strongest supporters of the US president Donald Trump in Europe. Therefore, he responded to Trump's demand for increased European defence spending. At the Brussels Press Conference, he argued that the EU should support Trump, because he is also the key to peace between Russia and Ukraine, a war that had caused devastating economic and moral consequences to Europe (Wiedermann, 20 March 2025).

Finally, while believing that the EU should continue cooperating with the US, the prime minister of Croatia, Plenković, saw the defence package presented by the European Commission, the White Paper on defence and the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 plan, as an opportunity to develop Croatia's defence industry and strengthen its military capabilities, in line with Trump's expectations (Portal.hr, 7 March 2025).

The only two member states opposing the rearmament plan were Italy and Slovakia.

The Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni opposed the ReArm Europe plan and requested the Commission to establish an objective and transparent reporting mechanism for defence expenditure, compatible with NATO. According to Meloni, the mechanism should be linked to positive values, like investments in cybersecurity, infrastructure, research and development. Nonetheless, Italy

supported the German proposal to review the Stability Pact, though it argued that the reform should extend beyond defence to include other European public goods, starting from competitiveness (ANSA, 7 March 2025). Accordingly, Meloni opposed the EU's plan to raise €800 billion for common defence, to counter Russia and Donald Trump's disregard for European security. Indeed, rather than increasing debt, she advocates for incentivizing private investments in defence programmes or direct EU funding. Furthermore, despite her strong support for Ukraine, she opposed the deployment of peacekeepers in Ukraine in the event of a ceasefire (Kington, 20 March 2025).

Moreover, the prime minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico, initially endorsed the ReArm Europe plan at the EU summit held in March. Nonetheless, similarly to Giorgia Meloni, he ended up objecting it, due to the opposition of the Slovakian members of the European Parliament and Fico's governing coalition. Besides, Fico questioned multiple times the necessity to raise defence spending, a move he perceived as a potential pretext for new conflicts (The Slovak Spectator, 23 June 2025).

During her speech to the Danish cadets in Copenhagen, the President of the European Commission – and member of the European Council – Ursula von der Leyen, declared that "*If Europe wants to avoid war, it must get ready for war.*" Significantly, when anticipating the themes of the White Paper on Defence, she assessed that the spread of freedom that had followed the end of the Cold War led Europe to years of underinvestment in defence and to over-complacency, whereas the other countries used that time not only to remobilise, but also to challenge the rules that govern global security.

Therefore, she claimed that the era of the peace dividend was long gone. Indeed, Russia remains the biggest threat for Europe on the horizon, while the oldest partner of the EU, the United States, is refocusing its attention to the Indo-Pacific. In response to these developments, von der Leyen urged Europe to act immediately and form a new international order in the second half of the decade and beyond, to make Europe "*prosperous, free and ready, willing and able to defend itself*", arguing that Europe "*cannot afford to be pushed around by history.*" (EuNews, 18 March 2025).

Therefore, she launched the slogan "Readiness 2030" and asked the member states to increase their defence spending, since EU contributions to security and defence were much lower than the contributions of the United States, Russia or China. Moreover, she reiterated that, while increasing its defence capabilities, the EU should remain fully committed to working with NATO and the United States, while also working on strengthening their cooperation with the UK and other partners in Europe, in the neighbourhood, within the G7, in Canada or in Asia (EuNews, 18 March 2025).

In a nutshell, the Special Council held on the 6th of March underscored the commitment of the EU to a common defence. Indeed, the member states decided to raise defence spending to respond, among other threats, to Trump's unpredictability, as formally mentioned by multiple member states when discussing Europe's rearmament plan. Indeed, despite some conflicting opinions about the financing mechanisms, the summit established the foundation for the White Paper on Defence and the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 Plan, which are described below.

3.3.2.1. The White Paper on Defence

The White Paper on Defence was officially published on the 19th of March. The document identifies what the EU needs in order to build a stronger defence and elaborates a strategy to achieve it and to ensure peace and security in the continent.

While the EU possesses strong foundations and potential, its common defence had been weakened by decades of underinvestment, notably following the end of the Cold War. Nonetheless, the latest geopolitical developments have disrupted the post-Cold War political equilibrium. As a result, the EU needs to assume more responsibility on the international stage to uphold the international rules-based order (European Union, 19 March 2025, p. 2).

Historically, the EU has cooperated with NATO to address international threats, but it can no longer rely on it to confront the new threats, such as the growing influence of China and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. This urgency has been further heightened by the re-election of Donald Trump, who

reoriented the focus of the United States away from Europe and towards other regions. Consequently, the White Paper notes that the United States views itself as "*over-committed in Europe*" and wants to rebalance its historical role as Europe's main security provider. Therefore, the member states should invest more in defence and act in solidarity, by rearming and developing their military capabilities to deter armed aggressions and create a resilient defence industrial base. To this end, the EU needs massive investments over a sustained period, and the White Paper provides a framework for the ReArm Europe Plan, with concrete options to stock military equipment in the short term and projects to address gaps in different capability areas in the medium-long term (European Union, 19 March 2025, pp. 2-4).

There are different security threats that the EU must deal with, including terrorism, extremism and hybrid attacks, although currently the most pressing one is the war in Ukraine (European Union, 19 March 2025, p. 5).

Under the Readiness 2030 Plan, the member states remain responsible for their own troops, while the EU fosters the conditions necessary to frontload investments with predictability and reduces red-tape. This is achieved by facilitating collaboration, efficiency, interchangeability and interoperability; by supporting dual-use infrastructure for mobility, communications, navigation and observation, and by enabling partnerships (European Union, 19 March 2025, p. 6).

The EU helps the member states to identify priorities and EU-level capabilities' shortfalls. Besides, it supports new capability projects, the aggregation of demand – by undertaking joint procurement on behalf of the member states – and enhances cooperation through PESCO. The identified priorities are air and missile defence, artillery systems, ammunition and missiles, drones and counter-drone systems, military mobility, AI, quantum, cyber and electronic warfare, strategic enablers and critical infrastructure protection (European Union, 19 March 2025, p. 7). The EU can close the capability gaps by using collaborative formats, such as a "lead nation" framework, the European Defence Agency (EDA), the NATO Support and Procurement Agency, or the Organisation for joint armaments cooperation (OCCAR).

To address the red tape impeding military mobility, the EU must simplify the regulations and procedures for the access of armed forces to transport facilities and identify immediate and future energy supply bottlenecks with partners, like NATO (European Union, 19 March 2025, p. 8).

Furthermore, the EU plans to build an Eastern Border Shield and thus strengthen the border with Russia and Belarus against military and hybrid threats. It also plans to simplify regulations and procedures specific to the defence sector, which would improve the efficiency of the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) (European Union, 19 March 2025, pp. 9-10).

Finally, the "Porcupine Strategy" aims at enhancing Ukraine's security and defence capacity, through the provision of artillery ammunition, air defence systems, drones, training and equipment support, support to Ukraine's defence industry, enhanced access to space assets and services (European Union, 19 March 2025, pp. 10-11).

One prerequisite for defence readiness is a well-functioning European defence industrial sector, and the EU should build it by: a) supporting, reinforcing and promoting industrial capacities across the EU – supporting joint procurement on large scale and across years through EU instruments; b) securing the supply of critical industry inputs and reducing dependencies; c) building a true EU-wide Market for Defence equipment – a comprehensive security of supply regime; d) simplifying existing rules and cutting red tape; e) boosting research and development to foster innovation; and f) keeping, attracting and developing talent, enhancing skills and expertise (European Union, 19 March 2025, p. 12-14). Besides, the EU should foster innovation, using drone technology and artificial intelligence, and by collaborating with innovative civilian startups and R&I[4]. Furthermore, the SMEs should play a pivotal role as providers of disruptive technologies and innovation; and the evolution of

[4] The EU introduced the European Armament Technological Roadmap and the TechEU Scale-Up Fund to invest in dual-use technologies (European Union, 19 March 2025, p. 14)

technologies should create job opportunities and strengthen the competitiveness of the EU (European Union, 19 March 2025, pp. 14-15).

The ReArm Europe Plan identified five pillars to urgently increase defence spending. To begin with, the Commission proposed the creation of the Security Action for Europe Regulation – to adopt under the Article 122 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union – providing the member states loans of up to €150 billion, backed by the EU budget. Moreover, it proposed the activation of the National escape clause within the Stability and Growth Pact to unlock additional expenditures, of up to 1.5% of the GDP – with these two mechanisms the defence investment could reach €800 billion over the next four years (European Union, 19 March 2025, p. 16). Furthermore, the EU plans to use cohesion policies to contribute to defence capabilities, and the European Investment Bank (EIB) plans to widen the scope of defence-related funding, by replacing the ad-hoc Strategic European Security Initiative with a public policy that will contribute to Europe's peace and security through a bigger financial and capital allocation. However, public investment is not enough, and small and medium enterprises should gain a better access to capital, and the Savings and Investment Union should channel additional private investment. Finally, the Commission promises to find additional funding sources for EU level defence (European Union, 19 March 2025, p. 17)

Nevertheless, most security challenges require international cooperation. To this end, the EU allows the participation of like-minded third countries in defence projects – notably PESCO projects.

NATO remains crucial – even though the US demands for the Union to take more responsibility in its own defence. Nonetheless, the EU believes that they should keep their bilateral dialogue and supply chain. Furthermore, while valuing the relationship with the United States, the EU should still improve its cooperation with other like-minded allies, such as the United Kingdom, Norway, and Canada (European Union, 19 March 2025, pp. 18-19).

The White Paper invites the member states to request the activation of the national escape clause by the end of April and the Council to adopt the SAFE Regulation with urgency. Besides, it urges the co-legislators to adopt a European

Defence Industry Programme and modify the European Regional Development Fund. The member states are invited to increase their collaborative defence procurement of at least 40%, as proposed by the European Defence Industry Strategy, and to agree on a new military support initiative for Ukraine. The Commission and the European Investment Bank should increase their support to the European defence industry, and the Commission should present a Defence Omnibus Simplification proposal. Finally, the EU should propose a European Armament Technological Roadmap on investment for dual-use advanced technological capabilities and should adopt a Joint Communication on Military Mobility (European Union, 19 March 2025, pp. 20-21).

The day after the publication of the White Paper on the Future of European Defence, the European Council held a summit focused on three topics: competitiveness, migration, security and defence. Notably, following the conclusion of the summit held on the 6th of March, and in light of the publishment of the White Paper, the European Council called again for an acceleration to the integration process to ramp up Europe's defence readiness within the next five years. Besides, it invited the co-legislators and the Council to work together on the Commission proposals and for the implementation of the actions identified in the conclusions of the summit held on the 6th of March (European Council, 20 March 2025).

Moreover, the European Council reiterated that a stronger Europe is complementary to a stronger NATO, which remains the foundation of collective defence for its member countries. Besides, these policies do not prejudice the security and defence interests of the single member states (European Council, 20 March 2025).

Finally, on the 21st of March, António Costa and Ursula von der Leyen held an online meeting with the leaders of Iceland, Norway, Türkiye and the United Kingdom. Costa and von der Leyen debriefed them on the European Council meeting that took place the day before. They discussed the EU support for Ukraine and assessed that peace shouldn't reward the aggressor. Therefore, the pressure on Russia should be increased. Besides, they commented the initiative led by France and the UK to form a Coalition of Willing to define the support

for Ukraine and the security guarantees that the Europe can provide (European Council, 21 March 2025). Besides, at the meeting, Costa and von der Leyen asked their like-minded allies to provide up to 35% of defence products to the EU, or, in alternative, to sign a Security & Partnership Agreement if they want to provide more than 35% (European Council, 21 March 2025).

3.3.2.2. ReArm Europe/ Readiness 2030 Plan

In March 2025, the European Commission presented the ReArm Europe/ Readiness 2030 plan, a package of financial tools to implement the goals outlined in the White Paper on Defence.

The ReArm Europe Plan proposes to leverage over €800 billion in defence spending through the activation of the national escape clause and the adoption of a €150 billion instrument for joint procurement, called the Security Action for Europe (SAFE). Furthermore, the plan seeks to gain the support of the European Investment Bank, the redirection of cohesion funds, and the mobilisation of private capital through the Savings and Investments Union (European Parliament, EPRS, April 2025, p. 1).

Experts caution that the plan must be followed by practical measures, it must pool procurement, prioritise Europe-made equipment, and build an integrated defence industrial base (European Parliament, EPRS, April 2025, p. 1) – more independent from third countries, notably the US.

Notably, defence became one of the main priorities of the 2024-2029 Commission, and the White Paper on Defence became one of the pillars of EU defence (European Parliament, EPRS, April 2025, p. 2)

The defence package known as ReArm Europe Plan/ Readiness 2030 addresses the "era of rearmament" of the EU, both to support Ukraine and to ensure long-term security.

The plan is structured in five pillars:

- **Security Action for Europe.**

The Security Action for Europe (SAFE) is a new financial instrument that will raise up to €150 billion in capital markets to accelerate defence investments.

The member states can access the funds through long-term loans, backed by EU budget, thus increasing their military capabilities via common procurement. Ukraine, EFTA/EEA nations, accession candidates and Security and Defence Partnership countries can also participate in the joint procurement.

The Commission proposed this instrument for five years (2025-2030) and based it on article 122 TFEU. SAFE allows the member states to support the European defence technological and industrial base (EDTIB) and requires a Council decision, excluding the European Parliament from the process. The financial support allows common procurement procedures. To access the funding, the member states must formalise their expression of interest and submit a financial request along with a European defence industry investment plan, between two and six months prior the entry into force of the regulation. After the assessment, the Commission presents the implementing decision with the details of the financial assistance. The support is given in the form of a loan, with a maximum duration of 45 years. The Commission borrows on behalf of the EU on the capital markets, for a maximum of €150 billion – with guarantees that the EU will pay back (European Parliament, EPRS, April 2025, pp. 5-7).

SAFE is expected to complement the already existing European Defence Fund, to be consistent with the objectives outlined in the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) and to be complemented by the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP)[5].

In a nutshell, the SAFE Regulation is a loan-based mechanism to support national investment plans for the EU defence industry. It is expected to generate

[5] The European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) was announced by Ursula von der Leyen in her 2023 State of the Union speech. It sets a vision for the European defence industrial policy until 2035 by: reinforcing the EDTIB through increased and more collaborative European investment from Member States; improving the responsiveness of the European defence industry under any circumstances; spreading a defence readiness culture; and prioritizing partnerships with strategic, like-minded international partners (European Commission, DG DEFIS, 5 March 2024). On the other hand, the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) is a regulation proposed by the Commission to implement concrete measures that have been identified in the European Defence Industrial Strategy. Both the EDIS and the EDIP aim at increasing the defence industrial readiness of the EU and its capacity to protect its citizens (European Commission, DG DEFIS, 5 March 2024).

synergies with the EU defence policy and with the implementation of the Strategic Compass, in consistency with the EU Capability Development Plan (CDP), and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) (European Commission, 19 March 2025, pp. 2-3). SAFE must be in line with the subsidiarity principle, meaning that actions must be taken both at Union level and member state level to scale up the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) (European Commission, 19 March 2025, p. 5).

The member states that want to receive financial assistance under the SAFE instrument must submit a European Defence Industry Investment Plan to the Commission by the 30th of November with a description of the defence products, the activities, the expenditures and the measures requiring financial assistance – and must include Ukraine in the planned activities. The member states may request the Commission to organise an exchange of good practices, so that the member states can benefit from the experience of other member states. Finally, the member states can submit an amended request to the Commission, complementary of an amended plan justifying the change in the planned expenditures (Council of the European Union, 27 May 2025, art. 7).

SAFE supports the procurement of several defence products – which have been grouped in two categories[6].

Furthermore, the procurement contracts must make sure that no more than 35% of the components come from outside the EU, EEA-EFTA countries, or Ukraine (European Commission, DG DEFIS, 2025).

The SAFE regulation was approved and entered into force on the 27th of May 2025.

- **The National Escape Clause**.

[6] Category 1: ammunition and missiles; artillery systems, including deep precision strike capabilities; ground combat capabilities and their support systems, including soldier equipment and infantry weapons; small drones (NATO class 1) and related anti-drone systems; critical infrastructure protection, cyber and military mobility including counter-mobility. Category 2: air and missile defence systems; maritime surface and underwater capabilities; drones other than small drones (NATO class 2 and 3) and related anti-drone systems; strategic enablers such as, but not limited to, strategic airlift, air-to-air refuelling, C4ISTAR systems, space assets and services; space assets protection, artificial intelligence and electronic warfare.

EU member states are encouraged to activate the national escape clause (NEC), included in the Stability and Growth Pact, to increase budgetary flexibility.

The national escape clause is different from the general escape clause, that can only be used during severe economic crises. Indeed, the national escape clause offers greater flexibility and can be used to address national challenges. Activating the NEC would enable member states to allocate public funding of up to 1.5% of the GDP, for a maximum duration of four years, to national defence – including military equipment and infrastructure, dual-use goods and services, military personnel and training, and military aid. This could translate in €650 additional billion of defence expenditure across the EU over the next four years. The expenditure must be decided at national level and is not subject to geographical restrictions regarding the allocation of the additional money (European Parliament, EPRS, April 2025, pp. 3-5).

- **Cohesion funds.**

The EU can allow greater defence investment through cohesion funds, notably by using the European Regional Development Funds. The reform was presented by the Commission and was approved by the Parliament and the Council. It will be the responsibility of the member states to allocate the funds towards defence-related projects, infrastructure, and research and development (European Parliament, EPRS, April 2025, pp. 7-8; Council of the European Union, 18 September 2025).

- Expansion of defence and security projects by the **European Investment Bank** (EIB).

The European Investment Bank Group consists of the European Investment Bank (EIB), and the European Investment Fund. The EIB normally excludes financing for ammunition, weaponry and military infrastructure, but allows investments for dual-use items, which serve both civilian and military purposes. On the 21st of March, the EIB Board of Directors expanded the EIBG's eligibility to finance Europe's security and defence infrastructure and industry (European Parliament, EPRS, April 2025, pp. 8-9).

- Private capital from the **Savings and Investments Union.**

Another option to raise defence spending is by mobilising private capital through the Savings and Investments Union strategy, which aims at fully realising the single market for financial services, by completing the Banking Union and the Capital Markets Union. Once established it would unlock private capital, useful for funding Europe's defence industry (European Parliament, EPRS, April 2025, p. 7).

The Readiness 2030 roadmap represented a major step towards a Europe of Defence, increasing the level of commitment of the member states in this field more than ever, while reducing the role of the US as security provider in Europe.

Following the adoption of the documents, the prime minister of Spain who had delayed its defence investments until that moment, keeping them well below the 2014 NATO target of 2%, announced his plan to invest an additional €10.5 billion to reach the long-delayed target. Indeed, to Sánchez, Spain could not remain outside the EU consensus on defence spending (Escartín, 26 March 2025). Indeed, the country had been lagging behind other nations by dedicating only 1.3% of its GDP to defence spending. Notwithstanding, the new investment plan included an industrial and technological strategy to address future defence challenges. According to Sánchez, in a world that's dominated by uncertainty, Europe represents hope and certainty, and it must be protected by strengthening security and defence systems (Jones, 22 April 2025).

Therefore, Sánchez expressed full support for SAFE and EDIP and encouraged allies to spend well and more efficiently, suggesting more co-production, joint purchasing and interoperability, rather than concentrating on GDP percentages (Sánchez, 25 June 2025).

Meanwhile, due to infighting and inaction, in Germany Scholz's coalition collapsed. The newly nominated chancellor, Friedrich Merz, demonstrated a strongly pro-European, Atlanticist and pro-Ukraine position from the beginning of his mandate, promising to work closely together with Macron to give a new push to Europe. Indeed, Macron and Merz decided to set up a joint security and defence council to meet regularly (Henley, 7 May 2025).

Merz urged all EU member states to boost their defence spending, presenting it as the only way to close Europe's capability gaps and support Ukraine. Moreover, he promised that he would discuss nuclear deterrence with France and the UK and would cooperate closely with Poland. However, while supporting Europe's strategic autonomy, he recognised that a ceasefire in Ukraine would be impossible without the involvement of the United States (Henley, 7 May 2025). Therefore, Friedrich Merz announced his commitment to unify Europe and the United States in their strategy for Ukraine. To that end, he promised to strengthen Germany's military and to establish a conventional army in Europe, in order to make the Union more strategically autonomous and to ensure that the US will remain committed to Europe's security. On that account, he expressed support for the ReArm Europe Plan. During his first speech to the Parliament, he acknowledged the expectations placed upon Germany by its European partners and promised to embrace its role guaranteeing reliability and predictability. Furthermore, he underscored the importance of cohesion, promising to do its utmost to foster unity between Europe and the US (Fouda, 15 May 2025).

Furthermore, in order to increase defence spending and face Trump's threats – surrounding the Transatlantic Alliance and the territory of Greenland – Denmark decided to quit the Frugal Four – a conservative fiscal coalition formed by the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden and Denmark in 2020 – to embrace a more flexible attitude towards the EU seven-year budget. PM Frederiksen asserted that her decision was driven by the necessity to rearm Europe, which has become the priority of her government (Liboreiro, 3 June 2025). Therefore, Frederiksen showed full support for the ReArm Europe plan, which would mobilise €800 billion through low-interest loans (Liboreiro, 3 June 2025). Denmark also expressed support for the 5% defence target wanted by Trump, which envisages spending 3.5% of GDP on defence and 1.5% on other security challenges (High North News, 2 June 2025).

At the national speech before the Globsec Forum, PM Petr Fiala stated that to address the international landscape, notably the expansionary policy of Russia and its attack against Ukraine, the situation in the Middle East, and Trump's

disruptive foreign policy – evolutions he saw not only as a “hard awakening”, but as an opportunity as well – Europeans must transform, starting with money and weapons, by investing more in defence. Fiala expressed full support for the ReArm Europe plan and the changing role of the EIB to raise defence investment – fundamental for survival and prosperity. Indeed, he believes that Europe should reduce its dependency on third countries, starting with the US, and invest in production and research, to achieve strategic autonomy, while also building a strong and determined society. To that end, he claimed that spending 2% of the GDP on defence was not enough (Government of the Czech Republic, 12 June 2025).

Moreover, the newly elected president of Romania, Nicuşor Dan, distanced himself from the position of his predecessor. Indeed, he wants Romania to strengthen itself internally and become more active both within the EU and NATO. Notably, he assessed that Romania will maintain its pro-Western direction, meaning participation in NATO, presence in the European Union, and strategic partnership with the United States. Nicuşor wants Romania to strengthen itself internally, be more active within both structures, and develop a strategic partnership with the United States (AGERPRES, 22 May 2025). Besides, he is steadfast in his support for a pro-Western policy. Indeed, he is confidently pro-European and supports the new rearmament plan. Notably, he wants to maintain a close relationship with US President Donald Trump, especially in the security area, in order to retain the American troops on the national territory (Diaconescu, 9 May 2025).

The prime minister of Finland, Petteri Orpo, reacted to Donald Trump’s re-election, notably the imposition of tariffs on imports, by asking the EU to stay united. However, his position went beyond economy, since tariffs can also ripple through the supply chains, slowing the flow of materials needed for Europe’s defence industries, thereby affecting European security as well. To Orpo, Europe should step up in defence, support NATO, while also learning to stand firmly on its own feet (Mokrani, 7 April 2025). Therefore, Finland endorsed the ReArm Europe plan and started rearming. Besides, it decided to leave the Ottawa Treaty

– that bans landmines – and aims at raising its defence spending up to 3% of the national GDP (Lugano, 1 April 2025; Finnish Government, 11 April 2025).

Finally, the prime minister of Croatia, Andrej Plenković, expressed the need for Europe to increase defence spending, strengthen its military technologies and capabilities and provide military assistance to Ukraine. Therefore, he expressed support for the ReArm Europe Plan, while also signing an agreement with Albania and Kosovo to boost military capabilities, technologies and improve interoperability. However, he underscored the importance of US engagement in European affairs and within NATO institutions, arguing that the United States should remain committed to Europe and to the transatlantic alliance, since it is a factor of stability and peace in the continent. Besides, NATO has been a guarantor of collective security for 75 years. (Cosic, 6 May 2025). Therefore, Plenković will continue cooperating with Trump, and will support the ReArm Europe Plan to address Trump's insistence that Europe should assume greater responsibility for its own security.

Indeed, some member states, while supporting the rearmament plan, keep prioritising NATO, or plan to use the investments, not only to strengthen the EU, but to satisfy Trump's demands for a better burden-sharing within NATO and for enhanced European defence autonomy.

For instance, the President of Cyprus expressed support for the ReArm Europe plan, notably the SAFE regulation, stating that the Republic of Cyprus intends to use it in conjunction with a recent US decision that gives Cyprus access to American military equipment[7] (Cyprus Business News, 29 May 2025). Moreover, the Greek prime minister Mitsotakis expressed support for the ReArm Europe plan as well, notably for the SAFE mechanism, presenting a 12-year defence procurement plan from €25 billion by 2036 to modernise armed forces, which would help Greece reach the 5% target advocated by Trump by 2035 (eKathimerini, 25 June 2025).

[7] Cyprus is not a member of NATO, due to the territorial disputes with Türkiye, which invaded and occupied its northern territory. Türkiye fears that Cyprus accession to NATO will be used for the reunification of the territory (Cyprus Business News, 29 May 2025).

Furthermore, Sweden also demonstrated its willingness to fulfil current and future defence obligation to better address the Russian threat and the growing uncertainty surrounding the US commitment to European security, by expressing support for the rearmament plan. Indeed, during a press conference held in Stockholm on the 6th of May, the prime minister of Sweden, Ulf Kristersson, asserted that Europe cannot expect the US to maintain in Europe the same role it had over the last 80 years. Consequently, Sweden's defence expansion will prioritise NATO-aligned capabilities, notably drones, air-defence systems, and ammunition – using them to boost military aid to Ukraine as well (Deconinck, 6 May 2025).

In contrast to other member states, the prime minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico, ultimately opposed the ReArm Europe Plan and the NATO target championed by Donald Trump. As notable outlier among the EU leaders, Fico argued that the use of military force had historically failed to resolve conflicts, asserting that the current policies were deteriorating the current security situation, risking a broader global conflict. Besides, Slovakia had priorities more pressing than extensive armament, such as improving people's living standards and restoring public finances. (bne IntelliNews, 24 June 2025). Indeed, Fico announced that his country would benefit from neutrality, even questioning the membership of the transatlantic alliance (Reuters, 17 June 2025).

Therefore, Slovakia showed little to no engagement with the Readiness 2030 plan, aiming at increasing the military capabilities of the EU. Nevertheless, he suggested that the national defence spending might increase slightly in 2025, but it wouldn't be more than a "tenth of a percent" and would only be used for dual-use projects like infrastructure and military hospitals (bne IntelliNews, 24 June 2025). Moreover, an annual progress report announced that Slovakia is requesting an exemption from EU fiscal rules and is expected to spend around 2.1 % of the GDP on defence between 2025 and 2028, which is however still far away from the 5% target advocated by Trump (The Slovak Spectator, 23 June 2025).

The European Council established a clear link between increased defence investment and enhanced EU competitiveness. Indeed, increasing defence

spending would not only strengthen society, but it would also stimulate job creation, drive innovation, foster regional development and support local communities (European Council, 28 April 2025).

President Costa asserted that strengthening European defence and fostering innovation in key industries is vital for collective security and prosperity (Costa, 5 May 2025). Furthermore, during his address at the European University Institute event on Peace and Security in Europe, Costa underscored that peace isn't a permanent condition. It must be defended not only through diplomacy, but also with clarity, resilience, and force, if necessary. Besides, he argued that Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine had dismantled many assumptions, notably that only economic interdependence could prevent aggression, that post-Cold War borders were inviolable, and that peace in Europe had become self-sustaining. Consequently, he concluded that peace must be preserved, upholding shared values, such as integration, common security and the institutionalisation of disputes (Costa, 8 May 2025).

It is thus imperative of Europe, to guarantee Ukraine's security, given that Ukraine's security is interlinked to Europe's security, and it should cooperate with the United States to provide sustainable peace guarantees. Nevertheless, the EU must build a Europe of Defence, not by building 27 national defence policies but by creating a global European defence. Europe must be capable to defend itself and deter future aggressions. To that end, the European Commission introduced new programmes in March, whose activation allows the member states to spend more on defence, without cutting expenses from other policies, such as health and education. Costa urged the member states to use the defence programmes to spend more and more efficiently by aggregating demand, through joint procurement, and to build European capabilities – notably by pushing joint European projects on defence innovation and green tech (Costa, 8 May 2025).

Finally, on the 17th of June 2025, the European Commission presented the Defence Readiness Omnibus proposal, a package aimed at establishing a defence-readiness mindset across the European Union and to facilitate the allocation of the €800 billion in defence investments over the next four years. The Omnibus addresses to the problems raised by the European Council on the

6th of March, it reflects the priorities of the White Paper and recognises that the regulatory framework must be adapted to enable rapid capability development and deployment (European Commission, DG DEFIS, 2025).

The package includes legislative and non-legislative proposals, along with a Commission Communication. It proposes a simplification of the administrative requirements for the applicants; it introduces a faster time-to-grant and a more predictable implementation of the European Defence Fund. Furthermore, the package aims at streamlining the procedures for defence procurement[8] (European Commission, DG DEFIS, 2025). On top of that, the EDF committed €5.4 billion in defence Research and Development to strengthen cross-border cooperation, encourage the participation of SMEs and new entrants, and accelerate the development of next-generation technologies across all defence domains – land, sea, air, space and cyber (European Commission, DG DEFIS, 2025).

The proposal was submitted to the European Parliament and to the Council for examination under the ordinary legislative procedure. The Council and the Parliament backed the measures, but inter-institutional negotiations are expected to finalise and implement the legislation. Its adoption is expected for 2026 and would mark another decisive step towards the actualization of a Europe of Defence.

3.3.3. NATO summit in June 2025

On the 25th of June 2025, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) convened for a summit at The Hague, in the Netherlands. The summit was of particular significance for being the first meeting since Donald Trump's re-

[8] through incentives for requests sent by at least three member states, a facilitation of off-the-shelf purchases to replenish the stocks, an increased flexibility in framework agreements, doubled thresholds under the Defence Procurement Directive for supply and service contacts, and facilitated intra-EU transfers of defence products by easing the authorisation processes for transfers between member states. Besides, it urges the EU to work on introducing a fast-track for defence-related infrastructure projects with a two-month permitting window, streamlined procedures and a single point of contact in each member states. The goal is to allow defence readiness projects to benefit from existing derogations, to introduce a mandate to apply exemptions aimed at supporting investments in critical substances, and to adjust the eligibility criteria under InvestEU.

election. Under his administration, the United States has redirected its focus away from Europe and towards other geographical areas, notably Asia (Evans & Thomson, 2025). Furthermore, Trump is known for having contrasting views regarding Ukraine, NATO and multilateralism. Significantly, Trump criticises Europe's underspending in defence and, since the beginning of his term, he has constantly advocated for allies to increase their defence spending to 5% of their national GDP. This request is accompanied by threats that he might refrain from defending his allies unless they meet the 5% threshold.

Donald Trump believes that the US is overcommitted to Europe and that Europe should start fulfilling its responsibilities. Indeed, he made many harsh and provocative statements.

As a result, the EU began to worry that the US would not help them in case of Russian attack. Besides, intelligence agencies claimed that Russia was planning to test NATO commitment to article 5, further increasing the level of tension.

Some EU leaders, especially those from Eastern Europe and Greece, reacted to Trump's defence target by raising their defence spending, and by expressing support for the 5% target. Indeed, when discussing the rearmament of Europe in March, some member states supported the initiative not only to improve Europe's security, but to reach the 5% target as well, even though it hadn't been formally adopted yet. Indeed, they believed that making Europe more strategically autonomous in security and defence would maintain Trump committed to Europe and to the Transatlantic Alliance, which remains the main security provider in Europe.

Nevertheless, Trump's rhetoric did not resonate uniformly across all European nations. Indeed, few member states, such as Spain and Slovakia, formally rejected the 5% target, and prioritised spending their GDP on other policy areas, dedicating a smaller percentage to defence.

Nevertheless, most member states did fall for Trump's rhetoric, some of them even endorsing the 5% target before it was officially approved by the North Atlantic Council. Indeed, following Trump's election and his constant advocating for higher defence spending within NATO, Estonia and the Czech

Republic immediately expressed their support for the target, Estonia by approving a four-year defence investment plan, with an additional funding of €2.8 billion – thus allocating 5.5% of the GDP towards military budgeting until 2029 (Martin, 25 April 2025) – and the Czech Republic by committing to hit 3% by 2030 (Euractiv, 22 May 2025). Besides, the President of Romania also expressed full support for the 5% target (Deconinck, 4 June 2025).

Furthermore, the Portuguese prime minister promised to finalise a plan for defence investment to implement over several years, with the intention to raise the target to 5%. PM Montenegro asserted that the new investments would be developed by national defence industries and related activities, believing that higher investment would stimulate economic growth (Reuters, 5 June 2025).

Meanwhile, Slovenia declared that it would remain devoted to NATO, emphasising however that all it wants is peace. Therefore, it decided to allocate 2% of the GDP to basic defence capabilities and 1.5% to wider defence areas, such as healthcare system, infrastructure and cybersecurity, whereas an additional 1.5% could be devoted to strengthening resilience. In 2025, Slovenia's defence expenditure was 2% of the GDP and it will increase an additional 0.2% per year, until the 2029 overview (Republic of Slovenia, 23 June 2025).

Finally, the Netherlands praised the security and defence relationship with the US and wants to continue cooperating within NATO (NL Times, 25 June 2025). Significantly, the government of Netherlands decided to support the 5% target pushed by the United States. To PM Schoof, with a war on the continent, security can no longer be taken for granted. Therefore, increasing investment in defence is inevitable and the NATO alliance is indispensable in that regard. The Netherlands will thus introduce a spending plan that would include support for Ukraine as well (Government of the Netherlands, 13 June 2025).

During his speech at the NATO Public Forum, Schoof reiterated the importance of the transatlantic alliance, underscoring his plan to increase defence spending and keep unity within the alliance (Government of the Netherlands, 24 June 2025).

Given the strong support, Donald Trump was able to raise the NATO defence spending target to 5% of the national GDP at the June summit (Öncel,

2025, pp. 11-12). Indeed, at the following press conference, Donald Trump assessed that the major focus of the summit was the need for other NATO members "*to take up the burden of the defence of Europe*". Therefore, they raised the target to five percent (Trump, 25 June 2025).

Significantly, Trump asked Europe to do more for its own defence since it was still largely dependent on the US and the meeting held before the summit was seen as the perfect opportunity to find a balance between the expectations of the US and the capabilities of Europe. Nonetheless, the EU also faced the dilemma of linking the defence budgets to the purchase of US military equipment, which would limit the pursuit of strategic autonomy of the EU, but would safeguard it from the possibility of a US withdrawal from the continent (Öncel, 2025, p. 9).

As promised by Mark Rutte, the Secretary-General of NATO, at the press conference preceding the summit, the goal to increase defence investment by 5% would not only improve the response of the allies to the security challenges, but it would also provide more jobs (NATO, 23 June 2025).

As a result, the meeting of the North Atlantic Council, formed by the Heads of State and Government of the member states, reaffirmed the commitment of the participants to NATO and to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty – the collective defence clause (NATO, 25 June 2025) – and the commitment to security threats, starting with the war in Ukraine. Therefore, the allies decided to invest 5% of their annual GDP on defence requirements and on security- and defence-related expenditures by 2035. The investments will ensure forces, capabilities, resources and infrastructures needed for deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security.

The 5% commitment comprises two essential categories of defence investment. Indeed, each member will allocate at least 3.5% of GDP annually based on the agreed definition of NATO defence expenditure by 2035 to resource core defence requirements, and to meet the NATO Capability Targets. To that end, they are expected to submit annual plans showing a credible, incremental path to reach this goal. Besides, each member will account for up to 1.5% of GDP annually to inter-alia protect NATO critical infrastructure, defend the

networks, ensure civil preparedness and resilience, unleash innovation, and strengthen the defence industrial base (NATO, 25 June 2025).

Finally, the allies reassessed their support to Ukraine, promising to include direct contributions to Ukraine's defence and defence industry when calculating their spendings (NATO, 25 June 2025). Indeed, the allies pledged to spend over €35 billion in defence assistance to Ukraine for the year ahead (NATO, 23 June 2025).

During the press conference, Donald Trump reaffirmed his commitment to the military alliance and called the rise of the defence spending target a "*big win*" for Western civilization. To him, the summit was an historic milestone, since Europe finally agreed to take more responsibility in defence – mainly because EU leaders feared that Trump would reduce his commitment to NATO, become closer to Russia and move US troops out of Europe (Sabbagh, 2025).

France agreed to increase defence spending to 5% of the GDP, believing it would also contribute to structuring a European pillar within NATO and give Europe more responsibility in its own defence. However, enhancing investment should go hand in hand with the strengthening of armed forces and the development of a defence industry. Indeed, the purpose of this surge in investment should be to respond to the Russian threat, but requires unity, respect, foresight, and lowering the trade barriers (Macron, 25 June 2025).

When asked whether he trusted Trump to respect article 5, Macron simply responded that texts had been signed and that article 5 implies solidarity between all members, not only from one to the others, hence reiterating that Europe security cannot depend on a single country (Macron, 25 June 2025).

Besides, during an interview held in Brussels on the same day of the NATO summit, PM Luís Montenegro stated that defence is a new priority for his government, emphasising however that it won't compromise other areas. When asked whether the commitments in defence were the result of Trump's pressure or a real necessity, Montenegro replied that it was "*a combination of both factors*" (Portugal Pulse, 25 June 2025).

Moreover, the prime minister of Lithuania underlined the necessity to keep strong transatlantic bonds, given the critical period, thus inviting non-EU allies

to participate in the defence procurement schemes (Anadolu Agency, 26 June 2025). The prime minister of Croatia, Plenković, agreed to increase defence spending to reach the NATO 5% goal, clarifying that 3.5% refers to defence, while the remaining 1.5% to investments that are connected to defence but can also be used for civilian purposes (The Voice of Croatia, 26 June 2025). And, finally, Slovenia promised a gradual increase in defence spending to 3% by 2030 and prepared an action plan for the allocation of the funds (Republic of Slovenia, 26 June 2025).

Orbán judged the NATO summit a success for being focused on how to make Europe stronger in defence, instead of focusing on Ukraine. Significantly, he argued that, to him, supporting Ukraine compromises Europe's security (Orbán, 25 June 2025).

Hungary expressed support for the 5% target, guaranteeing that it will be able to achieve it over the next ten years, on condition that the EU changes its fiscal regulatory regime, by giving the member states more scope of manoeuvre. He promised he would use that 5% to develop its national defence industry, which would also help Hungarian industry (Orbán, 25 June 2025).

Finally, after the NATO summit, Italian PM Giorgia Meloni backed NATO plan to raise defence spending to 5% by 2025 – to heed demands from US President Donald Trump that Europe should pay more for its own defence – and declared that the new NATO targets for higher defence spending are affordable for Italy, as they give the countries total flexibility on how to reach them (Reuters, 2025, June 25). Besides, when asked about the future of European Union defence, PM Meloni said that Italy is a member of NATO, the Western defence system, based on national armies cooperating among themselves, and will decide in the future where to be. However, she prioritises building a European column within NATO and improving cooperation between national defence and national companies (ANSA, 25 June 2025).

The defence spending agreement was different for Spain – which is the country contributing the least to defence. Indeed, Spain can achieve the targets without necessarily reaching 5% of the GDP. Nonetheless, it needs to report what

it is doing in terms of spending and how it is reaching the targets (NATO, 23 June 2025).

Indeed, regardless of Trump's critics, the Spanish prime minister officially rejected the 5% target since it would devastate the country's welfare state, and would force the country to increase taxes, cut services or reduce the commitments to the environmental transition and to international development. Besides, it would be incompatible with their world view. Therefore, Sánchez told NATO that it needs to spend just 2.1% to acquire and maintain the personnel and equipment required by the alliance. Sánchez advocates for a '3.5+1.5' model, where 3.5% would go to traditional military spending on tanks, weapons and aircraft, whilst the remaining 1.5% is counted for broader security-related investments, thereby adopting a more flexible approach (Finch, 19 June 2025).

Trump issued a strong critique of Spain, signalling his intention to impose tariffs and other trade-related penalties to compensate their defence contributions (Trump, 25 June 2025).

Despite the pressure, Spain reaffirmed its dedication to the transatlantic alliance, arguing that the geopolitical situation calls for reinforced transatlantic solidarity, to ensure deterrence and collective defence (Sánchez, 25 June 2025). Moreover, he reiterated its support for Ukraine and its solidarity to the Eastern flank of the alliance. Therefore, Spain will deploy an Industrial and Technological Plan for Security and Defence and support industrial cooperation with Europe and North America (Sánchez, 25 June 2025).

Following the example of Spain, the Belgian prime minister, De Wever, while acknowledging the necessity to invest more in defence, asked President Trump and his NATO allies to allow the countries to invest in defence at their own pace. Indeed, Belgium is one of the worst allies when it comes to reaching the 2% target from 2014. De Wever committed to meet the target, but avoided a confrontational strategy, like Spain did (The Brussels Times, 25 June 2025).

Nonetheless, with the current deal, Belgium won't probably reach the 3.5% target by 2035. Besides, a key figure from the government clarifies that the Belgian defence spending will remain limited to 2% throughout the legislative period (The Brussels Times, 25 June 2025), given the opposition in the national

parliament, who rejected the target for taking money away from social security (Belga News Agency, 17 June 2025).

Similarly to Belgium, Luxembourg's PM Frieden supported the 5% defence target but asked for more flexibility, as Belgium and Spain did, by attaching caveats (RTL Today, 25 June 2025).

Nonetheless, even though Trump's intervention at the NATO summit convinced the allies to increase their defence spending, both at national and at EU level, his declarations concerning Ukraine sparked disagreements with the EU. Notably, Donald Trump assessed that Ukraine could easily end the war with Russia by giving up Crimea, and by refraining from joining NATO, which was, for him, the primary cause of the conflict. His position was endorsed by the Hungarian President Viktor Orbán as well, who argued that, since Ukraine is not a member of NATO, NATO should have no business in Ukraine. Indeed, Ukraine is a partner country that cooperates closely with NATO, but it doesn't have the same security guarantees as a member state (Sutherland, 2025).

Trump's and Orbán's declarations were immediately condemned by Zelensky and by the European Union (Sutherland, 2025).

Therefore, the day after the NATO summit, the European Council held a meeting on Security and Defence, to discuss the conclusions of the NATO summit. At the meeting, the European Council reaffirmed its commitment to the conclusions of the 6 March and 20 March summits. These meetings emphasised the necessity to increase the EU's strategic autonomy and assume greater responsibility for collective defence, through the implementation of the White Paper on defence and the Readiness 2030 Plan (European Council, 26 June 2025).

Moreover, commenting on the results of the NATO summit, the European Council reiterated that a stronger EU in defence is complementary to a stronger NATO and would facilitate the implementation of the 5% defence target. To this end, the leaders pledged to strengthen Europe's defence technological and industrial base, and ensure the timely delivery of equipment supply, by aggregating demand, harmonising the requirements and integrating the defence market across the Union. Consequently, the EU agreed to advance short-term

and long-term initiatives, in coordination with the EDA, the Commission and the High Representative to further increase defence integration. Furthermore, it encouraged the European defence industry, by including SMEs, and finally, it pledged to scale up production and adopt the "Defence Readiness Omnibus", to strengthen the borders of the EU (European Council, 26 June 2025).

Moreover, at the summit, the EU agreed to enhance military mobility – allowing the free movement of defence equipment and personnel across the Union – and to cooperate with like-minded partners (European Council, 26 June 2025).

To summarize, the European Council agreed to adopt new policies to further enhance the strategic autonomy of the EU and implement the new 5% defence target.

Nevertheless, President Costa, in a speech held at the press conference following the European Council meeting, distanced himself from Trump's (and Orbán's) declarations about Ukraine, by reminding the importance of supporting Ukraine when discussing defence, asserting that Ukraine's security is closely interlinked to Europe's security. To that end, the EU needs to push for a just and lasting peace in Ukraine and pave the way to its Union membership. Indeed, the Ukrainian government is carrying out impressive reforms, despite the ongoing conflict. Besides, the EU adopted 17 additional packages of sanctions against Russia (Costa, 27 June 2025).

3.3.4. European Council summits in the second half of 2025

The first half of 2025 marked a significant milestone in the integration process of the European Union in security and defence. The progress was driven by the adoption of the White Paper and the ReArm Europe / Readiness 2030 Plan, which established a roadmap for increasing defence spending and strengthening the Union's defence industrial base. Furthermore, the adoption of the 5% defence target by NATO intensified the Union's rearmament process.

The decision to strengthen Europe's defence by raising defence investments and by addressing the Union's capability gaps, was guided by the geopolitical context, starting with the war in Ukraine, which led to the adoption of policies

and action plans, starting with the Strategic Compass. However, while being a fundamental driver of the integration process, the war was not the only element determining the acceleration of the defence integration process in 2025. Indeed, the unpredictability of Trump's foreign policy and his campaign to increase burden-sharing and raise the NATO defence target to 5% of the GDP also contributed to the decision of the EU to increase its strategic autonomy in security and defence. Indeed, Trump's foreign policy has been explicitly mentioned by EU leaders as one of the elements driving their decision to increase defence spending and support EU defence integration.

Furthermore, Trump's proposals for resolving the Ukraine-Russia conflict, widely favouring Russia, met the resistance of most member states, who decided to distance themselves from the US in the pursuit of the Union's strategic autonomy. Notably, the EU aims at building a Europe of Defence to deter aggression, increase the security of its citizens, and support Ukraine.

Moreover, at the beginning of July, Denmark took over the six-month presidency of the Council of the European Union and put security and defence high on the political agenda, aiming at rearming Europe by 2030 at the latest (Lory & Liboreiro, 4 July 2025). At the joint press conference launching the Danish presidency of the Council, António Costa congratulated the Prime Minister Mette for her unwavering support for Ukraine. Moreover, he announced the decision of the member states to commit an additional €24 billion in military support to Ukraine. Furthermore, the Commission granted more fiscal flexibility to the member states to facilitate both the support for Ukraine and the achievement of the new NATO target (Costa, 3 July 2025). To that end, Costa believes that the EU should implement a common defence system, and invest in strategic capabilities like air defence, maritime security, space and cyber. During the meeting, Costa refrained from defining the roles of NATO and the EU in establishing a Europe of defence. Indeed, defence remains a sovereign duty of the member states, a duty necessary to preserve the Transatlantic Alliance as well (Costa, 9 July 2025).

In the aftermath of the June summit, some member states, while agreeing on doing more for Ukraine, they also tried to increase the US involvement in Europe's and Ukraine's security.

For instance, the Bulgarian PM Zhelyazkov reiterated his support for Ukraine for as long as necessary and reaffirmed his support for enhanced cooperation between NATO and the EU, based on the opportunities introduced by the White Paper and SAFE. Furthermore, he also discussed enhancing cooperation with third countries, such as the US and Canada (BNT News, 16 July 2025).

Furthermore, Bulgaria will develop a National Defence Plan to increase defence spending to 5%, arguing that, given the prolonged instability caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Bulgaria continues to support the strengthening of NATO's deterrence and defence capabilities, especially on the Eastern flank and in the Black Sea region. (BNT News, 16 July 2025). However, Bulgaria believes that the White Paper on Defence adopted in March provides clear prospects for the development of defence capabilities, useful to increase the country's competitiveness as well. (Bulgarian News Agency, 31 August 2025).

Similarly to the Bulgarian prime minister, the Estonian PM urged Trump to contribute strong and credible security guarantees to Ukraine, believing that if Europe takes the lead, then Americans will do the same (Government of Estonia, 17 August 2025). Indeed, Estonia believes that the EU should increase support for Ukraine and put pressure on Russia by increasing EU's defence readiness, believing that the US would do the same (The Baltic Times, 9 September 2025).

Furthermore, the Finnish prime minister argued that Ukraine's army must be strengthened, and the EU must continue to give its support through the Ukraine Facility, and facilitate its reconstruction (Orpo, 26 August 2025).

Therefore, Finland urged the other member states to increase their defence spending to strengthen European security and to implement the priorities set by the EU and by NATO. Besides, Orpo believes that EU should do more on the negotiating table and should cooperate more with NATO. Indeed, Finland expressed support for the new NATO target and showed appreciation for its

relationship with the US, which has a comprehensive presence in territory of the nation. Therefore, he pressured the EU to invest more to increase border security and to favour defence research and military mobility (Orpo, 26 August 2025).

Conversely, countries such as Germany and France adopted a more resolute position. Indeed, as Trump made it clear that the US could no longer be relied on, Chancellor Merz decided it was time to stop relying on the US for security and defence, thereby pledging €83 billion on European-made weapons. Indeed, Germany planned 154 major defence procurements between September 2025 and December 2026, with only 8% coming from US suppliers. This shift followed the adoption of the 5% target within NATO, which urged Merz to pursue a "Buy European" strategy (Urbancik & Issel, 28 September 2025). Indeed, the dependence on American equipment had increased in recent years and the share of US arms exports to Europe had climbed from 13% between 2015 and 2019, to 35% between 2020 and 2024. In Germany the overall arms imports had risen by 334%, 70% of which was coming from the US (Urbancik & Issel, 28 September 2025). Nevertheless, despite the efforts, Chancellor Merz ended up admitting, during a visit to the White House, that the reliance of the EU on the US will persist, due to the US continued leadership in defence technology (Urbancik & Issel, 28 September 2025).

Furthermore, during a business summit sponsored by the Suddeutsche Zeitung, Chancellor Merz assessed that, given the current geopolitical and economic shifts, the EU should strive to shape a new world order alongside its neighbours, notably the UK, Türkiye and Norway (Anadolu Agency, 17 November 2025). Besides, he argued that the EU should do more to address the war in Ukraine, the Russian threat, and the tensions surrounding the US and China's aggressive posture. Indeed, Merz pointed out that the EU can no longer rely on the US for defence, on China for raw materials, or on Russia to eventually return to the path of peace. As the global order is changing, the European Union must become a European defence union and ensure its ability to defend itself against international challenges (Anadolu Agency, 17 November 2025).

Parallel to Germany, the French President Macron outlined a plan to boost defence spending in Europe, by devolving additional €6.5 billion to military

spending over the next two years to protect Europe and Ukraine. Notably, Macron plans to allocate €64 billion in 2027 and intends to deepen cooperation with the UK on nuclear deterrence (O'Sullivan, 14 July 2025).

Nevertheless, against all predictions and all the efforts to become more strategically autonomous, the EU was able to keep the US engaged in NATO and committed to Eastern European security, by investing more in its defence (Costa, 1 September 2025).

Nevertheless, the security situation was aggravated in September by airspace violations in Poland and Romania, done by Russian helicopters. Ursula von der Leyen tackled the problem at the State of the Union address held on the 10th of September, by asking Europe to take control of its own defence, security and destiny (European Commission, 10 September 2025) – thus pushing for more defence integration.

Therefore, the president of the European Council called an informal meeting with the heads of state and government, to be held on the 1st of October. The topics to discuss were defence and Ukraine, notably the need to do more to build a Europe capable of acting effectively and autonomously from third countries. Costa suggested focusing the discussion on how to deliver faster, how to support the Eastern flank, how to ensure an efficient political oversight and coordination, and how to support a just and lasting peace in Ukraine (Costa, 19 September 2025).

At the informal meeting on October the 1st, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and the High Representative, Kaja Kallas, presented some projects to strengthen European security, starting with the European Drone Wall and the Eastern Flank Watch – two pivotal steps on the path to achieve common defence readiness by 2030, and to secure the borders, following a 360-degree approach – and discussed new sanctions against Russia and how to mobilise more funds for Ukraine (European Council, 1 October 2025).

The meeting served to prepare new security decisions for the continent, and to further support Ukraine. Significantly, the Commission was expected to present the roadmap on 2030 defence readiness within two weeks, and the

European Council was expected to meet again in three weeks (European Council, 1 October 2025).

Therefore, on the 16th of October, the European Commission presented a Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council, with the title "Preserving Peace – Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030", a roadmap to review the progress on the White Paper presented in March and to discuss the remaining steps to achieve defence readiness by 2030, fundamental to respond to the geopolitical threats – starting with the rise in Russian defence spending by 7% of the national GDP (European Commission & High Representative, 16 October 2025, p. 1).

According to the Joint Communication, Europe's readiness must be rooted on a 360° approach and should aim at ensuring peace through deterrence, by being ready for the battlefields of tomorrow. To that end, the member states must equip themselves and make the EU autonomous from external partners, while continuing to cooperate with NATO (European Commission & High Representative, 16 October 2025, pp. 1-2). Europe needs to offset years of underinvestment and, to that end, the White Paper, together with the ReArm Europe Agenda, plans to mobilise up to €800 billion for defence – to be able to anticipate and respond to crises, increase military mobility, develop more innovation and skills, build a network of partners, and create a well-prepared and -informed society, with enhanced civilian-military cooperation (European Commission & High Representative, 16 October 2025, pp. 2-3) In pursuit of this, the EU must address its capability gaps by 2030 (European Commission & High Representative, 16 October 2025, p. 3).

The Commission proposed four main flagships, that will be open to all member states who want to participate: the European Drone Defence Initiative, to intercept drones, leverage drone technology for precision strikes and develop anti-drone capabilities; the Eastern Flank Watch, to reinforce the eastern border of the EU via land, air and sea – fully aligned with the EU's Black Sea Maritime Security Hub and NATO command structure; the European Air Shield, to achieve an integrated, multi-layered air and missile defence shield, interoperable with NATO command and control system; and the European Space Shield, for

the protection and resilience of space assets and services (European Commission & High Representative, 16 October 2025, pp. 5-8).

The Communication delves into the defence industrial dimension, underlining the necessity to build a strong, resilient and technologically innovative industrial base by ramping up the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base. The member states must leverage on their joint buying power through multiannual procurement programmes, stimulate R&D investment and promote dual-use technology and innovative SMEs and Mid-Caps.

Furthermore, the EU calls for a EU Competitiveness Fund, a Horizon Europe Framework Programme and European Defence Transformation Roadmap, to support innovation and new technologies. The EU should also accelerate the simplification of the bureaucracy, and respond to the need of skilled workers, through upskilling and reskilling programmes and talent engagement. Besides, it should guarantee secure access to critical raw materials and promote partnerships with like-minded countries, notably NATO countries, and more specifically Canada and the UK (European Commission & High Representative, 16 October 2025, pp. 9-11).

Ukraine remains the key to Europe's defence and its defence industry should be integrated into Europe's one. Indeed, the EU must contribute long-term security guarantees to Ukraine, through financial and military supplies – Ukraine is part of SAFE and EDIP – and by being part of a Drone Alliance (European Commission & High Representative, 16 October 2025, pp. 11-12).

Finally, the EU should adopt the Defence Readiness Omnibus by the end of 2025 and present a Defence Mini-Omnibus no later than December 2025, a Military Mobility package in November, and ensure financial resources through the EDF, EDIP, SAFE and the National escape clause. Meanwhile, the EIB Group is scaling up its financing for defence-related projects (European Commission & High Representative, 16 October 2025, pp. 13-15).

At the following summit, held on the 23rd of October, the European Council re-confirmed its determination to ramp up defence readiness by 2030, through a 360° approach and with the support of the EDA, building on the Strategic

Compass, and in full coherence with NATO, to address the gaps identified in the Joint Communication. The European Council stressed the importance of defending EU land, air and maritime borders, by providing concrete support to the member states on the Eastern flank and by addressing immediate needs, by making full use of SAFE, EDIP instruments and other financial means (European Council, 23 October 2025) – thereby gearing defence investment towards joint development, production, and procurement, with the support of the EDA. Indeed, demand aggregation based on standardised requirements and economies of scale are pivotal to provide predictability to the industry, lower costs and foster interoperability. Moreover, the EU should further integrate the European defence market to allow cross-border access to the defence supply chain, notably for SMEs and mid-caps (European Council, 23 October 2025).

While countries far away from the Russian border, including Italy, France and Germany questioned the costs and technical feasibility of the initiative, Eastern and Northern member states, notably Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Finland, endorsed it (European Parliament, EPRS, October 2025).

In light of these developments the president of Cyprus welcomed the progress made in security and defence, affirming his commitment to advancing these initiatives during his country's EU Council presidency, which started in January 2026. Besides, he pledged to deepen EU-NATO cooperation without restrictions on the 27 EU member states (SigmaLive, 2 October 2025). As a matter of fact, although Cyprus is not a member of the Transatlantic Alliance due to the long-standing territorial disputes with Türkiye, it maintains a strong relationship with the United States, based on trust and shared purpose, promotion of democracy and human rights. Indeed, Cyprus and the US have expanded their relationship across politics, defence and security and the President Nikos Christodoulides intends to maintain an excellent cooperation with the Trump Administration. To this end, they established a Cyprus-US Defence and Security Dialogue and several other initiatives with US support. The year 2025 has witnessed significant advancement in security and defence for Cyprus, through the introduction of three new assistance programmes (Christodoulides, 3 December 2025).

The member states expressed support for the new initiatives (Amaro, 1 October 2025). For instance, the neutral member states of the European Union endorsed the new roadmap, promising to make use of the financial mechanisms to address the capability gaps in a manner consistent with their constitutional neutrality. However, at the meeting held in Copenhagen by the heads of state and government, the Austrian Chancellor Stocker reiterated the necessity to upgrade Austria's armed forces and defence readiness. Indeed, its constitutional neutrality does not preclude the possibility to use joint procurement (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 1 October 2025). Meanwhile, Ireland pledged to cooperate more with the EU, the UK, and the US. The effort aims at addressing the threats in cybersecurity, sub-sea cables and gas connectors (The Irish Times, 16 October 2025). Finally, following the summit, Malta prime minister Abela told the national parliament that he is committed to contribute to the EU's Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030, focusing on civil-military coordination, maritime security, crisis preparedness and protection of critical infrastructure in the Mediterranean and in Southern Europe. He reiterated that the EU should not depend on others for its defence, including the US, and reaffirmed its constitutional neutrality. Ultimately, he reiterated support for Ukraine, but always within the bounds of neutrality (The Malta Independent, 30 October 2025).

The prime minister of Sweeden, Kristersson endorsed the European defence Readiness 2030 roadmap as well, asserting that Europe should take greater responsibility for its own security, since its most important task is to support Ukraine. Notably, Sweden is one of the world's largest military donors to Ukraine (Kristersson, 19 November 2025).

The sole voice against EU defence integration remains Slovakia. The prime minister Robert Fico has repeatedly accused the West and the US of fuelling the war in Ukraine. Consequently, he vowed to block Ukraine's accession to NATO for the duration of his mandate, arguing that its accession would trigger a third world war. Therefore, he suggested diplomatic solutions to the conflict (Nilsson-Julien, 7 October 2025).

The adoption of the new Joint Communication, entailing several action plans to improve EU defence, for instance the European Drone Wall and the Eastern Flank Watch, were adopted in the aftermath of the airspace violations by Russia.

This event urged a new wave of defence integration, accelerating the implementation of the White Paper on Defence and increasing the support for Ukraine. Notably, in the Joint Communication, the EU took a different position from the US. Indeed, Trump tried to pressure Ukraine into ceding parts of the occupied territory to Russia to end the conflict. This rhetoric drove a wedge in the Transatlantic relationship, driving most member states of the EU to reiterate their support for Ukraine and their support for EU's strategic autonomy.

Therefore, the US partly contributed to this "second wave" of defence integration, by increasing the perception of Russian threat. Besides, these policies had already been envisaged at the European Council summit held at the end of June to discuss the implementation of the NATO target.

Furthermore, on the 19th of November, the European Commission and the High Representative presented another Joint Communication on Military Mobility. The purpose of the document is to enable armed forces and equipment to move "seamlessly, at speed and at scale" across and beyond the EU, by introducing a 360° approach in coordination with NATO (European Commission, DG DEFIS, 19 November 2025). The Military Mobility Package established a unified set of rules for cross-border military transport permission procedures, with a maximum three-day processing time to create a "Military Schengen". It implements a digital tool to manage the processes, including diplomatic clearance and the digitalised EU Form 302. Furthermore, the package introduces a new European Military Mobility Enhanced Response System (EMERS) for rapid response in times of crisis, streamlines customs and transport formalities, and extends procedures to non-EU NATO members[9] (European Commission, DG DEFIS, 19 November 2025).

[9] Besides, the EU proposed the creation of a Military Mobility Solidarity Pool, to share and use registered national and EU transport assets, with possible EU co-funding; a Military Mobility Digital Information System, for authorisations and customs

For governance, the EU proposed a Military Mobility Transport Group to guide the implementation and a National Coordinator for Military Transport as contact point. Finally, the document seeks to resolve key bottlenecks and upgrade the four Priority Mobility corridors[10], while also intervening on over 500 "hotspot" projects. Besides, it focuses on enhancing resilience and cyber protection of dual-use infrastructure by introducing a resilience toolbox and by ensuring energy supply for military transport. All these measures must be carried out in cooperation with NATO (European Commission, DG DEFIS, 19 November 2025).

In a nutshell, since the NATO summit held in June, the EU has adopted new strategies and roadmaps to increase the level of defence integration. Indeed, following the approval of the 5% defence target, the European Council held a summit to discuss how to increase defence spending and reach the target. Besides, it discussed the implementation of the Readiness 2030 objectives, and the adoption of new strategies to improve the defence industrial base, reduce the bureaucratic burden and streamline military mobility. Nevertheless, the adoption of these new strategies was strongly accelerated by the airspace violations in Eastern Europe. Indeed, in the new published documents the EU reaffirmed the importance of maintaining close cooperation with NATO, fundamental for European security.

However, the publishment of the new National Security Strategy by Donald Trump reignited the tensions between the European Union and the US. To begin with, the document accuses the EU of civilizational erasure, arguing that the activities of the EU, notably the migration policies, are undermining the political liberty and sovereignty of the member states, statements that are likely to resonate with far-right, nationalist parties in the old continent, thereby weakening EU's unity and cohesion (Kayali, 5 December 2025; Freedland, 12

documentation, interoperable with NATO; and a Military Mobility Catalogue, to list dual-use transport and logistic assets. These initiatives will be partially supported by the European Competitiveness Fund (European Commission, DG DEFIS, 19 November 2025).

[10] Northern, central northern, central southern and eastern (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2 December 2025)

December 2025). Furthermore, the document argues that US policy should empower Europe to take primary responsibility for its own defence. Historically, the US has sought to steer Europe in the direction it wants, by leveraging its military presence, diplomatic pressure or financial power (Riekeles & Folkman, 8 December 2025).

His approach was widely perceived as an attempt to reshape Europe's regime and undermine EU institutions (Jonathan Freedland, 12 December 2025). As a result, European Council President Costa rejected all forms of "political interference", asserting that Washington doesn't get to choose on behalf of Europe. Therefore, he urged the EU to become stronger, more sovereign, and more confident in its abilities and strengths, to secure its position on the global stage (Zsiros & Tadeo, 8 December 2025).

Furthermore, Trump continued pressuring Ukraine to accept armistice and withdraw from the regions that have been occupied. In addition, the UK's prime minister, who prided himself for his solidarity with Ukraine, did not denounce Trump's decision and refused to join a European rearmament effort for fear of compromising his relationship with the US (Freedland, 12 December 2025).

Nevertheless, regardless of the latest developments, the EU is trying its best to keep cooperating with the US on the war in Ukraine.

Notably, in a Joint Statements, twelve European leaders[11] welcomed the progress made by Trump's administration towards a just and lasting peace in Ukraine. Therefore, they agreed to work together with Trump and Zelenskyy to assist Ukraine in securing peace and defending its territory. The member states agreed to strengthen Ukraine's armed forces and to form a European-led "multinational force Ukraine". Moreover, the leaders agreed to invest in the future of the country and to protect the long-term unity of the Euro-Atlantic, arguing that any element affecting the EU and NATO should be discussed among them (Kristersson, 15 December 2025).

[11] Chancellor Merz, President Stubb, President Macron, President Costa, President von der Leyen, Prime Minister Kristersson, Prime Minister Frederiksen, Prime Minister Meloni, Prime Minister Schoof, Prime Minister Støre, Prime Minister Tusk and Prime Minister Starmer.

Ultimately, at the summit held on the 18th of December, the European Council agreed to provide a loan to Ukraine of € 90 billion for the years 2026-2027. The funding will be raised on capital markets and backed by the EU budget. The arrangement, by using the "enhanced cooperation", ensures that the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia are exempt from the financial obligations. Furthermore, the European Council decided to address the hybrid attacks by Russia and Belarus, calling for accelerated efforts to strengthen resilience. Finally, it called for the adoption of a Defence Industry Transformation Roadmap and reiterated the need to implement the Defence Omnibus and the proposal to facilitate military mobility (European Council, 18 December 2025).

In conclusion, Donald Trump's foreign policy, characterised by rejection of multilateralism and criticism of the Transatlantic Alliance, contributed to the decision to increase defence integration at EU level. Indeed, the EU was facing other threats on the geopolitical landscape, most significantly the war in Ukraine, and was concerned about the prospect of losing the ally that had guaranteed Europe's security for decades. Therefore, the EU decided to adhere to the 5% NATO target pushed by Trump, while also working on its strategic autonomy.

Although there was some internal opposition throughout the year, notably surrounding the financial mechanisms, the European Council ended up endorsing further defence integration, which led to the adoption of the White Paper on Defence, the Readiness 2030 Plan, and other numerous proposals that still need to be adopted by the Council and the European Parliament. Most of these policies formally mention Trump's unpredictability as one of the driving factors for defence integration.

Nonetheless, even though the European Council conclusions highlighted a general support for Europe's rearmament and for the financial and legislative tools that have been adopted to implement the defence readiness goals, there were some diverging opinions among the members.

To this end, the table below provides a quick summary of the position of the members of the European Council on EU defence integration and on NATO and US solidarity.

Table 3: European Council members' positions on EU defence integration and US/NATO solidarity.

Actor	Support for EU defence integration	NATO and US solidarity
Pro-EU integration		
António Costa	He believes that the EU should become more autonomous in security and defence. He supports the ReArm Europe Plan to strengthen common defence, support Ukraine and become a stronger Transatlantic ally.	He believes that the EU should not depend on the US and NATO for security. Nonetheless, he believes that the EU should continue to cooperate with them.
Ursula von der Leyen	She presented the ReArm Europe plan and pushed the member states to spend at least 3% of their GDPs on defence. She believes that the EU should not rely on third countries and should do more for its and Ukraine's security.	She criticises Trump's foreign policy but recognises the importance of the US and NATO for the European security, and to achieve peace in Ukraine.
France	Believes that the EU should become autonomous from the US in security and defence, thus supporting the creation of a "Europe of Defence".	The EU should continue to cooperate with NATO and the US in international affairs but cannot depend on them for its security.
Germany	Thinks the EU should become strategically autonomous from the US, build a European Defence Union and a European conventional army.	Scholz wanted to maintain a strong relationship with the US and NATO, whereas Merz believes that the EU should stop relying on them for security and defence.
Luxembourg	Supports the ReArm Europe plan, the development of an industrial base and a strategically autonomous Europe.	It will keep cooperating with the US and with NATO but attaches caveats to the 5% defence target.
Spain	Expressed support for the Readiness 2030 Plan and decided to increase defence spending to 2.1 % of the GDP.	Committed to NATO but rejects the 5% target.
Portugal	Supports the ReArm Europe plan and investing in EU defence.	Perceives Trump's mandate as a period of uncertainty. However, it committed to NATO 5% target.
Greece	Believes that Europe should spend more on defence, hence supporting ReArm Europe and the SAFE mechanism. It presented a defence	Believes that the relationship with the US won't change under Trump. It is committed to increasing defence

	procurement plan from €25 billion.	spending to reach the 5% NATO target.
Denmark	Rearming Europe is the priority of its government. It announced a €6.7 billion surge in defence spending over the next 2 years.	Tensions with Trump over Greenland and over European defence. However, it supports the 5% NATO target.
Sweden	Supports ReArm Europe and believes that the EU should do more for its defence and for Ukraine.	Doesn't expect the US to guarantee Europe's defence but prioritises NATO – it is ready to fulfil any current and future defence obligation.
Finland	Supports EU defence integration and raising defence spending to meet EU targets.	Criticises Trump's trade policy but sees the US as an important ally for security. It is committed to the 5% NATO target.
Estonia	Expressed support for EU defence readiness, cross-border connections and eastern border security.	The US is a fundamental ally for its security. It fully supports NATO target and plans devoting 5.5% of the GDP to defence by 2029.
Latvia	Believes that the ReArm Europe Plan is essential for a stronger Europe and wants to allow large-scale investments in defence.	Believes that the US is important for Ukraine's and Europe's security. Supports the 5% NATO target.
Lithuania	Believes that the EU should spend more on defence, allow common borrowing and a more flexible approach to national deficits when it comes to defence spending.	Believes that the US is fundamental for Europe's and Ukraine's security. It is committed to NATO 5% target.
Poland	Believes that to survive, Europe needs to be armed. It celebrated the adoption of the White Paper and expressed support for EU-wide debt.	Believes that a stronger EU makes a stronger NATO, hence pushing the member states to respect the 5% defence target.
Czech Republic	Full support for the ReArm Europe plan and the changing role of the EIB.	Believes that Europe should stop relying on the US. It expressed commitment to the 5% NATO target.
Romania	The new president expressed a strong pro-European stance and support for the ReArm Europe plan.	It wants to maintain a close relationship with the US. Expressed full support for the 5% target.
Bulgaria	Support for the ReArm Europe plan and the White Paper on Defence.	Supports NATO 5% target and believes that every security format should include the US too.
Croatia	Supports the Readiness 2030 Plan and the White Paper. It believes that 30% of the defence	Believes that the US should stay committed to Europe and that NATO should guarantee

	budget should be used to move from Eastern to Western technology.	collective security. It supports the 5% defence goal.
Slovenia	Expressed support for a joint European response to the security challenges. It is committed to the military projects financed by the EIB, focusing on developing advanced technologies.	Remains devoted to NATO and is committed to increasing defence spending to 3% of the GDP by 2030. It believes that the EU should be united when responding to US challenges.
Austria	It decided to be part of an EU security and defence policy and to use joint procurement in accordance with its constitutional neutrality.	Not a member of NATO but believes that the EU could benefit from good transatlantic relations.
Cyprus	Supports the ReArm Europe plan, especially the SAFE regulation. It fully supports strengthening the EU strategic autonomy.	While not being a member of NATO, it fully supports EU-NATO cooperation and maintaining a strong relationship with the US.
Malta	Supports the EU Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030 and EU strategic autonomy, but in accordance with its neutrality.	Not a member of NATO. It believes that the EU should cooperate with the US to increase security.
Sceptics		
Belgium	Agreed on investing more in defence but criticised the Readiness 2030 Plan for taking loans and increasing the countries' deficit.	Doesn't want to cut the decade long ties with the US and with NATO. Yet, it rejects the 5% target, thus limiting defence spending to 2%.
Netherlands	Supports the goal of enhancing European defence capabilities and investments but opposes common debt instruments.	Believes that NATO and the US are indispensable for European security and supports the 5% defence target.
Hungary	Expressed support for a common EU defence policy and its willingness to contribute funds to it but opposed joint borrowing.	Fully supports Trump and the NATO 5% target.
Ireland	Neutral country. However, it declared its intention to cooperate with the EU, increase defence spending and participate in joint procurement of military hardware.	Not a member of NATO. It believes that Ireland should cooperate with the US to combat the Russian threat.
Opposing		
Italy	Formally opposed the plan of the EU to raise €800 billion for defence, proposing private investment and direct EU	Prioritizes the relationship with the US and creating a European pillar within

	funding. Besides, it believes that a European defence should include NATO.	NATO. Besides, it supports the 5% target.
Slovakia	Expressed little to no engagement with the Readiness 2030 plan, and questioned the necessity to raise defence spending, believing that it is fuelling the war in Ukraine.	Opposes the 5% NATO target and even questions the membership of the alliance.

3.4. Findings and conclusions

One year after being elected, Donald Trump is seeing a sharp drop in support at national level.

To a large extent, the decline stems from the perceived failure to deliver most of the promises he made during his political campaign or at the beginning of his term. Indeed, Trump didn't follow an isolationist foreign policy, but rather a strongly assertive international profile. Significantly, his "America First" strategy didn't translate in a withdrawal from the international scene, but rather in unilateralism. Notably, he supported the Israeli action against Iran, he bombed the northwest of Nigeria, threatened to occupy Greenland and make Canada the 51st state and, at the eve of the new year, he deposed the Venezuelan president. Furthermore, his administration tightened border controls to contain irregular immigration from the Mexican border, nearly triplicating the number of arrests – besides, a lot of people died under custody – and conducted a tariff war against his enemies and allies (Villa & Della Gatta, 20 January 2026).

Nonetheless, Donald Trump was successful in pushing a 5% defence target within NATO, which ended up being endorsed by most his allies. Indeed, Trump compelled his European allies to spend more for their defence. However, he did not use the defence spending increase to withdraw from the continent, but to increase its militarisation (Villa & Della Gatta, 20 January 2026).

This chapter underscored how the re-election of Donald Trump in the United States contributed to the integration process of the European Union in security and defence.

Historically, most member states have relied on the United States for security and defence through the Transatlantic alliance. Nonetheless, the re-

election of Donald Trump in early 2025, marked by a prioritisation of American interests and a rejection of multilateralism, heightened the perception of threat. This shift served as a catalyst for the EU to raise defence spending and accelerate defence integration at EU level.

Significantly, the European Union is experiencing a period of geopolitical uncertainty, dominated by the war between Russia and Ukraine, which led to the adoption of the Strategic Compass to strengthen Europe's defence in 2022. Notably, some member states, especially those sharing a border with Russia, advocated a better security and defence policy at European level and the victory of Donald Trump with his disruptive foreign policy intensified the perception of Russian threat, thereby convincing the member states that the EU needed to achieve greater strategic autonomy.

By analysing the statements, the interviews, the declarations and the policies adopted since January 2025, it becomes clear that Donald Trump has contributed to the decision of the EU to increase defence integration. Indeed, the conclusions of the European Council frequently cite Donald Trump as a determining factor, contributing to the decision to accelerate defence integration and increase defence investment, thereby leading to the adoption of the White Paper on Defence, the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030, and several other policies that have increased, or plan to increase the strategic autonomy of the EU in security and defence policy.

Notably, Trump threatened to leave NATO multiple times, or to relocate his national troops and resources from the European territory to other world regions, unless the European nations assumed greater responsibility for their defence. These statements culminated in the decision to raise the NATO defence spending target to 5% of the GDP.

Trump's rhetoric heightened the security concerns among EU member states, who feared they lacked sufficient military capabilities to face Russia in the eventuality of an armed conflict. Therefore, most members of the European Union started advocating for more defence cooperation within the EU, and outside of the NATO framework, aiming to achieve strategic autonomy and reduce their dependence on the US.

To that end, the EU held multiple formal and informal European Council summits which laid the groundwork for the adoption of new strategies and financial tools, most notably the White Paper on the Future of Defence and the ReArm Europe Plan.

However, while the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission and most Heads of State and Government expressed full support for the adoption of these strategies and for strengthening the strategic autonomy of the EU, certain member states voiced reservations. Indeed, some member states, while supporting the idea of a stronger and more independent EU, expressed scepticism towards the financing mechanism of the project. Other member states, especially those closer to or bordering with Russia, argued that while strengthening EU cooperation, the EU should also cultivate its relationship with the US and adhere to the NATO 5% defence target.

Finally, Slovakia and Italy opposed the EU rearmament plan. Notably, Robert Fico, who had expressed support for the ReArm Europe plan in March, ultimately reversed his position after facing the opposition of his governing coalition (The Slovak Spectator, 23 June 2025). Italy took a similar stance, rejecting the ReArm Europe Plan. Instead, the prime minister Meloni reaffirmed her commitment to the Transatlantic Alliance and to the 5% defence target, advocating for the creation of a European pillar within NATO, rather than the creation of a European army. Besides, she expressed cautiousness about permanent EU borrowing mechanism, thereby favouring the reallocation of existing funds and private investment.

This year also witnessed the shift of several member states, starting with Germany, which initially responded to Trump's re-election with caution, but became more proactive following the nomination of Merz as new Chancellor.

Currently 16 member states have activated the national escape clause (NEC) as part of their national defence funding plans, temporarily allowing them to deviate from their budgetary requirements, while ensuring debt sustainability. These countries are Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia and Slovenia (Council of the European Union, 10 October 2025).

Moreover, the Commission has welcomed the expression of interest from Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Finland under the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument, mobilising at least €127 billion in potential defence procurement.

Sure enough, some member states, while advocating for increasing defence spending and strengthening Europe's strategic autonomy, missed the deadline – the 30th of November – to submit a request under SAFE (European Commission, DG DEFIS, 30 July 2025).

In contrast, some member states that had initially opposed or showed little interest for the ReArm Europe Plan – notably Italy and Slovakia – ultimately endorsed the initiative. Similarly, countries like Belgium and Hungary, which had expressed concerns about common EU borrowing, reversed their positions. This shift was largely due to the SAFE instrument's compatibility with NATO frameworks and the opportunity it provided to invest and develop the domestic defence industries. Furthermore, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the adoption of the 5% target within NATO ultimately convinced these nations to adopt this financial mechanism.

Nevertheless, the implementation of SAFE and the activation of the national escape clause was uneven. On the one hand, some member states, including Spain, Italy and France, still haven't activated the national escape clause, worrying about the fragile fiscal consolidation agreements and about the financial markets – or citing their unwillingness to spend more on defence. On the other hand, other members, like the Netherlands and Sweeden, remained sceptical about the risks for EU economic stability (ICDF, 22 July 2025).

Finally, some member states continue to prioritise alternative cooperation frameworks, while fiscally cautious governments keep dismissing loans as a viable option.

The success of the White Paper depends on the unity of the EU. Indeed, if obstacles emerged in the future, the EU could move towards alternative frameworks, even if outside of the EU (Atlantic Council, 1 April 2025).

Therefore, while several member states have signalled their intent to increase defence spending and create a Europe of the Defence, bolstered by the adoption of the 2030 Readiness Roadmap, it is important to observe whether they will follow through and implement the requirements of the White Paper, by using the financial mechanisms of the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 Plan, or by relying on their national budget or other instruments.

Furthermore, while most of the current governments have favoured EU strategic autonomy and independence from the US in security and defence, a shift in national leadership could stall or reverse the progress made.

Nonetheless, the first year of Trump's second term has been a catalyst for a stronger Europe. Significantly, Russia's hostility towards Ukraine and Trump's disruptive administration, which is now spreading tensions to other policy areas, notably migration and trade, are pressuring the EU to continue increasing its strategic autonomy in security and defence, at least until the end of Trump's mandate or until the end of the war in Ukraine.

The table below summarises the main developments in the EU defence integration process since January 2025.

Table 4: Summary of the process tracing analysis

Event	Implications
Donald Trump becomes the 47th President of the US	"America First" as foreign policy motto. Trump wants his NATO allies to raise their defence spending to 5% of their national GDP, threatening to refrain from defending those not reaching the target.
EU informal summit on defence – 3rd February	The summit was held a few days after Trump got into office. The member states agreed to strengthen the EU's strategic autonomy and increase defence spending to close the capability gaps in defence, while maintaining close cooperation with NATO and the US. Yet, the summit didn't discuss financing methods, thus calling for another summit in March.
European Council Special summit – 6th March	The EU set the basis for the adoption of the White Paper on Defence and the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030, a roadmap to strengthen EU defence and strategic autonomy, including multiple financing mechanisms.

European Council summit – 20th of March	It discussed the adopted documents: The White Paper on Defence: a strategic document to close the capability gaps of the EU in defence, identify what the EU needs to achieve a stronger defence, and reduce US involvement. The ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030: proposal containing a set of financial tools to leverage over €800 billion for EU defence.
Defence Readiness Omnibus – proposal presented on June 17	It reflects the priorities of the White Paper and aims at facilitating the allocation of the defence investments, by simplifying the requirement and streamlining the procedures. Not adopted yet.
NATO summit – 25 June	The members agreed upon raising the defence spending target to 5% of the GDP (as advocated by Trump) – dedicating 3.5% to core defence equipment and 1.5% to critical infrastructures, civil preparedness, innovation and to strengthen the industrial base.
European Council summit – 26 June	The summit discussed the results of the NATO summit, thus reiterating the commitment of the EU to raise defence spending. Besides, it called for other initiatives to strengthen the defence industry and improve the military mobility – all in coherence with the NATO target, endorsed by most member states. Yet, the European Council distanced itself from Trump's statements on Ukraine's security, reiterating its full support to the country.
European Drone Wall and Eastern Flank Watch – 1 October	The Commission and High Representative presented new projects to strengthen Europe's security and achieve defence readiness, mainly to reiterate support for Ukraine and to respond to the airspace violations in Poland and Romania by Russian helicopters.
Joint Communication "Preserving Peace – Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030" – 16 October	A roadmap to review the progress on the White Paper presented in March. While pressuring the EU to mobilise up to €800 billion for defence, it proposes four flagships: the European Drone Defence Initiative, the Eastern Flank Watch, the European Air Shield and the European Space Shield – all aligned with NATO.

Joint Communication on Military Mobility – 19 November	Its adoption is expected to enable armed forces and equipment to move "seamlessly, at speed and at scale" within EU territory – and in coordination with NATO.

Conclusion

The purpose of the dissertation was to analyse how the re-election of Donald Trump in the United States at the end of 2024 contributed to the decision of the European Union to increase its level of integration in security and defence.

The United States have played a fundamental role for the security of the European continent since the end of World War II, most notably through the Transatlantic Alliance, which was established to protect Western Europe from the expansionism of the Soviet Union and its communist ideology.

Europe's reliance on the United States as security provider resulted in decades of underinvestment in security and defence. Indeed, the defence policy of the EU was only established in the 1990s as a complementary framework to NATO rather than a substitute one, and its tasks were rather limited. Besides, several agreements, most notably the "Berlin plus" agreement, granted the EU direct access to NATO assets, thereby disincentivizing the development of the EU's own assets and capabilities.

Nonetheless, the latest geopolitical developments urged the EU to change its approach. Indeed, the Russian expansionism in Ukraine, started with the annexation of Crimea, and followed by the large-scale invasion in 2022, underscored the urgent need for the EU to increase defence spending and improve its defence capabilities.

Moreover, the election of Donald Trump in the United States also drove the EU towards closer defence integration. Notably, Trump's rejection of multilateralism and his threats to abandon the Transatlantic Alliance, unless the allies met specific defence targets, fundamentally challenged the reliability of the US as security provider.

Significantly, his first term, from 2017 to 2021, contributed to the implementation of important security and defence policies.

Consequently, it is reasonable to expect that the re-election of Trump at the end of 2024 would similarly accelerate the EU's defence integration.

Indeed, Trump threatened to leave the Alliance and even allow Russia to do "*whatever the hell they want*" to his European allies, unless they raised their defence spendings to 5% of their national GDPs (Founta et al., 2025, pp. 145-146) – hence threatening to reject the collective security clause, entailed in article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

The impact of Donald Trump's foreign policy on the defence integration process of the European Union was investigated through a process tracing analysis, a qualitative research method that documents the pivotal moments leading to a phenomenon through a careful description of the independent, dependent and intervening variables. This method allows us to individuate patterns in the relationship between the variables, while also considering the role of other intervening variables – most notably the Russian expansionism in Ukraine.

In order to describe the relationship between the variables, we analysed the conclusions of the summits held by the European Council – the institution of the European Union responsible for setting the political priorities of the EU. Moreover, we investigated the interviews, statements, and press conferences given by each member before and after the summits, to individuate how those opinions converged into the European Council conclusions and their immediate aftermath.

The analysis reveals that a majority of Member States responded to Donald Trump's foreign policy by deciding to increase defence spending and by endorsing the creation of a "Europe of Defence". Notably, Western countries and Poland advocated for the EU to stop outsourcing defence to the United States, preparing for the eventuality in which the US doesn't defend Europe against a Russian attack.

In contrast, other countries, especially those in Central and Eastern Europe – geographically closer to Russia, – while supporting EU defence integration, they worked hard to secure US involvement in European security, notably by expressing unwavering support for the 5% defence target wanted by Trump.

Notwithstanding, there was an overall support for EU defence integration, which led to the adoption of the White Paper on Defence, a strategic document identifying the capability gaps of the European Union and elaborating a strategy to close capability gaps and make the EU stronger and more efficient, and the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 Plan, a roadmap to achieve defence readiness by 2030. The latter document introduced different financing mechanisms to increase defence spending, without needing to take money away from other policies, especially health and education.

Significantly, the ReArm Europe plan introduced the SAFE Regulation, which will raise up to €150 billion for defence through joint procurement. Besides, the EU urged the member states to activate the National Escape Clause, to enable them to allocate up to 1.5% of their national GDP to defence, thus allowing for greater flexibility, which, along with the SAFE financial instrument, could raise up to €800 billion. Moreover, the document entailed other financing methods, including the redirection of cohesion funds, the use of European Investment Bank financing and the mobilising of private capital from the Savings and Investment Union strategy.

Most member states endorsed for the ReArm Europe Plan and more than half have activated the SAFE mechanism or the national escape clause before the end of the year.

Besides, all member states have agreed to increase their defence spending – although some of them agreed to spend more than others.

At the end of June 2025, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization held a summit, the first one since the re-election of Donald Trump. At the meeting, the members agreed to raise defence spending to 5% of the GDP – the target advocated by Donald Trump since the beginning of his second term.

The target was endorsed by most EU member states. Some of them, especially those standing closer to Russia, had already expressed their support for the target before it became official. Nevertheless, a few countries, notably Spain, Belgium and Slovakia, while agreeing to dedicate more money to their defence, they rejected the 5% target.

To summarize, the first half of 2025 witnessed significant progress towards a more integrated Europe in security and defence, through the adoption of strategies and roadmaps meant to address capability gaps and make the EU more strategically autonomous.

In the second half of the year, the EU continued to strengthen its defence and to enhance its strategic autonomy, through the adoption of several strategies, most notably the Joint Communication "Preserving Peace – Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030", which introduced a new roadmap to evaluate the progress of the White Paper on Defence.

The document introduced four additional flagships: the European Drone Defence Initiative, the Eastern Flank Watch, the European Air Shield and the European Space Shield (European Commission & High Representative, 16 October 2025).

Notwithstanding, while the first two flagships were introduced in response to the September's Russian airspace violations in Eastern Europe, they are also part of the strategy announced at the June European Council summit and have the purpose of implementing the 5% spending NATO target and strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy. Furthermore, Trump's latest declarations about Ukraine, most notably that, to solve the conflict, Ukraine should give up parts of the occupied territory to Russia, prompted the EU to distance itself from the rhetoric of the US and accelerate its defence integration. Indeed, Trump's declarations met the opposition of most member states, who instead increased their commitment to Ukraine and intensified their sanctions against Russia.

Therefore, the resulting strategic documents voiced the necessity for the EU to become more strategically autonomous in security and defence, while maintaining its cooperation with NATO, which is still the main security provider in Europe. Nonetheless, the EU should also deepen its relationship with like-minded countries, prioritizing Canada and the UK.

Despite the contrasting opinions on how to end the war in Ukraine, the EU remained focused on keeping the United States committed to the continent's security, viewing it as indispensable to achieve a just and long-lasting peace.

Finally, the EU presented other defence proposals that still need to be adopted, for instance the Defence Readiness Omnibus, which will increase the level of defence integration in the coming years.

In a nutshell, the dissertation responded to the research question by finding a connection between Donald Trump's attitude towards Europe and NATO and the acceleration of the integration process in security and defence at EU level.

Nevertheless, the research was not without limitations. For instance, by focusing on the European Council, the research didn't include the analysis of other EU institutions, which also played an important role in the integration process, such as the European Commission.

Furthermore, the European Council consists of the heads of state and government of the 27 member states, each subject to a different legislative duration. Consequently, the members of the European Council changes frequently.

Our analysis found an overall support for the ReArm Europe Plan, facilitated in part by political shifts in the national government, such as for instance, Romania. Indeed, there were only two outliers, notably Italy and Slovakia, although they both ended up submitting an expression of interest under the SAFE financing mechanism. This overall positive attitude was instrumental to the integration process and the approval of the new defence strategies and financial mechanisms.

However, even though we found a pattern in the relationship, the trajectory remains sensitive to future political shifts. Indeed, future leaders might have different opinions on increasing defence spending and increasing the integration level in security and defence policy at EU level, potentially stalling or reversing or the integration process in the future.

Moreover, the upcoming midterm elections in the United States could limit the power of Donald Trump in foreign policy, thereby reducing the impact of his administration on third countries, including the EU.

Ultimately, Trump's re-election was not the only catalyst for EU rearmament. The ongoing war in Ukraine, the tensions in the Middle East and

the growing influence of China have also forced the EU to improve its defence capabilities.

Future studies should continue to monitor the relationship between US foreign policy and EU defence integration until the end of Trump's term. Moreover, future research could also focus on another EU institution, such as the European Commission, the primary architect behind the White Paper and other strategic documents, or the European Parliament, more representative of the European public sentiment.

Finally, scholars should continue to analyse the impact of the other geopolitical developments on the defence integration process – most notably the Russian-Ukraine conflict, which remains the strongest catalyst.

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