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Between the Berlaymont and the Glass Palace

The relative roles of the European Union
and NATO in European defence

Davis Ellison and Daniel Fiott

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Executive Summary

Though European states have an array of difficult relationships around the world, from a belligerent Russia to an ambitious China, it is often the case that the most difficult relations are between and within Western-led international institutions. The relationship of the European Union and NATO has been a case in point for decades, where it remains constrained by political disputes and entrenched suspicion, especially due to the Cyprus-Türkiye-Greece conflict. US politics have been equally disruptive. The second Trump presidency has only underscored that the United States' approach to European security is due for an overhaul. Further, the United Kingdom's departure removed one of the EU's most capable military actors from the Union's institutional framework. Tension has always existed between those states with overlapping memberships in the two organisations. Tensions have often existed between EU and NATO staffs as well. Though only 5 kilometres apart in Brussels, it can seem that the two institutions could not be further apart.

What is striking, however, is the degree to which European governments continue to invest in both organisations despite persistent tensions. For most states, there is no viable alternative to this dense, institutionalised form of security cooperation. National positions do, of course, differ – some allies have long struggled to meet NATO spending targets, while others, such as Poland, have embraced defence investment as a core national priority. However, the broader objective is shared via consensus now: to remove European free riding on the United States and to reinforce credibility on both sides of the Atlantic. Against this backdrop, EU-NATO relations are best understood as a constant negotiation between cooperation and competition. This has, indeed, been the tempo of relations for many decades, starting with the EU's emergence as a security actor in 1992 to the three recent Joint Declarations signed by both organisations since 2016.

This study takes into account the recent state and current state of EU-NATO relations and asks the following questions with an eye towards improved cooperation:

1. Where should NATO and the EU improve their direct institutional cooperation? What gaps exist that could be filled? What could be strengthened?
2. How do we strengthen the role of the EU within NATO? How do we reduce Europe's dependence on the US?
3. Where prudent, how can the EU better align its defence cooperation policy with the needs and demands arising from NATO?

In answering this, there are several specific efforts that can be undertaken at the political and policy levels which can help ease this unruly period of transition away from American predominance in European military affairs. First is a reform to the Berlin Plus Agreement, second is cementing close political relations across Brussels between the PSC and NAC, third is reconceptualising defence scenarios in European strategy, and fourth is doing more to align defence planning between the two organisations.

Introduction

Though European states have an array of difficult relationships around the world, from a belligerent Russia to an ambitious China, it is often the case that the most difficult relations are between and within Western-led international institutions. The relationship of the European Union and NATO has been a case in point for decades, particularly since the Anglo-French Saint Malo declaration in 1998, which gave energy to what would become the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. Tension has always existed between those states with overlapping memberships in the two organisations. Tensions have often existed between EU and NATO staffs as well. Though only 5 kilometres apart in Brussels, it can seem that the two institutions could not be further apart.

This is not the result of a lack of effort to bridge this divide, however. Significant resources have been devoted over the past quarter century to undertake joint ventures, divide responsibilities, and to develop a shared approach to common challenges. The 2025 progress report on EU-NATO cooperation cites 74 common proposals with topics ranging from military mobility, counter-drone technologies, and protecting undersea infrastructure.¹ Institutional cooperation improved markedly considering the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with much closer dialogue on defence industrial issues and support measures to Kyiv. This, however, was due in part to a stronger transatlantic commitment and close dialogue with EU leadership during the Biden administration, a relationship that has markedly shifted under the second Trump administration.²

Certain political factors remain barriers to deeper cooperation. Türkiye's membership in NATO and Cyprus's membership in the EU is a serious thorn in the side of practical efforts at cooperation. Austria's veto on Romania and Bulgaria joining the Schengen Area was a point of political difficulty felt in the halls of partnership staffs at both the EU and NATO.³ Further, Austrian and Irish neutrality are often cited as issues in EU-NATO relations, though officials in both Vienna and Dublin are quick to note that their constitutional practices of neutrality do not hinder their abilities to undertake practical cooperation when needed, nor are either explicitly pacifist, with both maintaining professional armed forces.⁴ In general, the political barriers to cooperation have eroded as the number of states belonging to both organisations has increased. With Sweden and Finland now both members of NATO, only Ireland, Austria and Malta are not a part of NATO. Conversely, though, the US, Canada, Türkiye, Norway, Iceland, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania are not in the EU.

¹ 'Fourth Progress Report on the Implementation of the Common Set of Proposals Endorsed by NATO and EU Councils on 6 December 2016 and 5 December 2017', Joint Declaration, NATO, 17 June 2019, https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/legacy-wcm/media_pdf/pdf_2019_06/190617-4th-Joint-progress-report-EU-NATO-eng.pdf.

² Giuseppe Spatafora, "'You Can't Turn Trump into Biden': Europe Needs a New Approach in 2026", *EU Institute for Security Studies*, December 2025, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/commentary/you-cant-turn-trump-biden-europe-needs-new-approach-2026>.

³ Paul Taylor, 'Europe Needs a Defence Leadership Structure Outside the EU and NATO', *European Policy Centre*, 17 February 2026, <https://www.epc.eu/publication/europe-needs-a-defence-leadership-structure-outside-the-eu-and-nato/>.

⁴ Christoph Schwarz, *Between Principle and Pressure: European Perspectives on Austrian Neutrality*, Nr. 2025/2 (Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy, 2025), https://www.aies.at/download/2025/AIES_Study_-_Between_Principle_and_Pressure_0.pdf.

The literature on this topic has become voluminous over the decades. Much of the past research has been concerned precisely with the potential for overlap between tasks and mandates between the two organisations. John Helderich at the University of Oxford has noted that research on the topic largely argues that any greater role for NATO comes at the expense of possibilities for greater strategic autonomy, and that greater European autonomy is likely to come at the expense of a tight relationship with Washington.⁵ This is roughly consistent with the argument made by Nele Marianne Ewers-Peters that divisiveness over the issue can (at the political, staff, and expert levels) be typecast into the roles of advocates for closer cooperation, active blockers of closer cooperation, “balancers”, and the “neutrals”.⁶ Oftentimes this division is reduced to an East-West division within both the EU and NATO, though this is overly reductive. There are some states, such as the three Baltic states, that embed themselves closely within both structures (e.g., the first “European Commissioner for Defence” is Lithuanian). Meanwhile, founding members of the EU such as the Netherlands have taken a more restrained view on deepening EU roles in security and defence, preferring instead to focus limited resources on NATO.

This present study takes into account the recent state and current state of EU-NATO relations and then asks the following questions with an eye towards improved cooperation:

1. Where should NATO and the EU improve their direct institutional cooperation? What gaps exist that could be filled? What could be strengthened?
2. How do we strengthen the role of the EU within NATO? How do we reduce Europe’s dependence on the US?
3. Where prudent, how can the EU better align its defence cooperation policy with the needs and demands arising from NATO?

It considers these questions both in the international and organisational contexts, considering both political and bureaucratic considerations.

Research on the topic largely argues that any greater role for NATO comes at the expense of possibilities for greater strategic autonomy.

⁵ John Helderich, ‘Trapped in the Grey Zone: NATO-CSDP Relations in a New Era of European Security Governance’, *International Politics* 62, no. 5 (2025): 1070–83, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00647-9>.

⁶ Nele Marianne Ewers-Peters, ‘Positioning Member States in EU-NATO Security Cooperation: Towards a Typology’, *European Security* 32, no. 1 (2023): 22–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2022.2076558>.

Method

This study has built upon past HCSS, CSDS, and external research, specifically studies on European defence policymaking⁷, EU-NATO relations⁸, transatlantic relations⁹, and the geoeconomic development of Europe.¹⁰ It has thereby benefited from years of prior fieldwork in Washington, Brussels, London, Paris, Kyiv, Seoul and Taipei. It further uses data analysis, archival research, interviews, and surveys. This past work is cited throughout. In addition to this, novel field work was conducted through site visits and discussions at NATO Headquarters, multinational closed-door discussions in tandem to the 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague, and engagement in the 2026 Munich Security Conference.

While many of these events and consultations were held under the Chatham House rule, they each nevertheless elicited important insights that are reflected throughout the chapters below. Taken together, they have provided insights on actual policy practices and discussions being held across London, Paris, Washington, and Brussels on EU-NATO institutional changes, precisely the discussions this study aims to inform.

⁷ Davis Ellison and Tim Sweijjs, *Shields and Spears: Nuclear-Conventional Force Balancing and the European Deterrence Architecture* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2026), <https://hcss.nl/report/shields-and-spears/>.

⁸ Hans Horan et al., *Assessing Europe's Resilience and Preparedness in an Era of Strategic Risks* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2025), <https://hcss.nl/report/assessing-europes-resilience-and-preparedness-in-an-era-of-strategic-risks/>.

⁹ Davis Ellison and Paul van Hooft, *Twilight of Atlanticism? America's Shifting Approaches to Europe* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2024), <https://hcss.nl/report/twilight-of-atlanticism-americas-shifting-approaches-to-europe/>.

¹⁰ Irina Patrahau and Benedetta Girardi, 'Opaque Supply Chains May Prevent ReArming Europe', *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*, March 2025, <https://hcss.nl/news/opaque-supply-chains-may-prevent-rearming-europe/>.

Chapter 1.

The History and Current State of EU-NATO Cooperation

Close cooperation between the EU and NATO should, in principle, be almost instinctive. Both organisations sit at the core of Europe's security architecture, albeit with distinct institutional logics and historical trajectories. NATO was created to provide nuclear and conventional deterrence and to guarantee the collective defence of Europe. The EU, by contrast, only emerged as a meaningful security and defence actor in the 1990s, gradually carving out a role as a crisis manager with responsibilities spanning civilian missions, military operations, sanctions and capacity-building. As the EU's ambitions in foreign, security and defence policy expanded after Maastricht, the functional overlap with NATO became unavoidable. Over time, this overlap has translated into more structured interaction, not least through joint political declarations and a growing portfolio of practical cooperation. EU-NATO coordination in the Western Balkans, the Horn of Africa, the Mediterranean and theatres such as Afghanistan and Iraq testified to a shared willingness to stabilise Europe's neighbourhood. Yet it was Russia's behaviour, first in 2014 and decisively in 2022, that fundamentally reset the tone and content of the relationship.

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 forced both organisations to take hybrid threats more seriously and to improve coordination on resilience and situational awareness. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 went much further, acting as a catalyst for deeper cooperation in areas such as critical infrastructure protection, defence procurement and military mobility.¹¹ The war also re-centred European security debates on territorial defence and deterrence. NATO moved rapidly to reassure its members and reinforce the Eastern Flank, while the EU mobilised unprecedented financial and regulatory instruments to support Ukraine militarily and economically. The result has been a more explicit, if still imperfect, division of labour: NATO as the backbone of collective defence, and the EU as an increasingly important actor in defence industrial policy, capability development and partner support. This division has been reinforced by political developments such as Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO, and Denmark's decision to lift its opt-out from the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

At the same time, Russia's war has exposed the limits of Europe's earlier expeditionary mindset. Experiences in Afghanistan and the Sahel have cast doubt over the sustainability

¹¹ Hans Horan et al., *Assessing Europe's Resilience and Preparedness in an Era of Strategic Risks*.

and political appetite for large-scale out-of-area operations. While crisis management remains formally part of NATO's mandate, the centre of gravity has shifted back towards deterrence and defence in Europe itself. Paradoxically, this renewed sense of purpose for NATO has not marginalised the EU. On the contrary, since 2016, the Union's responsibilities in defence industrial cooperation and capability planning have expanded markedly, driven by Brexit, the Trump administration (the first and second) and long-standing concerns about overdependence on the United States. Today it is the EU, rather than NATO, that is training Ukrainian forces and coordinating the delivery of ammunition and military equipment, underscoring how far the Union has moved from its earlier, more tentative role in defence.

Despite this intensification of cooperation, EU-NATO relations remain structurally constrained by political disputes and entrenched suspicion. The Cyprus-Türkiye-Greece conflict continues to cast a long shadow over institutional interaction, effectively stymying information-sharing and allowing individual states to veto cooperation despite the substantial overlap in membership. Türkiye's assertive posture in the Eastern Mediterranean, its constant flirtation with the procurement of Russian air defence systems and its transactional approach to NATO enlargement have strained relations with both Brussels and allied capitals.

US politics have been equally disruptive. Donald Trump's first presidency unsettled European leaders by openly questioning NATO's value, the credibility of Article 5 and even framing the EU as an economic adversary. Although President Joseph Biden's election in 2020 and Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022 appeared to restore a degree of transatlantic cohesion¹², doubts about the long-term reliability of US security guarantees never fully disappeared – particularly as Washington's strategic focus tilts towards China.¹³ The second Trump presidency has only underscored that the United States' approach to European security is due for an overhaul: one focusing more intently on China and forcing NATO allies to spend much more on defence. As the NATO Hague Summit on 25 June 2025 demonstrated, allies have now pledged to invest 5% of their GDP in defence rather than the 2% of GDP previously agreed at the Wales Summit in 2014.

Brexit has further complicated the picture. The United Kingdom's (UK) departure removed one of the EU's most capable military actors from the Union's institutional framework, while political tensions over Northern Ireland and London's post-Brexit positioning limited the scope for structured EU-UK defence cooperation. Yet recent leadership changes point to renewed opportunities. Ursula von der Leyen's continuation as Commission President ensures a broadly Atlanticist orientation in Brussels. Mark Rutte's appointment as NATO Secretary General brings to the Alliance a figure familiar with EU politics. The current UK Labour government has signalled greater openness to cooperation with the EU, as symbolised by the EU-UK Security and Defence Partnership, which adds another potentially stabilising factor.¹⁴ Against the backdrop of President Trump's re-election in 2024, these leadership dynamics may prove decisive in shaping how resilient EU-NATO cooperation remains under political pressure.

What is striking, however, is the degree to which European governments continue to invest in both organisations despite persistent tensions. For most states, there is no viable alternative to this dense, institutionalised form of security cooperation. National positions do, of course,

¹² Ian Lesser, 'Great Optimism in the EU and NATO as Brussels Looks to Biden', *Transatlantic Take*, 2020, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/great-optimism-eu-and-nato-brussels-looks-biden>.

¹³ Luis Simón et al., 'Europe as a Secondary Theater? Competition with China and the Future of America's European Strategy', *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (2021): 90–115.

¹⁴ Jeroen Dobber and Phil Badstieber, 'EU-UK Security Pact: A Good Starting Point for Closer Cooperation', Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, 28 May 2025, <https://www.freiheit.org/global-security-hub-brussels/eu-uk-security-pact-good-starting-point-closer-cooperation>.

EU-NATO relations remain structurally constrained by political disputes and entrenched suspicion.

differ – some allies have long struggled to meet NATO spending targets, while others, such as Poland, have embraced defence investment as a core national priority. However, the broader objective is shared via consensus now: to remove European free-riding on the United States and to reinforce credibility on both sides of the Atlantic. Against this backdrop, EU-NATO relations are best understood as a constant negotiation between cooperation and competition. This has, indeed, been the tempo of relations for many decades, starting with the EU's emergence as a security actor in 1992 to the three recent Joint Declarations signed by both organisations since 2016.

1.1. The growth of EU-NATO cooperation (1990-2014)

The formal origins of EU-NATO relations lie in the early 1990s, when the Treaty of Maastricht marked the EU's tentative but consequential entry into foreign, security and defence policy. Before this moment, NATO's engagement with European defence integration was largely mediated through the Western European Union (WEU), an institution that functioned more as a consultative forum than an operational actor. The endorsement of the Petersberg Tasks by WEU ministers in 1992 nevertheless signalled a shift in European ambition, explicitly linking defence cooperation to crisis management beyond collective defence.¹⁵ As these tasks were gradually absorbed into the EU's institutional framework, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) emerged as the political anchor for a more assertive European role. Still, political intent outpaced military reality. It was not until the Cologne European Council in 1999 that member states explicitly committed themselves to developing autonomous military capabilities. This institutional maturation ran in parallel with early attempts to structure EU-NATO relations, most notably through the Berlin Plus arrangements concluded in 2003, which granted the EU conditional access to NATO planning and assets and established the basic mechanics of inter-organisational cooperation.¹⁶

These developments were inseparable from the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, which left a deep imprint on European strategic thinking. NATO's interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo during the 1990s underscored a blunt reality: even after the Cold War, European security continued to rest on US military power. The failure of Europeans to act decisively on their own lent a certain irony to claims that Europe had entered a post-American security era. Yet dependence on US intervention also generated political unease. In Paris, reliance on Washington was increasingly framed as incompatible with strategic autonomy; in London, the fear was that European passivity would erode the United States' willingness to remain engaged in NATO.¹⁷ These fears and ambitions culminated in the 1998 Saint-Malo Declaration, which reaffirmed NATO's centrality while simultaneously calling for credible European military capabilities, including forces able to act autonomously where the Alliance as a whole chose not to engage. Saint-Malo thus reflected a broad consensus: NATO and the United States remained indispensable, but Europe needed greater capacity and responsibility if the transatlantic bargain was to endure.

¹⁵ Alyson JK Bailes and Graham Messervy-Whiting, *Death of an Institution: The End for Western European Union, a Future for European Defence?*, Egmont Paper no. 46 (Egmont Institute, 2011), <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2013/09/ep46.pdf?type=pdf>.

¹⁶ Jolyon Howorth, 'European Defence and NATO: From Competition to Co-Operation to Replacement?', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 63, no. S1 (2025): 156–68, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.70010>.

¹⁷ Stephanie Anderson, 'EU, NATO, and CSCE Responses to the Yugoslav Crisis: Testing Europe's New Security Architecture', *European Security* 4, no. 2 (1995): 328–53.

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 exposed deep fractures within the Alliance and pushed France and Germany to prioritise EU-based defence integration.

Saint-Malo proved to be a critical moment in European defence. Without challenging NATO's primacy, it facilitated the transfer of the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) from the WEU into the EU itself. This process was consolidated with the launch of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) in 1999, following the Cologne and Helsinki European Councils. From the outset, cooperation with NATO was hardwired into this project. *Operation Althea* in Bosnia and Herzegovina, launched in 2004 under the Berlin Plus framework, became the most visible expression of this logic, with the EU assuming responsibility from NATO while relying on allied assets. In fact, the Berlin Plus Agreement followed the 1999 NATO Washington Summit, where it was agreed that the EU should be able to conduct basic military tasks alone, if necessary.¹⁸

Initially, Berlin Plus was established to support EU crisis management operations and missions, mainly because the Union had not yet established its own credible command and control (C2) instruments – the Union was, in the late 1990s, practically and operationally de facto dependent on NATO. Even though this situation has changed today, with the Union able to conduct a vast array of military operations and missions autonomously, it is often overlooked that Berlin Plus was also somewhat of a political declaration by the EU and NATO, which predates the three Joint Declarations signed by both organisations since 2016. Indeed, the Berlin Plus Agreement acknowledged that 'NATO and the European Union are working together to prevent and resolve crises and armed conflicts in Europe and beyond [and that] they share common strategic interests and cooperate in a spirit of complementarity and partnership'.¹⁹

Yet the EU's growing profile in security and defence also triggered transatlantic anxieties. Former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's warning against duplication, discrimination and decoupling (the so-called "3Ds") encapsulated Washington's red lines and fears, reinforcing the expectation that greater European capacity should strengthen NATO rather than dilute US leadership. In doing so, it effectively set the conceptual boundaries of EU-NATO relations for the decade that followed. As former Secretary of State Albright stated in December 1998, 'our interest is clear: we want a Europe that can act. We want a Europe with modern, flexible military forces that are capable of putting out fires in Europe's backyard and working with us [the United States] through the alliance to defend our common interests'.²⁰ However, the 3Ds were designed to reiterate the United States' expectation that Europe would not develop an independent military structure that would challenge NATO decision-making (D one), defence industrial policy (D two) or work against non-EU members in the alliance (D three).

Subsequent shocks further shaped the relationship. The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 exposed deep fractures within the Alliance and pushed France and Germany to prioritise EU-based defence integration. Although the immediate political fallout was destabilising, the longer-term effect was to accelerate institutional consolidation within the EU, contributing indirectly to the Treaty of Lisbon. The Lisbon Treaty strengthened the Union's security architecture through the introduction of the mutual assistance clause and the solidarity clause, while laying the groundwork for deeper forms of cooperation such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). At the same time, successive rounds of NATO and EU enlargement

¹⁸ Nicholas Williams, 'NATO-EU Cooperation: Don't Forget Berlin Plus!', *European Leadership Network*, 26 March 2018, <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/nato-eu-cooperation-dont-forget-berlin-plus/>.

¹⁹ Tim Waugh, 'Berlin Plus Agreement', European Parliament, 2004, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dv/berlinplus_/berlinplus_en.pdf.

²⁰ Madeleine K. Albright, *The Right Balance Will Secure NATO's Future*, Chillcot Papers no. 4, From St. Malo to Nice: European Defence: Core Documents (European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2001), 10–12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06989.8>.

altered the internal balance of both organisations. The accession of Central and Eastern European states reinforced NATO's core deterrence function and the imperative of sustained US engagement. Yet even as enlargement entrenched NATO's relevance, doubts about its purpose persisted, with a number of post-Cold War observers openly questioning whether the Alliance had outlived its strategic utility.²¹

1.2. The birth pangs of EU-NATO cooperation (2014-2022)

However, in many respects, any lingering notion of NATO's obsolescence was decisively punctured by Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Although neither NATO nor the EU intervened militarily to reverse Moscow's actions, the crisis marked a strategic watershed moment. It restored a sense of common purpose and reaffirmed the centrality of transatlantic security cooperation. For NATO, Crimea underscored the enduring logic of collective defence and the need to reassure allies on the Eastern Flank against further Russian coercion. The methods employed by Moscow – reminiscent of the Cold War and Soviet Union with unmarked forces, disinformation and coercion below the threshold of open war – revived uncomfortable historical echoes and challenged assumptions about the nature of contemporary conflict.

The response to Crimea also clarified the functional differentiation between NATO and the EU. As the Alliance refocused on nuclear and conventional deterrence, including through enhanced readiness and a NATO Response Force, the EU was increasingly called upon to address the non-military dimensions of the threat. The Union's role expanded into areas where it wields a comparative advantage: cyber security, counter-disinformation, sanctions, regulatory power and the protection of critical infrastructure. Rather than fuelling institutional rivalry, this division of labour curiously generated a measure of strategic complementarity and reduced some of the bureaucratic friction that had characterised earlier phases of the relationship. In essence, the magnitude of Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine forced NATO and the EU to work together and the Obama administration supported such efforts by deploying more US troops to European soil and engaging in dedicated US-EU summits.²²

From 2014 onwards, this logic translated into more systematic cooperation.²³ NATO interpreted developments in Ukraine as confirmation of its enduring relevance, while the EU approached the conflict through the lens of its economic, diplomatic and normative engagement with Kyiv. The result was a relatively stable equilibrium: NATO concentrated on military reassurance and deterrence, while the EU focused on economic support and punitive measures against Russia. This balance proved resilient enough to absorb further political shocks. Brexit, in particular, complicated EU-NATO relations by removing one of Europe's

²¹ Hugh De Santis, 'The Graying of NATO', *The Washington Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1991): 51–65; Michael Kimmage, 'Time for NATO to Close Its Door', *Foreign Affairs* (Washington, D.C.), 17 January 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2022-01-17/time-nato-close-its-door>; Christian Whiton, 'NATO Is Obsolete', *The National Interest*, 7 July 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/nato-obsolete-25167>; Irving Kristol, 'Who Now Cares About NATO?', *Wall Street Journal* (New York), 6 February 1995.

²² Robert A. Pollard, *Jumpstarting the U.S.-EU Relationship: Mr. Obama Goes to Brussels* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2014), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/jumpstarting-us-eu-relationship-mr-obama-goes-brussels>.

²³ Gustav Lindstrom and Thierry Tardy, eds, *The EU and NATO: The Essential Partners* (EU Institute for Security Studies, 2019), https://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/08e9e07b-cd30-11e9-992f-01aa75e-d71a1.0001.01/DOC_1.

NATO concentrated on military reassurance and deterrence, while the EU focused on economic support and punitive measures against Russia.

most capable military actors from the Union and injecting further tensions into EU-UK relations.²⁴ Yet the UK's departure also had paradoxical effects. Freed from longstanding British scepticism, the EU accelerated defence integration through initiatives such as the European Defence Fund (EDF), PESCO, an embryonic command-and-control capacity (the MPCC) and new mechanisms for monitoring capability development (CARD) – steps that would have been far more difficult with London still inside the Union.

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 as US president subjected EU-NATO relations to an additional stress test. For the first time, a US president openly questioned the EU's legitimacy, framed it as an economic adversary and cast doubt on Washington's commitment to collective defence. While NATO's leadership sought to preserve cohesion and pressed allies to increase defence spending, European governments responded by deepening cooperation within the EU framework. This amounted to a form of strategic hedging²⁵, with several member states investing in EU-based capability development and defence-industrial cooperation as insurance against US unpredictability.²⁶ Predictably, this shift generated new transatlantic frictions, particularly as Washington objected to its exclusion from EU-funded defence initiatives despite its own confrontational posture towards the Union.²⁷

Against this volatile political backdrop, institutionalised EU-NATO cooperation proved more resilient than might have been expected. The first Joint Declaration, signed in July 2016, was primarily political in nature but provided a practical framework for cooperation across a wide range of areas, from hybrid threats and cyber defence to maritime security, civil preparedness and military exercises. By establishing a shared agenda of concrete actions, it acted as a form of institutional ballast, allowing cooperation to continue beneath increasingly strained transatlantic politics. While it did little to resolve longstanding structural constraints – not least disputes involving Cyprus and Türkiye – it prevented relations from sliding into paralysis at a moment of acute political uncertainty.

And there were some notable success stories in EU-NATO cooperation from an operational perspective. In 2016, NATO and the EU's border agency Frontex exchanged real-time information and data on migration flows, and NATO supported Frontex's deployment under Operation Poseidon through the provision of naval vessels to support ISR tasks.²⁸ Additionally, the first Joint Declaration led to enhanced cooperation on countering hybrid threats and the EU and NATO conducted their first joint intelligence assessment on hybrid threats in Europe.²⁹ There was also more intense cooperation in the maritime domain, with

²⁴ Peter Round et al., *European Strategic Autonomy and Brexit* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018), <https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/images/comment/military-balance-blog/2018/june/european-strategic-autonomy-and-brex-it-iiss-dgap.pdf>.

²⁵ Ben Barry et al., *Defending Europe Without the United States: Costs and Consequences* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025), <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2025/05/defending-europe-without--the-united-states-costs-and-consequences/>; Alexandr Burilkov and Guntram B. Wolff, *Defending Europe without the US: First Estimates of What Is Needed* (Bruegel, 2025), <https://www.bruegel.org/analysis/defending-europe-without-us-first-estimates-what-needed>.

²⁶ Daniel Fiott, 'The EU, NATO and the European Defence Market: Do Institutional Responses to Defence Globalisation Matter?', *European Security* 26, no. 3 (2017): 398–414.

²⁷ Daniel Fiott, *Cooperation in an Era of Strategic Competition: EU-NATO Relations in the Context of War and Rivalry*, NUPI Policy Brief (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2023), <https://www.nupi.no/en/publications/cristin-pub/cooperation-in-an-era-of-strategic-competitioeu-nato-relations-in-the-context-of-war-and-rivalry>.

²⁸ Antonia-Maria Sarantaki, *Frontex & NATO: A New Partnership in the Making*, Working Paper Nr 100/2019 (ELIAMEP, 2019), https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/100_2018_-WORKING-PAPER-_Antonia-Maria-Sarantaki.pdf.

²⁹ 'Fourth Progress Report on the Implementation of the Common Set of Proposals Endorsed by NATO and EU Councils on 6 December 2016 and 5 December 2017'.

data and intelligence exchanges between the EU's Operation Sophia in the Mediterranean and NATO's Operation Sea Guardian. What is more, the first Joint Declaration paved the way for the first-ever joint EU-NATO hybrid exercise (PACE-17) through parallel and coordinated exercises.

Ironically, the Trump presidency also helped to push the EU into new territory in security and defence. Sustained pressure on European allies to spend more, combined with doubts about US commitments, injected momentum into initiatives such as the EDF and PESCO. Even if their operational impact remains questionable, their creation during this period helped lock in participation and embed defence cooperation more firmly within the EU's institutional defence industrial framework. A second Joint Declaration in 2018 reaffirmed the commitment to EU-NATO cooperation, even as transatlantic tensions over trade and burden-sharing continued to spill into the security domain. These strains were further crystallised by President Emmanuel Macron's 2019 claim that NATO was "brain dead", a remark that captured European anxieties about consultation, alliance cohesion and US leadership, while once again elevating the debate over European strategic autonomy.³⁰

1.3. EU-NATO cooperation and War in Europe (2022-2024)

The election of President Joseph Biden in 2020 produced a cautious thaw in EU-US relations and, by extension, reshaped the political context of EU-NATO cooperation. From the outset, the Biden administration prioritised restoring predictability, trust and institutionalised dialogue across the Atlantic. This effort was not without disruption. The chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and the mishandling of French interests in the AUKUS submarine agreement in 2021 exposed enduring fractures and sensitivities. Nevertheless, Washington deliberately sought to stabilise defence dialogue with the EU outside the NATO framework and to ease trade tensions. At the same time, the administration was explicit that China constituted its primary long-term security challenge, a framing that implicitly raised doubts about the permanence of US military primacy in Europe.³¹ These assumptions were abruptly overturned by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which re-centred European security in Washington's strategic calculations and triggered a substantial reinforcement of US military presence on the continent.

Russia's war against Ukraine reopened foundational questions about Europe's capacity for self-defence. Any residual belief that Europe could secure itself independently of the United States and NATO was severely tested, not least by Washington's central role in sustaining Ukraine's war effort.³² US military and financial assistance dwarfed European contributions in qualitative terms, particularly in high-end capabilities. While the EU mobilised significant aggregate support, only a fraction translated into military assistance, and Europe's defence industrial base struggled to scale production at the pace required by the conflict. Persistent shortfalls in ammunition, advanced systems and enablers exposed long-standing structural weaknesses. By contrast, despite facing its own production bottlenecks, US industry

³⁰ 'Emmanuel Macron Warns Europe: NATO Is Becoming Brain-Dead', *The Economist* (London), 11 July 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>.

³¹ Ellison and van Hooft, *Twilight of Atlanticism? America's Shifting Approaches to Europe*.

³² Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Strengthening the US and NATO Defense Postures in Europe after Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*, Talbot Paper (Brookings Institute, 2022), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/strengthening-the-us-and-nato-defense-postures-in-europe-after-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

delivered the bulk of Ukraine's artillery, air defence, electronic warfare and situational awareness capabilities, reinforcing the reality of continued American indispensability.

Since the outbreak of the war – and sharpened further by the second Trump presidency – the EU and NATO have recalibrated their division of labour. NATO remains the bedrock of nuclear and conventional deterrence, but the EU has assumed more visible and innovative roles.³³ These efforts fall short of compensating for any major US retrenchment, particularly given signals from Washington about scaling back support for Ukraine and reassessing its European posture. Nonetheless, the EU's contribution has evolved in three important respects. First, the Union has become the primary framework for training Ukraine's armed forces. Second, it has leveraged Single Market competences to stimulate defence industrial production and replenish European stockpiles. Third, the expansion of the European Peace Facility (EPF) has entrenched the EU as a direct provider of military assistance, marking a decisive shift beyond crisis management towards an explicit role in Europe's defence.

Russia's invasion has also prompted strategic reorientation within both organisations. For the EU, the adoption of the Strategic Compass in 2022 represented a qualitative break with earlier documents that offered broad strategic guidance while avoiding the concrete realities of defence planning. Adopted in March 2022 after an extended reflection process, the Compass constitutes the Union's first genuine defence strategy, specifying ambitions, instruments and timelines. NATO, in parallel, updated its own Strategic Concept at the Madrid Summit in June 2022, replacing the 2010 version.³⁴ The revised Concept reasserted NATO's core mission of collective defence, scaled back earlier aspirations of a more global reach and formally recognised China as a systemic challenge, albeit secondary to the Russian threat.

Taken together, the EU's Strategic Compass and NATO's Strategic Concept reveal both convergence and tension in the relationship. NATO describes the EU as a "unique and essential partner" and highlights cooperation across military mobility, resilience, emerging technologies, cyber and hybrid threats, climate security and China. The EU mirrors many of these priorities but places greater emphasis on joint exercises, capability development, air security and shared situational awareness. This alignment underpinned the third EU-NATO Joint Declaration, which extended cooperation into new areas such as critical infrastructure protection, space security and countering foreign interference, reinforcing a shared understanding of security as a multi-domain challenge.

Defence-industrial politics, however, remain a persistent challenge. NATO has long been perceived as structurally favouring US industry, reinforcing incentives for allies to procure American equipment. The EU's defence instruments, notably the EDF and PESCO, were explicitly designed to strengthen Europe's industrial base and have sharpened sensitivities in Washington and London. NATO's insistence on the inclusion of non-EU allies in EU defence initiatives reflects these concerns. While the EU has not fundamentally altered the eligibility rules of its programmes, it has demonstrated flexibility through PESCO by admitting partners such as the US, Canada, Norway and the UK into selected projects. Canada's participation in the SAFE defence loan scheme further illustrates this pragmatism. Claims of duplication have traditionally been directed at the EU, yet NATO's own innovation initiatives, including DIANA and the NATO Innovation Fund, raise parallel questions, even if their scale and logic differ from EU instruments.

³³ Daniel Fiott, *The Turning Tide? A European Agenda for the Washington Summit* (Centre for Security, Diplomacy, and Strategy, 2024), <https://csds.vub.be/publication/the-turning-tide-a-european-agenda-for-the-washington-summit/>.

³⁴ 'NATO Strategic Concept 2022', NATO, 2022, <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/>.

NATO remains the bedrock of nuclear and conventional deterrence, but the EU has assumed more visible and innovative roles.

The second election of Donald Trump in 2024 marked a decisive turning point in EU-NATO relations. Rather than restoring continuity, it reshaped the strategic environment through a transactional and coercive approach to alliance management. “America First” priorities were unapologetically foregrounded, subordinating alliance cohesion to domestic political imperatives. EU-NATO relations became entangled in a dense web of interlinked issues spanning trade, defence spending and industrial policy. From the outset of his second term, President Trump framed the alliance relationship as a transactional bargain, reiterating demands for Europeans to shoulder a greater share of the defence burden and explicitly linking US commitment to European financial contributions.

1.4. EU-NATO cooperation in the Shadow of The Hague (2025)

This logic of Trumpian transactionalism was institutionalised at the 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague, where allies agreed to raise defence spending targets to 5% of GDP by 2035. The agreement distinguished between 3.5% for core defence requirements and 1.5% for broader security-related investments.³⁵ Allies acquiesced partly because of Trump’s rhetorical conditionality on US commitment and partly because the deal provided a tangible demonstration of European responsibility. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte framed the pledge as essential to deterrence in an environment defined by Russian aggression and rising Chinese power, stressing not only higher spending but also improvements in capability, interoperability and resilience.

Yet the Hague Summit also exposed deep fissures. The headline target masked sharp divergences in fiscal capacity and political will, with some states openly questioning the feasibility of the new targets, while others pursued even higher levels of spending.³⁶ Although the Summit reaffirmed Article 5 commitments, it did so amid growing unease about US reliability. At the same time, the spending pledge created space for enhanced EU-NATO complementarity. The EU’s substantial defence investments and relaxed fiscal rules enable member states to channel hundreds of billions of euros into capabilities that contribute to NATO objectives, even if these contributions are not captured in alliance metrics. Moreover, in the 1.5% category – covering cyber defence, infrastructure and resilience – the EU arguably possesses stronger tools than NATO itself, given its regulatory and financial reach.

Despite these openings, EU-NATO relations remain embedded in wider transatlantic tensions. The 2025 EU–US Trade Deal, agreed at Turnberry, Scotland, added a further layer of complexity. Negotiated under the threat of punitive tariffs, the agreement capped most EU exports at a 15% tariff while securing preferential treatment for selected strategic goods and establishing mechanisms for cooperation on supply chains, investment screening and economic security. While EU leaders presented the deal as averting a damaging trade war between the US and EU, its substance provoked controversy. The tariff ceiling underscored the asymmetry of the negotiations and fuelled criticism that Brussels had traded strategic autonomy for short-term stability.³⁷

³⁵ Elie Perot, *Fuzzy, Loose, Soft: NATO’s New Defence Spending Targets* (Centre for Security, Diplomacy, and Strategy, 2025), <https://csds.vub.be/publication/fuzzy-loose-soft-natos-new-defence-spending-targets/>.

³⁶ Nan Tian et al., *NATO’s New Spending Target: Challenges and Risks Associated with a Political Signal* | SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2025), <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/essay/2025/natos-new-spending-target-challenges-and-risks-associated-political-signal>.

³⁷ Cecilia Malmström, ‘Trump’s Very Bad Trade Deal with Europe’, RealTime Economics, *Peterson Institute for International Economics*, 31 July 2025, <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economics/2025/trumps-very-bad-trade-deal-europe>.

The architecture of the Turnberry agreement illustrates the growing fusion of economic and security policy. Trade concessions were explicitly linked to energy purchases, technology flows and market access, reflecting a strategic environment in which economic instruments are deployed to advance geopolitical objectives. For the EU, safeguarding export access was essential; for the US, trade leverage served broader domestic and strategic aims. This entanglement underscores a central challenge for EU-NATO relations: economic integration and security cooperation are no longer separable domains but mutually reinforcing – and constraining – dimensions of transatlantic relations.

The implications for NATO are significant. Once conceived primarily as a military alliance, NATO now operates in a context where economic security and trade policy shape alliance cohesion. President Trump's elevation of tariffs to the level of alliance politics has forced allies to confront how economic coercion intersects with collective defence. Protectionist trade measures risk undermining the economic foundations required to sustain higher defence spending. Notably, the Hague Summit framed defence commitments not only in military terms but also around resilience, supply chains and infrastructure protection – areas where the EU has distinctive advantages.

The interaction between the EU and NATO during the second Trump administration reveals a deeper structural shift, however. The EU is no longer a subordinate actor in strategic industrial policy. Where EU defence initiatives were once framed cautiously as complementary to NATO, the Union now asserts itself explicitly as a strategic actor. Investments in capability development, defence industrial cooperation and innovation increasingly challenge US dominance in defence markets and supply chains. While operational cooperation and interoperability remain intact, the EU's expanding defence-industrial footprint introduces new fault lines into the transatlantic security order.

Ironically, President Trump's transactional approach has accelerated European cooperation in defence. Such external pressure has prompted several EU member states to fast-track defence spending and long-delayed capability projects. Instruments such as the EDF and PESCO are now pursued not merely as burden-sharing mechanisms but as foundations for an autonomous European defence capacity. The SAFE defence loan instrument and the European Defence Industrial Programme (EDIP) reinforce this trajectory, signalling a more ambitious industrial strategy. While NATO remains the backbone of collective defence, the EU's expanded role in innovation, industrial augmentation and economic security points to a maturing strategic identity that should become increasingly more resilient to US policy volatility.

This identity, however, is uneven. Intra-EU divisions persist over how to engage with President Trump. France and Germany both articulate visions of greater European independence but diverge on its expression, while Eastern Flank states remain wary of any move that could dilute US commitment and weaken deterrence against Russia. The alliance is thus navigating a transition from a security order anchored in stable American leadership to one requiring greater European agency alongside continued interoperability. The Hague commitments reflect consensus on the need for greater European contribution, but they also raise questions about alliance coherence should US disengagement become more pronounced.

Fears of an imminent US withdrawal from NATO may be overstated. European allies are increasing defence efforts, and Washington appears reluctant to relinquish political control of the Alliance, despite the rhetoric. Many European governments continue to procure US equipment as a means of sustaining security guarantees, reinforcing a transactional logic

NATO now operates in a context where economic security and trade policy shape alliance cohesion.

that has intensified since Trump's first presidency. The linkage between defence spending, procurement, energy and trade – as exemplified by the Turnberry deal – suggests that NATO will continue to function as a mechanism for extracting European investment into the US defence industry.³⁸

Perhaps the more challenging element of future EU-NATO relations is the approach taken in the 2025 US National Security Strategy. Not only does the Strategy reinforce the logic that NATO is central to US security and economic interests, but, for the first time, it directs US ire towards the EU in novel and worrying ways. Indeed, while the 2025 National Security Strategy foregrounds “America First” principles and downplays multilateralism, it treats NATO as a vehicle for sovereign cooperation aligned with US interests. This reflects a statist conception of alliance politics in which European states are encouraged to be “sovereign” while remaining under US tutelage within NATO. And then, in the 2026 National Defence Strategy, the Trump administration underlined that Europe's security is ‘first and foremost’ a responsibility for Europeans.³⁹

For EU-NATO cooperation, this creates a paradox. The Trump administration views the EU as the wrong type of security actor: one rooted in pooled sovereignty and insufficiently responsive to US demands. By privileging national sovereignty and identity, the Strategy implicitly questions the legitimacy of supranational frameworks foundational to post-war European security. European leaders, by contrast, emphasise that collective defence is inseparable from shared values and democratic norms. The resulting tension is increasingly explicit. US rhetoric portrays the EU as weak and obstructive, while European officials warn against external interference in domestic political choices. Against this backdrop, EU-NATO cooperation is likely to continue in less visible forms, increasingly channelled through staff-to-staff engagement.

This quiet pragmatism allows NATO to benefit from the EU's expanding defence instruments while limiting political exposure to an administration openly sceptical of European integration. This appears to be the conclusion of the 10th progress report on EU-NATO cooperation, published in June 2025. Not only have the EU and NATO engaged in a dense set of dialogues, mainly centred on the common approach to supporting Ukraine, but they have also enhanced operational exchanges on cyber defence and countering hybrid threats.⁴⁰ In particular, in 2025, EU-NATO cooperation deepened in new threat domains such as protecting critical infrastructure and securing critical supplies. The two partners also enhanced cooperation on supporting defence capacity building in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and other partners. Additionally, the EU participated in several more NATO military exercises, and the EU and NATO continued to exchange operational information in the maritime domain.⁴¹

³⁸ Alexandr Burilkov et al., *Fit for war by 2030? European rearmament efforts vis-a-vis Russia* (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2025), <https://www.kielinstitut.de/de/publikationen/fit-for-war-by-2030-european-rearmament-efforts-vis-a-vis-russia-18194/>.

³⁹ ‘2026 National Defense Strategy’, Department of Defense, January 2026, 11, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>.

⁴⁰ ‘Tenth Progress Report on the Implementation of the Common Set of Proposals Endorsed by EU and NATO Councils on 6 December 2016 and 5 December 2017’, European Commission, June 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/f54kvokr/250605-progress-report-nr10-eu-nato.pdf>.

⁴¹ ‘Tenth Progress Report on the Implementation of the Common Set of Proposals Endorsed by EU and NATO Councils on 6 December 2016 and 5 December 2017’.

1.5. In summary

EU-NATO relations are today set against a markedly altered strategic backdrop shaped by Russia's war against Ukraine and intensifying US-China geopolitical competition. There is, however, a paradox at the heart of EU-NATO relations. While the strategic logic for deeper EU-NATO cooperation has rarely been stronger, meaningful political convergence between the two organisations remains constrained by persistent transatlantic tensions. In practice, organisational cooperation has advanced in a number of functional areas, including maritime security, countering hybrid threats and resilience. Yet politically, the relationship continues to be framed through a competitive lens, despite the substantial overlap in membership. NATO, in particular, is under pressure to reaffirm its relevance at a time when US strategic attention is increasingly oriented towards the Indo-Pacific. Although it remains uncertain whether the second Trump administration will ultimately scale back US commitments to European security, the perception of shifting priorities in Washington weighs heavily on alliance dynamics. Absent clear US leadership, it is difficult to envisage how NATO could transition smoothly towards a more Europeanised political and military posture.

Counterintuitively, the prospect of any US deprioritisation of European security has not yet translated into a decisive push for closer EU-NATO cooperation. If anything, political ambition appears muted. This restraint is, to an extent, understandable. NATO has little incentive to foreground cooperation with the EU at a moment when the US administration is openly sceptical of European integration. The tone and substance of the 2025 US National Security Strategy, which portrays the EU as an unhelpful and declining transnational actor, reinforce this caution. In such a context, NATO's leadership is likely to avoid highly visible demonstrations of EU-NATO convergence. The strategic cost of this posture, however, is significant. Without deeper engagement with the EU, NATO lacks access to the financial, regulatory and industrial tools that are increasingly essential for developing Europe's conventional military capabilities – precisely at a time when the US expects Europeans to do more as Washington concentrates on China.

Where this political equilibrium ultimately leads remains uncertain. There are compelling strategic reasons for the EU and NATO to intensify cooperation, yet transatlantic politics continue to inhibit this trajectory. These constraints are compounded by longstanding sources of friction, including the post-Brexit relationship with the UK and unresolved disputes involving Türkiye, Greece and Cyprus, notwithstanding the positive effects of Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO. In this environment, the most viable path forward may lie in continuing to deepen cooperation away from the political spotlight, embedding collaboration at the staff-to-staff level. This has, in practice, been the dominant approach since the third Joint Declaration in 2023. As European allies increasingly speak of the "Europeanisation" of NATO, it follows that the EU may need to play a more substantial role in enabling the Alliance to adapt to the prevailing geostrategic conditions, even if this contribution remains politically understated.

Chapter 2.

Building the future of EU-NATO relations in the era of ‘Europeanisation’

In practical terms, what does it mean to ‘Europeanise’ continental defence and security institutions, and what does this mean for the EU and NATO? There are a number of existing staff-to-staff relationships across both institutions, with NATO Permanent Liaison Team operating at the EU Military Staff since November 2005 and an EU Cell at SHAPE since March 2006. The SHAPE Vice Chief of Staff serves as the EU Operational Commander for EUFOR Althea in Bosnia under the Berlin Plus Agreement. There are many staff-level discussions across issues from crisis management, exercise coordination, and defence planning.

The real question is what EU-NATO cooperation looks like with less of the United States in NATO. As noted above, it is not as if Washington has been the only barrier to increased institutional cooperation. Were SACEUR to become a European officer, this would not solve the Cyprus dispute that causes problems in Brussels. Relatedly, given that a total U.S. withdrawal from the alliance has not (yet) occurred, Washington is still going to be involved in decisions related to the EU-NATO relationship. Priority then is reforming the institutional relationship so barriers to greater European responsibility taking are removed and redundancies are reduced. We already have a foretaste of what less US leadership in NATO looks like, with Washington handing several joint force NATO commands to European allies.

Disruptions from reduced US involvement in European security institutions is mitigated in part by dual-hatted European staffs in Brussels. Dual membership in NATO and the EU from Europeans by default protects some initiatives, particularly those that are most directly complementary, such as military mobility. While institutional cooperation may atrophy, allied staffs in capitals are aware of discussions in both organisations and can coordinate national activity as needed. Further, amongst military staffs, representatives to the NATO and EU Military Committees are the same in the cases of France, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, Spain, and Poland. These military representative offices are then alternative sites for EU-NATO cooperation, in an unofficial nature at least. From an intelligence and information perspective, this means that to a limited extent, sensitive intelligence is, in theory, available to both institutions at the national level, even if not reaching the international staffs themselves. The distance between the two institutions is not as far as may be felt externally, even though many allies and EU member states are still reluctant to share sensitive information and intelligence, even in an EU setting, given fears of leaks.

The real question is what EU-NATO cooperation looks like with less of the United States in NATO.

Proposed reforms to the EU-NATO relationship often highlight preferences for one institution over another. More transatlantic voices view European efforts at building a 'pillar' as duplicative, underpinned by the political assumption that US retrenchment will be short-lived. This perspective often opposes any active reforms of the EU-NATO relationship, viewing it as a tacit repudiation of transatlantic ties. This was on best display during NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte's January 2026 exchange in the European Parliament in which he argued "...if anyone thinks here, again, that the European Union, or Europe as a whole, can defend itself without the US, keep on dreaming. You can't. We can't. We need each other."⁴² External voices without a direct role in protecting NATO equities have shared a similar perspective, with the general argument being that the threat to Europe is too urgent to jettison NATO and the American backstop given the relatively weaker European defence position. For example, Paul Taylor at the European Policy Centre argues that "The future defence of Europe and its global interests can only be achieved with strengthened European military capability within NATO."⁴³

Rutte's position and those scholarly voices that support it run opposite to those in favour not only of greater Europeanisation within NATO, but of preferencing EU institutions over NATO. The Secretary-General's speech faced backlash from various political corners, particularly in France, with French foreign minister Jean-Noël Barrot responding that "Europeans can and must take charge of their own security. This is the European pillar of NATO." More pointedly, French centre-right MEP Nathalie Loiseau called Rutte's approach "disgraceful," and that Europe doesn't "need a Trump zealot." This rhetoric has covered over a deeper concern within the institutions themselves that Rutte's approach is short-termism and sacrificing long-term strengthening of the European pillar to immediate alliance stability. Speaking anonymously to Politico, one NATO diplomat noted that "For the benefit of the alliance, [Rutte's] sucking up to Trump...But the question is, where does it end?"⁴⁴

Former British diplomat and now Centre for European Reform deputy director Ian Bond has written that European officials and experts have underestimated the depth of American retrenchment and democratic backsliding, and that "European countries will therefore need to prepare to defend themselves with less or potentially no US help." Arguing further, Bond notes that Europeans need to pursue a crash effort at reducing reliance on American strategic enablers (like strategic airlift and space-based intelligence) and to be politically ready for Europeanising the NATO Command Structure.⁴⁵ Agreeing with Bond, former senior NATO official and secretary general of the AeroSpace and Defence Industries Association of Europe (ASD) Camille Grand has written that what is needed is a "decade-long, sustained effort that will profoundly transform NATO and the EU" with a particular effort to ensure European states can defend the continent in even the most demanding scenarios usually delegated to the US through NATO.⁴⁶

⁴² 'Remarks by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte at the Meeting of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and Committee on Security and Defence (SEDE)', NATO, 26 January 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2026/01/26/remarks-by-nato-secretary-general-mark-rutte-at-the-meeting-of-the-european-parliaments-committee-on-security-and-defence>.

⁴³ Paul Taylor, 'Time for a New Deal between the EU and NATO', *European Policy Centre*, 4 November 2024, <https://www.epc.eu/publication/new-deal-EU-NATO/>.

⁴⁴ Victor Jack, 'Mark Rutte Is on Collision Course with European Capitals over NATO', *Politico EU* (Brussels), 27 January 2026, <https://www.politico.eu/article/mark-rutte-donald-trump-flattery-nato/>.

⁴⁵ Ian Bond, *NATO Summit 2025: Time to Build a Proper European Pillar?* (Centre for European Reform, 2025), https://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/IB_NATO_2.6.25.pdf.

⁴⁶ Camille Grand, *Defending Europe with Less America* (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2024), <https://ecfr.eu/publication/defending-europe-with-less-america/>.

With all this established, there are several specific efforts that can be undertaken at the political and policy levels which can help ease this unruly period of transition away from American predominance in European military affairs. First is a reform to the Berlin Plus Agreement, second is cementing close political relations across Brussels between the EU Political and Security Committee (PSC) and the North Atlantic Council (NAC), third is reconceptualising defence scenarios in European strategy, and fourth is doing more to align defence planning between the two organisations.

2.1. Reforming Berlin Plus

The Europeanisation of the NATO Command Structure will likely have knock-on effects for EU military structures. Take the example of NATO's Joint Force Command – Naples (JFC-NP), currently led by the dual-hatted United States Naval Forces Europe and Africa commander and linked to the US Sixth Fleet. The US is in the process of severing this connection by handing command JFC-NP to Italy, and Europeans will also have to fill previously American-held staff positions throughout the command and its sub-components. This would create needs across NATO operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Iraq, as well as sub-components across Romania and Bulgaria. The same will be the case with JFC-Norfolk (JFC-NF) in Virginia, also led by the dual-hatted Second Fleet commander, set to be handed over to British command. JFC-NF plays an important coordinating role for NATO's defence plans, in ensuring reinforcement across the Atlantic, Arctic operations, and in anti-submarine warfare. US officers play important command and staff roles across this entire structure. The US is also taking command of Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) based outside of London, giving Washington the lead across NATO's air, sea, and land component commands. It is not readily apparent what impact this may have practically, but it is a signal that the US is stepping back from leadership roles set to be the primary operational commands in NATO plans.⁴⁷

The EU does not currently have a full standing military command structure as NATO does, and it would be needlessly duplicative to argue that NATO graduated readiness force or rapid reaction forces be put under a new EU structure. Rather, this command structure highlights a need for a review of the Berlin Plus Agreement to update it for the new era. In particular, to reconceptualise it for the EU to draw upon NATO resources in scenarios beyond peace-keeping and stabilisation operations. With a view to the EU taking a larger role in continental defence, an updated Berlin Plus document would offer several opportunities. Firstly, it would keep the basic concept of using NATO planning and command structures for the EU. Secondly, it would offer a pressure valve to the US desire to do less in Europe by facilitating a structured handover of US dual-hatted and staff roles towards Europeans.⁴⁸ Finally, it would be an opportunity to build on the 2025 UK-EU Security and Defence Partnership to clarify the British role in updated command structure arrangements within NATO.

An updated Berlin Plus also allows Canada, Türkiye, Norway, and Albania to be involved, when needed, in EU defence through NATO structures. Though a more informal, coalition style approach would be possible without using NATO, it would be a less ideal outcome than the existing multinational staffs and resources. It also allows for a more moderated transition towards increased European self-sufficiency rather than a crash programme in response to a precipitous American withdrawal. This would avoid immediately spending precious

⁴⁷ 'European Allies to Take on New Leadership Roles in NATO's Command Structure', NATO, NATO, 6 February 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2026/02/06/european-allies-to-take-on-new-leadership-roles-in-natos-command-structure>.

⁴⁸ Grand, *Defending Europe with Less America*.

political capital on yet another new piece of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Focusing on reform rather than wholesale replacement is the far more feasible and palatable option at this point, although one cannot fully discount that the EU will need to strengthen its own military structures in the future, depending on how any political transition in NATO occurs and if a more abrupt transition to European control occurs. And here, an updated Berlin Plus arrangement could also allow ad hoc European coalitions of the willing to use NATO and EU structures, when and if required.

2.2. Strengthening the NAC-PSC and Military Committee connection

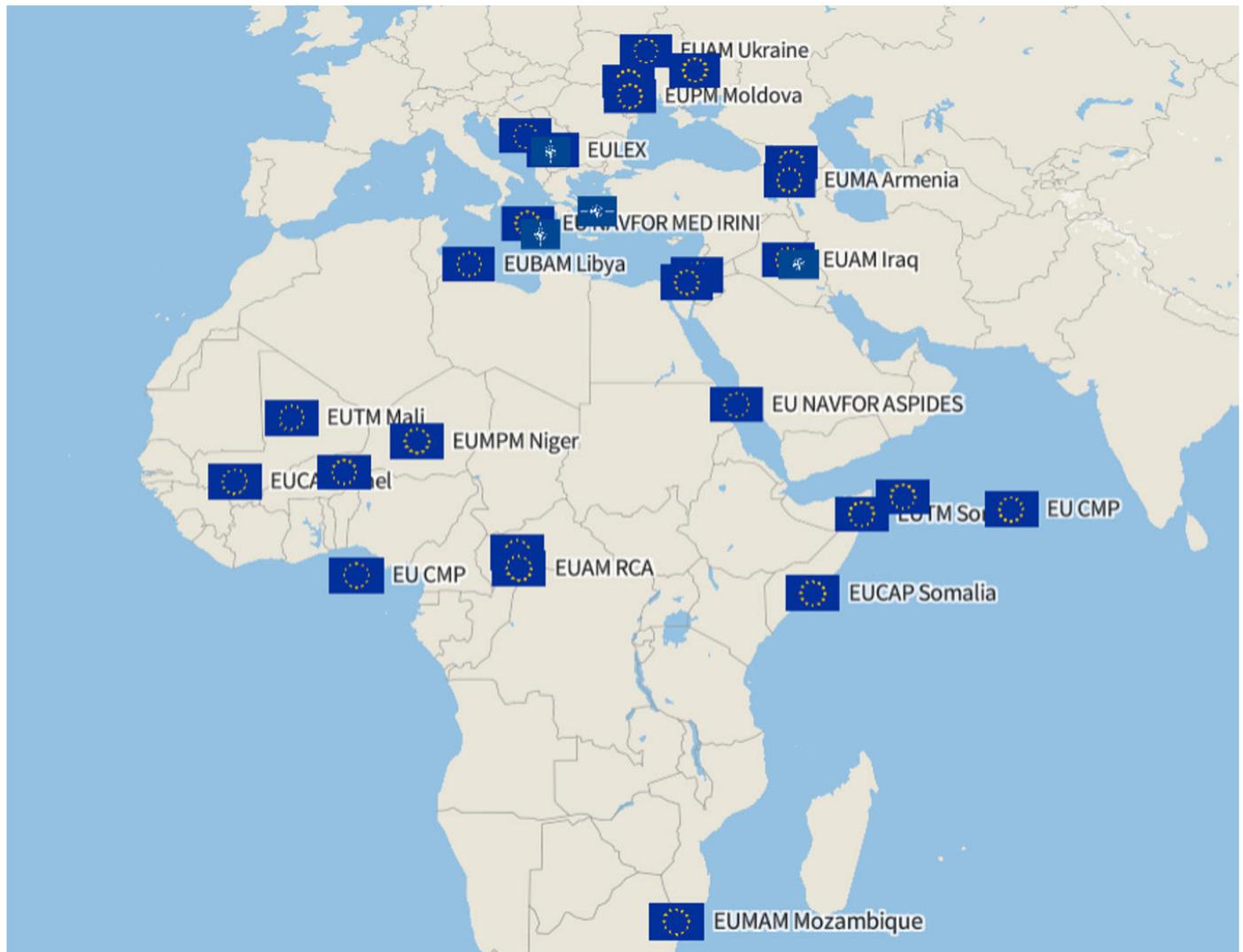
Despite similar levels of representation and similarities in policy topics, the NAC and PSC have little exchange beyond the occasional cross-briefing and staff interactions in carefully managed working groups. As already mentioned above, there is some level of informal information exchange via national channels (e.g., national ministry officials have access to the same levels of information from both the EU and NATO staff), but exchange between representatives' and institutional staffs remain limited. This contributes to both information asymmetries that would pose challenges during crisis periods and to an unequal exchange of ideas in areas of similar effort, such as intelligence analysis and defence planning. And here, there is real room to improve the learning opportunities of each body. For example, the PSC is made up mainly of senior ambassadorial diplomats from foreign ministries, but ambassadors do not always have first-hand experience of conventional defence matters, and, to the extent that they do know about defence, it is largely framed in terms of crisis management.⁴⁹ To assist the EU in becoming more adept at handling more serious defence questions (e.g. capabilities, deterrence, etc), socialisation with NAC colleagues would be a major plus point.

For this to be rectified long-term, it will have to be top down. Staffs can only do so much within the existing institutional permission structure. At the highest level, this would be represented by joint NAC-PSC sessions in which all representatives are present, thereby requiring joint preparatory work. This of course raises the range of political issues already discussed in the first chapter of this study. Beyond the obvious national representation issues (e.g., Cyprus), who would host and chair such sessions would also be politically contentious, while truly jointly managed sessions would be procedurally cumbersome. What would be perhaps more effective are issue-specific joint sessions, wherein the institutional burden is shared depending on the topic. An area of overlap in both interest and activity is the Mediterranean and NATO's 'southern flank'. As can be seen in the map below, there are a number of activities already underway in this area, a place where NATO's concepts are fuzzier than on the eastern flank. Joint PSC and NAC sessions on the southern flank would be most practical and perhaps more politically feasible, though some issues of noted allied division would need to be handled deftly (i.e., France and Türkiye over Libya, Greece and Türkiye over Cyprus).

Staffs can only do so much within the existing institutional permission structure.

⁴⁹ Simon J. Smith et al., 'The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost: A Grounded Theory Approach to the Comparative Study of Decision-Making in the NAC and PSC', in *EU-NATO Relations: Running on the Fumes of Informed Deconfliction* (Routledge, 2019).

Figure 1. Map of EU and NATO missions



As NAC-PSC ties theoretically improve, this opens the possibility for a cascading effect through the respective structures. The military committees of both organisations, which as mentioned several national representatives already sit on both, could be a site for much practical cooperation outside of the direct political spotlight. Staff interactions on the military side are already more routine as uniformed staffs are by default “dual-hatted” and working with other national authorities and in other forums, while civilian staffs in the IS and EEAS are bound to their respective institutions.⁵⁰ Given the increasing co-location of civil-military staffs in both organisations, MC level engagement could spill over into improved IS-EEAS ties into the coming years.

⁵⁰ Smith et al., ‘The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost’.

2.3. Reconceptualising defence scenarios

Europe's defence role has often been interpreted far too narrowly on out-of-area, crisis management operations. There is nothing in existing treaty or policy structures that locks this arrangement into place. Continental defence scenarios by Europeans on their own have not been unthinkable in the past, nor should they be now. At the very least, understanding requirements for forward defence in anticipation of reinforcements requires serious consideration. This is already an area of major focus for NATO, with the newly developed regional plans (RPs) placing "a particular focus on ensuring rapid reinforcement."⁵¹ EU-level planning should more closely align with this NATO thinking, at the very least to avoid duplication and in extremis to takeover should the U.S. backstop be lacking.

More self-sufficient defence planning scenarios would have to conceptualise reinforcement differently, with less emphasis on a transatlantic surge of forces (with perhaps the exception of Canadian troops) and more on transcontinental mobility. This thinking has already been done amongst many European states, particularly those with forces forward deployed in NATO eFP battlegroups that would require reinforcement. German land force planning already conceptualises the rapid reinforcement of the Baltics with multiple brigades within 30 days of a conflict.⁵² Dutch planning reflects a similar concept in combination with German units in the 1st German-Netherlands Corps (1GNC), all as part of the tiered readiness planning of the NATO New Force Model (NFM).⁵³

Connected with the prior section, expanding the scope of non-NATO defence scenarios (or perhaps adopting those same scenarios in the EU), European forces should be prepared for the execution of high-intensity operations without the prior assumption American support. This does not by default imply a transatlantic break or turn from NATO. This could be done under renegotiated Berlin Plus arrangements wherein US support remains limited, but some assets of the NATO Command Structure are still available. In extremis, and after many years of development and substantially more investment in human resources and CIS capabilities, the nascent European command structure (i.e. EU's Military Planning and Conduct Capability) could increasingly plan for and exercise continent-wide defence scenarios, even though this seems like a pipe dream today. Still with the live military exercises already conducted recently to test the MPCC, there is no reason why in time the EU could not support such scenarios, especially with a particular focus on mobilisation and reinforcement and in the context of Article 42.7 TEU contingencies, as set out in the EU treaties. Flexibility between EU and NATO command arrangements should be built into the scenarios used to inform defence planning.

Continental defence scenarios by Europeans on their own have not been unthinkable in the past, nor should they be now.

⁵¹ Nele Loorents, *NATO's Regional Defence Plans*, Washington Summit Series no. 5 (International Centre for Defence and Security, 2024), https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2024/07/No-5_NATOs-Regional-Defence-Plans_Nele-Loorents.pdf.

⁵² Generalleutnant Alfons Mais, 'Mittlere Kräfte - Operative Reaktionsfähigkeit Und Motor Der Modernisierung', FKH-Symposium, 26 April 2023.

⁵³ Ruben Brekelmans, 'Kamerbrief over Stand van Zaken NATO New Force Model', Ministrie van Defensie, 24 April 2025, 2-3, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2025/04/24/stand-van-zaken-na-to-new-force-model>.

Defence planning scenarios should explore the following as a baseline for European forces, which can be framed either as burden-sharing within NATO or independent European efforts as needed:

- Ensuring a strong defence of the Central Region, including the Baltic States, Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Scandinavian countries.
- Isolating Kaliningrad.
- Denying use of the North Sea and the wider Atlantic beyond.
- Denying the Black Sea and closing off the Bosphorus.
- Protecting from air, missile, and drone attacks on population centres.
- Securing lines of communication and port security in the Mediterranean.

More detailed analysis of the capabilities that follow from these areas has been conducted elsewhere.⁵⁴ Suffice it to say, existing NATO planning scenarios and regional plans based on the assured provision of American troops are inadequate to meet the tasks of improved European self-sufficiency, whether within NATO or otherwise.

2.4. Reforming and aligning defence planning

The NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) is the effort of NATO HQ and the military commands to identify the capabilities needed to undertake alliance defence plans. The EU's Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), led by the European Defence Agency (EDA), is an EU effort in tracking member states' defence spending priorities and planning, but differs in that it does not set national targets based on analysis of specific EU-wide plans. Both organisations have a wide variety of funding initiatives, multinational programmes, priority areas, and shortfalls that are insufficiently coordinated. The 2024 CARD report identified that work is needed to converge efforts across the two institutions, with a particular emphasis on the need to improve classified information exchange on priorities and shortfalls.⁵⁵

Areas of focus for alignment should include, at the minimum:

- NDPP Main Shortfall Areas (MSAs) and EU Capability Development Priorities. While the specific MSAs are classified and the EU priorities are open, there is enough available to highlight some similarities. Integrated air and missile defence (IAMD), space-based intelligence, and command and control systems are all areas that have been publicly identified by experts of both organisations.⁵⁶ It can anecdotally be said there are overlaps in other areas, such as in munitions and training.
- Multinational Solutions (MNS) and PESCO. Both organisations track and encourage multinational efforts to fill shortfall areas, with NATO helping to identify and promote High Visibility Projects (HVPs) and the EU working with members to coordinate PESCO projects, as discussed in chapter one. There is noticeable overlap between the various projects pursued across the two initiatives. One area to highlight is in C2 systems,

⁵⁴ Davis Ellison and Tim Sweijs, *Shields and Spears*.

⁵⁵ 'Coordinated Annual Review on Defence Report 2024', European Defence Agency, 2024, 5, <https://eda.europa.eu/docs/default-source/documents/card-report-2024.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Gordon B. 'Skip' Davis Jr., *The Future of NATO C4ISR. Assessment and Recommendations after Madrid* (Atlantic Council: Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, 2023), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/The-future-of-NATO-C4ISR-Assessment-and-recommendations-after-Madrid.pdf>.

a shortfall identified by both organisations. NATO's Allied Software for Cloud and Edge Services (ACE) HVP is being pursued by 22 allies, while the EU's Collaborative Warfare Capabilities (ECOWAR) PESCO project aims to build a similar system. Importantly, France, Belgium, and Sweden are in both projects.⁵⁷ While this is not inherently a problem, systems redundancy should be a point in defence architectures, if there is not coordination there can be divergent requirements leading to interoperability problems across users of the ACE and ECOWAR systems. At the very least, cost efficiencies could be identified through greater coordination. A more thorough analysis would certainly reveal more systemic overlaps.

- Alignment on accountability and oversight. The relatively sudden uplift in defence spending across Europe merits due attention to accountability of projects, including in NATO and the EU. The EU is arguably in a better position than NATO in this respect, given that through the EDA and the Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS) there are existing monitoring and reporting mechanisms and authorities. NATO, as put by the former deputy chief of staff for capability development at NATO Allied Command Transformation, there is no “authority to set deadlines, assign priorities, or enforce accountability” by NATO officials on common projects. Union bodies such as DG DEFIS, conversely, are subject to a certain level of scrutiny by bodies such as the European Parliament, the European Court of Auditors and, potentially, the European Ombudsman, even if such scrutiny does not directly or fully assess project delivery deadlines and priorities at the moment. Improvements on this are not trivial, as corruption cases have rocked defence procurement authorities in both NATO and in Ukraine.⁵⁸ Better alignment on commonly funded projects will necessitate alignment on oversight mechanisms. In this, the EU system could complement NATO's capacities, particularly in the NATO agencies and in the military staffs.

These proposals for improved alignment are by no means exhaustive, nor do they account for the breadth of behind-the-scenes national coordination in balancing NATO and EU priorities. EU and NATO defence planning processes are distinct and some may argue that they are duplicative in a variety of areas. However, there is a growing alignment between the EU and NATO on capability priorities, and the significant funding uplifts for defence are underway across Europe mean that more coordination is key. Indeed, in the coming years, the EU has proposed to invest EU funds into joint procurement projects such as air defence, (counter) drones, space and more, and this aligns with NATO capability targets too. Naturally, there will always be industrial competition between the two organisations, as members and allies compete for their own industries to lead in such capability priority areas. Still, there is remarkably more alignment in the present times on capability development precisely because the war on Ukraine has sharpened the EU's focus and brought it much closer in step with NATO priorities. This is a positive development, but there is clearly greater potential to ensure complementarity in commonly funded projects.

⁵⁷ 'EU Collaborative Warfare Capabilities (ECoWAR)', Permanent Structured Cooperation, European Defence Agency, accessed 3 March 2026, <https://www.pesco.europa.eu/project/eu-collaborative-warfare-capabilities-ecowar/>.

⁵⁸ 'Eurojust Coordinates Investigations into Alleged Corruption in Military Equipment Purchases for NATO', European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, Eurojust, 15 May 2025, [https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/news/eurojust-coordinates-investigations-alleged-corruption-military-equipment-purchases-nato-; Dato Parulava, 'Ukraine Uncovers Major Corruption Scheme in Defense Procurement', *Politico EU* \(Brussels\), 3 August 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-uncovers-major-corruption-scheme-defense-procurement-days-after-restoring-anticorruption/>.](https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/news/eurojust-coordinates-investigations-alleged-corruption-military-equipment-purchases-nato-; Dato Parulava, 'Ukraine Uncovers Major Corruption Scheme in Defense Procurement', Politico EU (Brussels), 3 August 2025, https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-uncovers-major-corruption-scheme-defense-procurement-days-after-restoring-anticorruption/)

Chapter 3.

Conclusions

There are a number of external factors which will continue to shape the EU-NATO relationship. Should a US-EU trade war significantly escalate, institutional cooperation could suffer as such tensions are likely to bleed into defence industrial areas. A US takeover of Greenland would cause an almost certainly unrecoverable transatlantic rift within NATO (unless Denmark abandons Greenland, and/or Europe abandons both the Danes and Greenlanders, which seem unlikely avenues at present). In such situations, it will become more difficult to insulate institutional level cooperation from the political deterioration.

Regardless, as discussed at length in the two chapters above, there are two main safeguards within the EU-NATO relationship that preserve it from transatlantic tensions. First and foremost are the states that are members of both institutions. Germany and France in particular play leading roles in both the EU and NATO, and both Berlin and Paris have repeatedly signalled their aim to improve relations between the organisations. Beyond these two examples there are of course many others that are active in these efforts, including the Netherlands. Secondly is that both are at their core about European security. Though NATO is transatlantic, its policies and plans centre in Europe just as those of the EU do. Both institutions are inextricably regional in their focus. Discussions remain primarily a matter of balance, not dissolution or decoupling in either case.

The challenge is in improving these institutional relations, rather than simply maintaining them. The present moment of American retrenchment is arguably an ideal point at which to start taking reform of the EU-NATO relationship more seriously. This is why this study asked the following questions:

- Where should NATO and the EU improve their direct institutional cooperation? What gaps exist that could be filled? What could be strengthened?
- How do we strengthen the role of the EU within NATO? How do we reduce Europe's dependence on the US?
- Where prudent, how can the EU better align its defence cooperation policy with the needs and demands arising from NATO?

On the first and third questions, the answers are more readily apparent as seen in chapter two. First is a reform to the Berlin Plus Agreement, second is cementing close political relations across Brussels between the PSC and NAC, third is reconceptualising defence scenarios in European strategy, and fourth is doing more to align defence planning between the two organisations. Some of these reforms have been underway incrementally as seen already in chapter one but have accelerated since the wider Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Most of this is also done with at least a tacit recognition that these developments are aimed at strengthening the role of EU members within NATO.

The trickier question has been and remains the question of self-sufficiency in relation to the United States. As of this writing, some European leaders have made clear an aim to

reduce the keystone role of American forces and defence industry in European affairs, not only as a function of transatlantic tension, but also for a more effective and resilient NATO. For EU-NATO relations to work, however, this would require at least the tacit approval of Washington, which has a long history of disfavours a more independent European defence as detailed in chapter one. The present administration is murky on this, pushing for greater European conventional self-sufficiency, yet demanding that Europeans continue to buy American defence platforms. This sort of internally contradictory approach makes navigating the EU-NATO relationship difficult. Nevertheless, as discussed in chapter two, a reformist approach through a reworked Berlin Plus agreement could be a small step towards navigating this relationship. *In extremis* however, European capitals may have to consider the structural and industrial consequences of a more sudden break in ties, particularly when sustaining US-made platforms.

At the core of these arguments on improving EU-NATO institutional cooperation is an unambiguous reorientation of both institutions towards European security. Put by German Chancellor Friedrich Merz at the 2026 Munich Security Conference:

“As a reminder and also for those who are not aware of it, in Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union, we undertake to aid and assist one another in the case of armed aggression in Europe. We now need to spell out how we are going to organise this at European level – not as a substitute for NATO, but rather as a strong, self-sustaining pillar within the Alliance.”⁵⁹

Years of out-of-area operations and smaller-scale peacekeeping missions have made this reorganisation, described by Merz, difficult. Europeans have continually struggled since 2014 to reorient themselves back towards continental defence and to answer hard questions about what this means for the two core European security institutions. This study has offered a provisional agenda for policymakers to consider and has aimed to open the door for further research questions on achieving greater European self-sufficiency. Further research into the specific capabilities, diplomatic reorientations, and industrial policy choices will be a natural follow-on to this governance focused report.

Underpinning all these institutional level discussions are wider questions about a Europe's envisioned role for itself in the coming years. Is Europe a 'geopolitical actor' or a regional bloc? Do capitals and populations support a wider EU role in defence? On the transatlantic front, is Europe a follower or a partner? Some, if not all, of these questions are submerged within discussions on future organisational cooperation.

Heated discourse on this topic continues as of this writing. The exchange between Secretary-General Rutte and various diplomats that opened chapter two is indicative of many discussions both in public and behind closed doors as planners have looked to hedge and de-risk various European architectures. This is certain to continue into the coming years, likely well beyond this second Trump administration. What is offered here is a provisional menu of institutional reforms that can be considered when navigating the presently challenging diplomatic moment. Both the EU and NATO have often been in crisis, but they can only move forward with reform.

⁵⁹ 'Speech by the Federal Chancellor at the Munich Security Conference on 13. February 2026 in Munich', Bundesregierung, 13 February 2026, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/federal-government/speech-munich-security-conference-2407298>.

Is Europe a 'geopolitical actor' or a regional bloc?



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