

Elevating EU-NATO Synergy for Enhanced European Defence

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Summary

For over two decades, there have been numerous attempts to define and frame the relations between the EU and NATO. Three joint declarations and significant steps ahead have been taken and yet, there is no clear vision of how these two organisations should work together more efficiently. The commonly accepted idea of cooperation sees “NATO pulling the strings and the EU pushing the funds” in accordance with their respective nature and scope.

Is this unbalanced relation the most suitable strategy to counter current geopolitical threats? No. But can this cooperation be upgraded? Possibly, yet this appears to be easier said than done. Providing the EU with a coherent defence policy and a strong industrial base can be a great additional value for NATO and not just in the extreme case of a possible disengagement of the US. If the European Allies are able to take greater responsibility and step up their efforts, they would materialise the burden-sharing idea the Americans have been so vehemently advocating. The latest appeals of Pete Hegseth – newly appointed US Secretary of Defence – to “European allies to step into the arena and take ownership of conventional security on the continent”¹ represent a renewed clear call to Europe that should not go unheard. Against this backdrop, the EU can be instrumental in achieving this goal without necessarily becoming a mere cashbox to fund the Allies’ build-up of capabilities. The EU has the tools to concert and coordinate the efforts of the European Allies whilst incentivising its Member States that are not part of the Alliance to invest more in defence. Both organisations can jointly work in a common framework created with a shared purpose: increasing readiness and preparedness to counter external threats.

From this perspective, the aim of this policy brief is to answer the question, “How to elevate the EU-NATO cooperation to strengthen European defence?”. The content of this paper is a result of research and interviews with officials from both the EU and NATO, as well as distinguished experts in the field of security and defence.

¹ US Department of Defense, Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Defense Contact Group (As Delivered), 12 February 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4064113/opening-remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-ukraine-defense-contact/>

1. EU-NATO: challenges within the partnership

The EU and NATO were created for different purposes; NATO as a military Alliance in charge of defence and deterrence and coordinating the collective defence of its members, the EU as a supranational organisation with a broader economic scope and a variety of different functions. Nevertheless, the ever-changing geopolitical landscape has caused these two organisations to cross each other's paths more than expected at the time of their foundation. Both the EU and NATO have extensive experience in dealing with crisis management operations and countering hybrid threats, but they have not managed to elevate their cooperation beyond that.

In the latest years, the EU has been rethinking its role in a complex geopolitical arena. This is demonstrated by a sequence of official documents prompting discussions on European defence. In 2016, the EU Global strategy mentioned: "The EU will step up its contribution to Europe's collective security...working closely with NATO."² In the same year in Warsaw, NATO took a historical decision concerning the future of its cooperation with the EU and both signed their first joint declaration³ covering seven areas: from cybersecurity, hybrid threats to defence industry and R&D. In 2021, the EU Member States finally decided to take a revolutionary decision and adopted the EU Strategic Compass⁴ introducing the concept of *strategic autonomy* in defence. A few months later, during the NATO Summit in Madrid, NATO adopted a new Strategic Concept that foresees an "unprecedented level of cooperation with the European Union" and the need to further strengthen this bond in full "respect for the organisations' different mandates, decision-making autonomy and institutional integrity."⁵ All the documents stress the importance for the EU-NATO dialogue to be implemented and gradually strengthened, but they also specify that it should happen within their respective scopes and areas of competence.

The EU-NATO dialogue is better defined as an objective rather than a concept and it is based upon three joint declarations signed in 2016⁶, 2018⁷ and then in 2023⁸. The third Joint Declaration, adopted in January 2023, represents the latest document where common priorities were identified. The decision to sign this declaration came eleven months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine when it was clear that Europe - without the US - would not be able to keep up with the production of equipment and provide military support to Kyiv against a country which turned to a war economy. It was the war in Ukraine that convinced several countries to finally have a proper discussion in their capitals about defence spending and address the limits of the existing relations between Member States, the EU and NATO. At the same time, the EU found itself needing a coherent and comprehensive strategy to identify resources to synchronise the efforts at the EU and NATO levels. Despite the initial enthusiasm, the third declaration does not include any action points nor guidelines on how to elevate this cooperation.

² Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy, pp. 12 eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf

³ NATO-EU Joint Declaration 2016, [NATO - Official text: Joint declaration by the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, and the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization , 08-Jul-2016](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm)

⁴ Council of the European Union, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, 2022, [A Strategic Compass for security and defence - Consilium](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/36096/nato_eu_final_eng.pdf)

⁵ NATO Madrid Summit Declaration 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm

⁶ NATO-EU Joint Declaration 2016, [NATO - Official text: Joint declaration by the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, and the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization , 08-Jul-2016](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm)

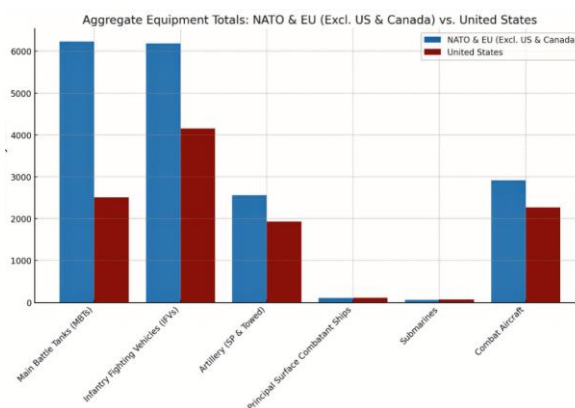
⁷ EU-NATO Joint Declaration 2018, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/36096/nato_eu_final_eng.pdf

⁸ EU-NATO Joint Declaration 2023, [Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation, 10 January 2023 - Consilium](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/36096/nato_eu_final_eng.pdf)

Since the inception of this partnership, one of the main obstacles hindering its progress is the reluctance to accept the idea that the EU should expand its competencies beyond the financial defence-related instruments and deal with hard defence and deterrence. The fact that the legal framework put in place by the Lisbon Treaty leaves defence matters as a competence attributed exclusively to the Member States does not contribute to fulfilling this ambition. The EU countries have so far demonstrated little will to support joint EU initiatives in defence if they do not advance their own national interests. This was observed to be the main reason behind the failure of the EDA's Pooling and Sharing (P&S)⁹ or the slow advance of the EU Battlegroups initiative. The Pooling and Sharing concept¹⁰, for instance, was adopted in 2010 to maximise military resources and reduce duplications and efforts among Member States. The initiative, however, failed to achieve substantial results – apart from air-to-air refuelling – due to the simple fact that Member States failed to identify capabilities they could share and subject to the P&S despite the possibility of saving financial resources.¹¹

In this context, it is important to stress that balancing the EU-NATO relations is meant to make use of the EU's full potential in defence and increase its ability to protect itself independently to further strengthen NATO in turn. Since no EU country is able to pull off a sizeable military operation on its own without the help of other European countries, the EU should work alongside NATO to ensure these parallel structures work in a coordinated way. Not even the staunchest EU supporter goes as far as to believe that the EU can substitute NATO as the ultimate security provider for the European continent. At the same time, the slow disengagement of the U.S. and increased threats coming from other regional and global players such as Russia, China or Iran require a revision of the current strategy to better adapt to the new reality. The European Allies must be able to defend their citizens working under the same framework (created by NATO) using all NATO and EU tools available.

The war in Ukraine has served as a wake-up call for Europe and has led several countries to increase defence spending for the first time in decades. In 2024, NATO's latest report¹² showed 23 out of 32 Allies reaching the 2% GDP – with a prospect of increase in the coming biennium. While welcoming this positive trend, it is important to underline that these numbers do not represent an assessment of a nation's military assets or the readiness of its forces. In addition, the floor of the 2% has been indicated as the baseline for defence spending, and the goal should be to increase it further. Based on the opinion of the experts interviewed, in order to ensure the executability of the defence plans agreed upon in Vilnius and Washington, the Allies will have to spend around 3.7% of their GDP on defence.



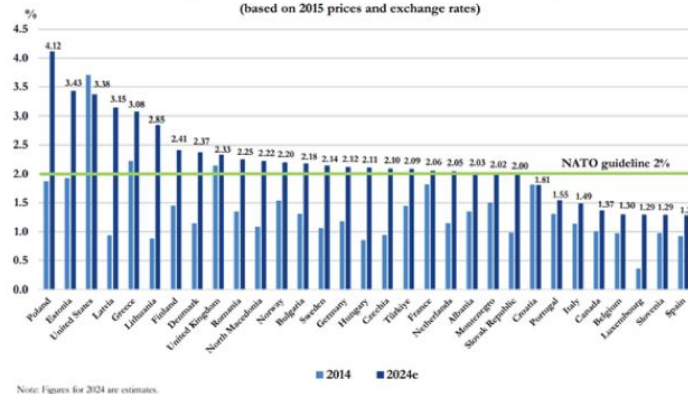
⁹ C. Molling, "European Defence Needs Political Commitment rather than Technocratic Solutions," SWP Comment 2012/C 18, pag.2, 22.06.2012.

¹⁰ European Defence Agency, Pooling and Sharing Concept, 2010 https://eda.europa.eu/docs/default-source/eda-factsheets/final-p-s_30012013_factsheet_cs5_gris

¹¹ Molling, "European Defence Needs Political Commitment rather than Technocratic Solutions," pag.2.

¹² NATO Press Release, Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024), [240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/pr/doc/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf)

Graph 4 : Defence expenditure as a share of GDP (%)
(based on 2015 prices and exchange rates)



Source: NATO

The existing capabilities gaps in Europe, and especially in the EU, require, as said, a strong intervention from the EU in order to make EU defence credible regardless of the support of the United States. Analysing the capabilities of EU Member States and European Nato Allies in comparison with the US – as seen in the table – can portray a misleading picture. The aggregate numbers show significant assets, but the graph does not indicate that these capabilities are not owned by all countries, and smaller countries rely on their neighbours/partners for specific operations. Moreover, the high costs of maintenance of some of these platforms make it difficult to keep them operational. The countries who perform better are mostly European Allies who are not EU Member States (UK and Türkiye) also in light of their constant investments and solid support to research and development.¹³

Source: *Military Balance 2024*, *The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*

2. EU-NATO cooperation in practice

The EU-NATO joint declarations produced some tangible results even if the process remains slow. Nowadays the seven original areas of cooperation include 74 common proposals¹⁴ identified by the EU and NATO in parallel and assessed biannually. In the coordination between the EU and NATO, there are some obvious limitations caused by the fact that not all NATO Allies are EU Member States. Among the major obstacles stemming from this fact is the challenge of sharing classified information. Both parties have found creative ways to bypass this issue by fostering continuous cross-briefings and informal exchanges. At the staff-to-staff level, the synergies work efficiently thanks to these frequent meetings between staff from the European External Action Service (EEAS), EU Military Staff (EUMS) and NATO’s International Military Staff. As of May 2024, over 50 such meetings have taken place.¹⁵ But it is safe to say that this is not an institutionalisation of a practice but rather an efficient mechanism that diminishes the impact of the problem per se. Despite the efforts, political obstacles remain – the existing Türkiye-Cyprus crisis impedes cooperation in cases when urgent measures or decisions need to be adopted

¹³ C. Grand, “Defending Europe with less America,” Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, July 2024, [Defending Europe with less America | ECFR](#)

¹⁴ European Commission, Seventh 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, June 2022, <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/cipr/items/752395/>

¹⁵ Council of the European Union, Ninth 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, 10471/24, May 2024, [EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE](#)

and a consultation with the Member States and Allies at the highest level of representation is required.¹⁶ One of the achieved signs of progress so far is the established practice of inviting the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to NATO's Foreign Affairs and Defence Ministerial meetings and of the NATO Secretary General to European Council's meetings, contributing to the goals of more synchronised work. The Chairman of the EU Military Committee and NATO's Chairman of the Military Committee often take part in their respective councils' meetings with EU and NATO Chiefs of Defence as further proof of the intention to keep each other briefed and up to date on the latest agendas.

When analysing EU-NATO relations, *joint* is probably the most visible missing part of the equation, particularly as you move from the political to the military dimension. At the current stage, there are no joint trainings or joint exercises between the EU and NATO but only coordinated exercises to ensure know-how and information sharing. It is customary to make sure that representatives of each organisation are present in case of EU or NATO exercises. For example, in 2022 in the framework of the Parallel and Coordinated Exercise (PACE)¹⁷ established to enhance coordination of the response forces between the EU and NATO, the EU conducted the Integrated Resolve 2022 in parallel with NATO. The scope of the operation was to assess the capacity to rapidly respond to a hybrid threat situation. In the fall of 2024, the EU concluded the Integrated Resolve 2024, a wide crisis response exercise that involved 24 Member States as well as the US and Norway, aiming to deepen EU-NATO staff-to-staff coordination and exchange in crisis management operations. In 2024, the European Commission, EEAS and EUMS have also been invited to participate in NATO's Steadfast Dagger 2024¹⁸ – a multidomain operation training exercise organised by NATO Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe and the Allied Joint Force Command Naples “to increase operational readiness and interoperability of the Allied Reaction Force.”¹⁹ In addition to these exercises, workshops and briefings are often held with staff from both NATO and the EU (EEAS/EUMS) on crisis management operations providing an opportunity for the staffers to update each other on the current missions and operations.²⁰

One of the areas where efforts for complementarity and synchronisation have been more evident is capabilities development, for example in the mentioned air-to-air refuelling initiative. Contrary to NATO, whose processes are centralised within the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP), the EU uses several instruments which make the process less linear. The Capability Development Plan (CDP)²¹ identifies the capabilities that EU national armies should possess to counter specific threats while the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD)²² provides an overview of the security landscapes enhancing opportunities for collaboration. In this context, the European Defence Fund (EDF) provides funds to incentivise joint procurement and R&D, overseen by the European Defence Agency (EDA).

¹⁶ D. Zandee, S. van der Meer, A. Stoetman “Countering Hybrid Threats: Steps for improving EU-NATO cooperation,” 2021, [EU-NATO cooperation: what has been achieved so far? | Countering hybrid threats](#)

¹⁷ European External Action Service, EU INTEGRATED RESOLVE 2022 EU IR22: Parallel And Coordinated Exercises (PACE), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-integrated-resolve-2022-eu-ir22-parallel-and-coordinated-exercisespace_en

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Joint Press Release, Council of the European Union, EU Integrated Resolve 2024: EU concludes wide crisis response exercise, October 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press->

²⁰ Council of the European Union, 10471/24, May 2024

²¹ European Defence Agency, Capabilities Development Plan, <https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/all-activities/activities-search/capability-development-plan>, 2008

²² European Defence Agency, Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, [Coordinated Annual Review on Defence \(CARD\)](#), 2017

These instruments are synchronised with NATO targets to allow maximisation of the efforts and prompt those countries who are NATO and EU Members to reach their targets and avoid duplications; financial and political obstacles at the domestic level do not make the process always successful.

It is worth mentioning that an important instrument used to promote cross-national cooperation at the EU level – and extended to NATO Allies US, UK, Norway and Canada - is the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). The initiative covers priority areas for both the EU and NATO such as military mobility, the flagship initiative of EU-NATO cooperation.²³ The PESCO has managed to address some of the current challenges identified in cooperation with NATO, and the progress achieved is proof of the potential of these synergies. The most successful example is provided by the latest PESCO progress report that showcases how EU Member states have adopted a new Military Mobility pledge 2024 and established a network of national contacts who will manage the requests for cross-border movements aiming to ease the mobility of military forces within the countries that are part of the project.²⁴ This is yet another proof of the potential of the existing tools if they are used appropriately. Furthermore, these initiatives are pivotal to increasing joint efforts and keeping key partners like Norway, the UK, and the US engaged in the European continent.

3. Next steps to elevate this partnership

Most of the Allies have managed to step up their defence spending over the 2% GDP as proposed by the NATO guidelines. Only 8 Allies do not meet this target and 7 of them are EU Member States: Croatia, Portugal, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg, Slovenia and Spain. This shows that there is still work to be done within the EU to allow these countries to reach their targets and be able to invest more in defence. The European Commission can be the “coordinator” of the operational, financial and production efforts within the EU, but Member States must demonstrate their commitment to collaborating with the EU institutions.

In the upcoming months, the leadership of the Commission and the Defence and Space Commissioner will have to address the issue of cooperation with NATO from the perspective of maximising the efforts to achieve common goals in a rather unstable scenario. **The message received from Washington is clear; increasing defence spending - regardless of the 3, 4 or even 5% GDP ceiling - and filling capabilities gaps cannot be further postponed.**

In general, the EU-NATO cooperation will require a major overhaul and focus on priorities and leadership. These are the most pressing policy recommendations:

1. **Create an EU-NATO Roadmap document to set tangible goals for this partnership.** The latest joint declaration needs to be updated to have a clear structured vision for the future of the EU-NATO cooperation. It is important to specify the role of the EU in NATO’s framework and in the overall European security architecture. This partnership needs a plan and a process to be implemented. In this regard, the White Paper on the Future of European Defence requested to the EU Commissioner for Defence - to be delivered within 100 days in office - could play a crucial role in identifying the level of ambition the EU wants to aspire to. Based on that, the EU and NATO should thoroughly plan the next steps ahead.

²³ S. Clapp, Members Research Service, “At a Glance: European capability development planning,” European Parliament Research Service, PE 759.619 - March 2024, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/759619/EPRS_ATA\(2024\)759619_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/759619/EPRS_ATA(2024)759619_EN.pdf)

²⁴ PESCO Secretariat, PESCO Projects Progress Report, July 2024, [PESCO-Projects-Progress-Report Public Release .pdf](#)

2. **Move from a coordinated overall to an official overall of information.** The issues concerning information sharing and classified documents need to be resolved to guarantee that crucial information is shared promptly and that adequate solutions are found. Political issues should be dealt with bilaterally and their impact on the overall procedures minimised.
3. **Overcoming the narrative of competition and working on the complementarity of skillset.** The EU and NATO have complementary instruments, but this does not mean that duplications of efforts and structures necessarily create competition as long as the objectives remain the same and the actions are synchronised. By allowing the EU to be slowly integrated into defence and deterrence, NATO can explore new ways to make their strategies effective also in light of the enforceability powers that the EU has.
4. **Raise awareness among Member States/Allies of their responsibility and their active role in driving this cooperation.** Since 23 out of 32 NATO Allies are also EU Member States, there should be more coherence between the national level, EU level and NATO level. Defence planning often gets stuck at national level and it is not possible to create or pursue a common strategy if countries do not recognise the need to act jointly by shaping their national defence policies based on the EU-NATO needs.
5. **Leading role for Eastern Flank countries and Nordics.** In this process of making all Member States more responsible, there is a potential role for the Eastern Flank countries to exercise pressure on the rest of the block. Nordic and Baltic countries are already successfully working together, mobilising military and political support for Ukraine. Following this example, all countries closer to the frontline should work together and proactively propose to the EU joint procurement projects on specific capabilities (e.g. capabilities coalition in the Baltics) and push for closer cooperation between the EU and NATO.
6. **Maintain the EU-US strategic dialogue.** The new administration in Washington asked for tangible changes that go beyond political commitment to the Alliance. Despite the significant discrepancies, we must keep a constant dialogue and avoid – if possible - a total disengagement of the US from the European continent.
7. **Increase further cooperation with key EU partners.** Norway, the UK, and Canada are EU partners and NATO members to keep engaged. These countries joined - or were invited to - several PESCO initiatives (e.g. military mobility), allowing cooperation in defence to cross the EU's borders. Since these countries are also members of NATO, it creates an extra level of exchange and dialogue which could be extended to other crucial areas.

About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making. We are the recipient of institutional funding from the European Commission under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme.



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