

In a nutshell

What is at stake?

- >>> Geopolitical Tensions:** The EU faces significant security threats from both its immediate neighbourhood (e.g., Russia, instability in North Africa and the Middle East) and global competition (e.g., China, US strategic shifts).
- >>> Internal Stability:** Ensuring peace within EU borders, especially regarding internal security issues such as terrorism, cyber-attacks, and organized crime.
- >>> Strategic Autonomy:** The EU is seeking to strengthen its ability to act independently in matters of defence and security, reducing reliance on external actors like NATO and the United States.

Who decides?



European defence and security decisions are made through a shared institutional framework involving national governments and EU institutions.

The European Council and Council of the EU are the main decision-making bodies, with input from the European Commission and the European External Action Service.

The European Parliament influences decisions through oversight and budgetary control, while PESCO enables deeper cooperation among willing member states. Coordination with NATO is also essential for collective defence.

Ultimately, EU defence and security policy involves a complex balance between national sovereignty and EU-level cooperation.



What works?



- **Crisis Management Operations:** The EU has successfully conducted numerous civilian and military operations, such as in Mali (EUTM Mali) or the Horn of Africa (EUNAVFOR Atalanta). These operations demonstrate the EU's ability to project power and respond to security threats in its periphery.
- **Cooperation with NATO:** EU member states in NATO benefit from synergies between the two institutions. NATO remains the primary collective defence organization in Europe, but the EU complements NATO's role with a focus on crisis management, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding. As the US are pulling away from NATO, the discussion is about developing a European defence pillar within NATO.
- **The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP):** This framework allows the EU to develop a coordinated approach to security, including peacekeeping, counter-terrorism, and cyber-defence.
- **European Defence Fund:** This initiative encourages cross-border cooperation on military research and development, which could strengthen Europe's defence capabilities over time. This is a recent creation, finally passed by the Council and the European Parliament in 2019/2020. It came into force on 1 January 2021.




What doesn't work? ???

- **Lack of Unity:** The EU's decision-making in defence is hampered by differing national priorities. Member states are hesitant to give up sovereignty over defence matters, and there is no consensus on the degree of strategic autonomy or the EU's military role.
- **Inadequate Military Capabilities:** The EU lacks a standing army and has limited capacity for large-scale military action. Many EU members are dependent on NATO or the US for defence, and their military expenditures remain below the recommended levels.
- **Fragmentation:** The EU's defence landscape is fragmented, with various national defence systems, procurement policies, and different levels of ambition. This fragmentation undermines the potential for the EU to act as a coherent military actor.
- **Limited Strategic Autonomy:** While the EU has made progress in strengthening its security, it is still largely reliant on NATO and the US, especially for collective defence (Article 5). The EU's efforts to become more autonomous are complicated by the lack of consensus among member states on the importance of such a goal. The 2025 discussions on a peace treaty between Ukraine and Russia entirely led by the US and Russia illustrates the EU's necessity to rethink EU strategic autonomy.



Looking ahead

The EU will continue to wrestle with questions about the balance between reliance on NATO and the desire for strategic autonomy. The evolution of EU defence policy will be shaped by external threats, internal divisions, and the broader international environment. Further integration in defence cooperation, such as joint military procurement or a shared rapid response force, could address some of the current weaknesses, but these steps will require overcoming deep political and institutional barriers.



Ultimately, European defence and security will depend on finding a balance between national sovereignty, EU unity, and cooperation with NATO and other global powers.

