Europe's Cupboard For War

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The European Union's scramble for critical raw materials (CRMs) is often framed as an industrial or green-tech story. But for anyone who cares about Europe's security, MPs, defence firms, or an officer counting rounds and semiconductors, it's equally a defence issue. The recent European Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) sets targets for mining, processing and recycling that are as strategic as any arms purchase, and the early signs are that member states are already treating CRM policy like a national security portfolio rather than only an industrial policy.

From green policy to munitions shelf: why CRMs are defence policy

Modern weapon systems are hungry for a handful of exotic and very specific inputs: rare earths for precision guidance and sensors, cobalt and nickel for high-performance batteries and turbines, and specialised alloys for electronics that must survive the shock of combat. That interdependence means a choke point in a single part of the supply chain, such as a mine, a refinery, or a shipping route, can ripple through NATO battalions and industrial supply chains alike. The CRMA tries to create an EU-level architecture for diversification and resilience; it also acknowledges that resilience will not be automatic and will need focused investments and strategic stockpiles.

National champions and a new division of labour

What's striking is how member states are beginning to carve up responsibilities. Germany, France, the Netherlands and Italy have already created national instruments like funds, industrial plans and storage proposals that align with an emerging EU playbook: sourcing, financing and storage, respectively. This signals a shift: CRMs are being managed like fuel or ammunition, not like commodity inputs. This is a healthy realpolitik: shared goals, national execution.

Stockpiles, not just pipelines

Stockpiling is currently the uncomfortable but necessary conversation. In a crisis, the time it takes to switch suppliers or re-route shipments can be measured in months or years. The Commission and several capitals are now piloting shared reserve concepts and strategic hubs for storage that could be mobilised in security contingencies. It's not about hoarding for its own sake; it's about ensuring operational continuity for defence programmes, from satellites to shipyards.

Money follows risk: financing the defence value chain

Markets do not favour thin margins and long permitting processes. That is why public finance, from national funds to European Investment Bank instruments, is being mobilised to back not only mining and processing, but also the SMEs that make components for the defence sector. Public guarantees, concessional loans and national "raw materials" funds are already lowering the barrier to entry for projects that would otherwise be stranded by commercial risk. If defence planners want a secure supply, they must be ready to accept that some of that security will look like industrial policy.

Treat CRMs as infrastructure, not a commodity

CRMs for defence should be treated as infrastructure. Just as a power grid requires spares, fuel reserves, or alternative suppliers, the same principle

applies to the minerals necessary for guided weapons, secure communications, and resilient sensors. Consequently, there are three key priorities for policymakers and defence planners:

The awkward trade-off

Treating CRMs as strategic infrastructure in the EU currently brings many trade-offs. It can slow green projects if permitting is redirected. It can also draw public money away from other priorities. The other risk is geopolitical. Faster domestic capacity building may frustrate the EU's trade partners and complicate diplomatic outreach. Nevertheless, when viewed through the lens of deterrence and resilience, these are manageable policy tensions, provided they are addressed transparently and collaboratively across the EU and with NATO allies.

The EU is still lagging

For all the progress it has made, the European Union continues to face structural challenges in turning CRM ambitions into resilient and defence-ready systems. Permitting for mining and processing currently remains slow and politically sensitive in many EU countries, especially in environmentally delicate regions, which slows progress toward CRMA benchmarks. The main obstacle the EU faces is processing, leaving Europe heavily reliant on third countries for refining and advanced materials. Strategic stockpiles are often discussed at both EU and national levels but rarely operationalised, with unclear governance, trigger mechanisms, and prioritisation of defence needs. Although funding has increased, it remains fragmented across member states, and there is no unified European platform capable of swiftly backing large-scale, high-risk upstream projects. Furthermore, coordination between defence procurement and raw material policies is still in early development: capability goals are addressed separately from supply chain resilience. Until these elements are combined institutionally and financially, Europe's CRM strategy will remain ambitious but not yet decisively strategic.

A long curve to resilience

The EU's CRM policy should be viewed as more than just addressing mining and environmental issues. It is evolving into a crucial component of Europe's strategic independence. While the EU regulations, national funding, and shared reserves may not lead to immediate autonomy, it at least marks a shift from the passive dependence the EU faced during the past twenty years toward a more active management stance. For defence policymakers, the takeaway is straightforward: securing supply chains demands the same political commitment and institutional support as ships, jets, and cyber defences. By getting this right, Europe's armed forces will have better

supplies, and its industry will be more resilient against future geopolitical challenges. Conversely, failure to do so could cost the EU industry heavily.