Shaping Europe's Security – A Formula for Success?

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Introduction

The transformation of the European military-industrial complex has accelerated in recent years and is seen by scholars as an appropriate response to the geopolitical challenges of the 21st century (Faure, 2025, p. 2). While EU defence industry governance is constrained by intergovernmental decision-

making (p. 12), which slows the decision-making process, recent security events, such as the war in Ukraine, as well as the aftermath of Brexit, have catalysed shifts in CSDP (Reis, 2025, p. 184). The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) initiative is increasingly invoked by policymakers and scholars in the international arena as a more effective tool. Notably, the Commission has recently been identified as a crucial leader in initiatives, such as the EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (Håkansson, 2024, p. 35). Although it has traditionally not been involved in security-centred decisions within the EU, its role in leading sanctions policy, shaping industrial frameworks, and driving initiatives such as the EU Strategic Compass marks a reconfiguration of authority within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) domain.

This article will highlight changes within the CSDP/CFSP framework and its instruments and evaluate the security and industrial initiatives that reflect this shift. The list of the mentioned policies is not exhaustive; it offers an overview of the most significant developments in recent years, to provide an overview of EU security policies.

The overall argument rests on the premise that the EU has begun to base its security decision-making on both the traditional intergovernmental level and the supranational level led by the Commission, thereby facilitating the further development of European security policy. Despite recent supranational developments, the final decision on defence policy remains the competence of MS that need to reach a compromise.

The changing role of the EU Commission in defence policy

CSDP is a component of CFSP established by the Maastricht Treaty and fully implemented through the Treaty of Lisbon. It was intended to introduce a standard defence policy, resulting in a common defence framework (Masło, 2024). Unlike other EU policies, the CSDP is governed under the Treaty of the European Union (TEU), and the security cooperation under CSDP remains a MS competence, "resulting from both the TEU and the unambiguous content of Declaration No. 13 on the CFSP" (Masło, 2024, p. 161).

The War in Ukraine has led to greater cooperation between MS, especially in defence (Masło, 2024; Sus, 2022). The conflict so close to the eastern border of the EU encouraged "a gradual centralisation and the emergence of new instruments that go beyond the traditional supranational and intergovernmental division" (Sus, 2022, p. 943), within the scope of CSDP.

This is not to say that the CSDP has been a dormant structure; in some regards, it was quite the opposite. Missions such as Operation Artemis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2003 and Mission Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2004 contributed to stabilising the security situation

in both regions (Andersson, 2024). However, as Andersson mentions, the CSDP has been described as impactful yet limited due to "the constraint of resources unfilled vacancies; high turnover of staff; and in training missions, lack of follow-up and too few instructors with necessary language skills" (Andersson, 2024). He also identified risk aversion, lack of coordination, poor strategic communication, and restrictions on the provision of arms.

More recently, the media has highlighted the Commission's noticeable involvement in the security structures traditionally managed by the MS following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (Lehne, 2023). Its direct participation in leading the sanctions policy and sanctions packages against Russia (Foukas et al., 2024, p. 101), a role usually fulfilled by the Council of Ministers (Lehne, 2023), has made the Commission a prominent EU leader, especially in security matters.

As Lehne (2023) summarised, the Commission became the answer to Kissinger's question about which phone number to call when wanting to speak to Europe. According to Witney (2025), "The European Commission, equipped now with its own Defence Commissioner and Directorate-General, has emerged as the EU institution best able to address defence issues strategically" (Witney, 2025). Zwolski (2025), however, argues that there is actually nothing innovative in the EU policy pursued to become a geopolitical actor, as it reflects recurring patterns in strategic thinking. Those are dictated by policy constraints, institutional limitations rooted in consensus-building rather than hierarchy, and tensions between integration logics that offer different trade-offs (p. 15). He also raises an important point regarding labour division. There is "a clear differentiation or unstable competition" (Zwolski, 2025, p. 15) between the EU and NATO's traditional domains.

Analysis of the prevalent initiatives within CSDP

The following section will focus on the analysis of the most prevalent CSDP initiatives, which represent a change in the way CSDP and CFSP operate and will emphasise prominent policies in these fields in recent years.

EU Strategic Compass

The European Council adopted the EU Strategic Compass in March 2022 to enhance the EU's defence and security capabilities (Sus, 2024, p. 943). Reis (2025) describes it as a crucial document that outlines the future of the CSDP (p. 177). According to scholars, the adoption of the Compass was driven by positive momentum, with all Member States (MS) motivated to work on the EU Security Strategy amid a worsening security environment, Franco-German cooperation, and the EU institutions—especially the EEAS and the HRVP (p. 947). During its drafting, the Commission has notably increased its involvement. The Heads of State not only agreed with the Commission's proposals regarding the investment and capabilities of the Compass but also instructed the Commission to develop a plan to further

enhance it. Ultimately, most of the Commission's proposals were incorporated. Yet as Sus (2024) pointed out, many Member States were concerned about the expanding role of the Commission and even argued that it was exceeding the competencies established in the Treaty (p. 956). However, as the EEAS (2024) notes, since its adoption, the main objectives of the Compass have been met, including the updated threat analysis and the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (p. 30).

European Peace Facility (EPF)

Unlike the EU Strategic Compass, the EPF was established before the war in Ukraine. However, it demonstrated its most significant potential once the war began (Foukas et al., 2024, p. 94). In essence, it is an off-budget European fund within the CFSP, based on two pillars: operation and assistance measures. It operates through missions and initiatives and aims to provide measures, such as military and defence equipment, infrastructure, and technical support to partner countries (European Peace Facility, 2024). Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the EPF has been central to addressing the urgent military needs of Ukraine, mobilising a total of €6.1 billion in aid.

The competencies of the EFP are dispersed among EU institutions. The Council of the European Union decides on the type of assistance and equipment to be provided, thereby granting Member States decision-making authority, together with the competencies outlined in the TEU, to determine their security. However, the European Commission acts as the initiative's administrator and serves as an internal auditor, responsible for determining the financial implementation of the assistance measure (European Commission, 2025). It thus holds an important role, yet key decisions remain in the hands of the MS.

Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)

PESCO, which was launched in 2016, is a CSDP mechanism with voluntary membership that aims to deepen defence cooperation by requiring binding commitments without veto power. For many years, it has been viewed as a tool to address EU security stagnation, relying on NATO security guarantees (Nocoń et al., 2019). However, in 2020, PESCO was also refined through full legislative implementation of the conditions for third-party participation. PESCO is thus a prominent example of differentiated integration within the EU—a process allowing some Member States to advance further in integration while others can opt out (Cózar-Murillo, 2023, p. 1305).

The 2025 PESCO Progress Report highlights that it now includes 74 projects, ranging from unmanned ground vehicles to cyber capabilities. It emphasises its focus on addressing capability gaps and strengthening the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base.

Another key feature of PESCO is its secretariat, a joint structure comprising the European Defence Agency (EDA), European External Action Service (EEAS), and European Union Military Staff that assists MS in adopting PESCO by providing political expertise (EEAS), military skills (EU Military Staff), and technical development (EDA). Although not central to PESCO decision-making, the Commission is involved in the implementation and funding of projects through the Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space. The procedure, however, is very lengthy and bureaucratic.

The Commission-led/ assisted security initiatives

As mentioned, in recent years the Commission's president, Ursula von der Leyen, has advocated for "Europe as a geopolitical power" and the EU defence agenda, grounded in the principles of the single market. Although it has not been the sole body promoting this agenda, the direction of the Commission is "notable" (Zwolski, 2025, p. 6).

The following policies mirror its involvement in shaping the EU's defence policy.

The EDF is a €7.3 billion fund for 2021-2027, managed and operated by the Commission. It aims to allocate funds for defence research and development and for capacity building that complement national contributions (European Commission, n.d.). The EDF has annual work programmes that set out the topics to be addressed. For 2025, it focused on investment in defence research, allocating €1.065 billion for collaborative research and development in the field of defence, which were agreed as priorities by the MS. Since the adoption of EDF in 2021, the Commission has invested €5.4 billion, which made it the top investor in research and development of defence.

Nevertheless, the framework still has some limitations. Brehon (2025) emphasises that, although it makes significant R&D investments, one should not assume that (1) it will have the capacity to fund more costly project, as most projects were below €5 million (see Figure 1) (2) that EDF will finance "future strategic bomber or the development of European Patriot missile defence system" [...]. "The EDF remains a marginal tool in capacity development" (Brehon, 2025).

The leading positions in defence coordination are held by France, Spain, and Greece, even though in 2024 their dominance had diminished, accounting for only 40% of projects compared to 63% in the first year of EDF operation.

Regarding the Commission's role specifically, Brehon (2025) also emphasises that, in the 2026 draft budget, funds allocated under the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) are down by 30% in commitments and 20% in payments. Additionally, in the current structure of the MFF for 2026-2034,

defence as the focus in the current geopolitical situation, "does not even have a heading in the plan" (Brehon, 2025).

Figure1: source: https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/801-unsettling-shifts-in-the-european-defence-fund

EDIS is the first-ever European Defence Industrial Strategy, a joint communication of the HRVP and the European Commission, outlining the plan for defence industrial policy until 2035 (European Commission, n.d.). Unlike PESCO, which focuses on military cooperation, EDIS explicitly targets the EU defence industrial base, including how the EU invests, produces, and builds defence equipment—such as resolving supply chain tensions and identifying bottlenecks in EU security of supply (European Commission, n. d.).

This marks a significant shift in EU security policy, as it aims to address the core of defence production, enabling not only cooperation among Member States but also preparing for a European Military Sales Mechanism to improve the availability of EU equipment (European Commission, n.d.).

These investments and reforms are to be financed by the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), with a budget of €1.5 billion, allocated to defence projects for MS and to support for Ukraine (European Commission, n. d). One of the key criteria for accessing the funds is the requirement that at least 65% of the component costs of a given defence product come from the EU or partner countries (Siwek, 2025). The Parliament's adoption is the final legislative step, and the Member State's approval is seen as a formality in this matter. Once approved by the MS, the project is considered a key financial instrument for investment in the EU.

c. EU Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030

The Initiative was jointly produced by the Commission and the EU's foreign policy chief and was endorsed at the European Council summit on the 23rd of October 2025. It is a comprehensive initiative based on the EU defence white papers, presented in March 2025 and co-authored by the HRVP Kaja Kallas and the European Commissioner for Defence and Space, Andrius Kubilius (EEAS, 2025). As Witney (2025) summarises, it focuses on modern warfare and transformations that are needed in defence capacities, key capability priorities and focuses on four flagship projects:

All of these initiatives are said to "aim at high tech and AI-enabled defence thinking, network systems stitching together missiles, robots and surveillance assets, forward defence and European cooperation to achieve independent interoperable strategic capacity" (Witney, 2025).

Importantly enough, as Witney highlights, with this project the intention is to "hold Member States 'feet to the fire' – to introduce new concepts, milestones etc. with annual progress reports by the roadmap's authors to an October EU summit" (Witney, 2025).

Overall, the Commission compares its implementation to the introduction of the single market and the euro, in which it plans to play a leading role.

Conclusion

The CSDP and CFSP have undergone significant shifts in recent years. Established initiatives such as PESCO, the EPF and the Strategic Compass have gained new momentum. At the same time, the European Commission has become an initiator of new defence policies, managing funds and driving the development of a growing number of instruments. The war in Ukraine has been the primary factor driving the shift in security policy-making.

Still, some challenges have been identified. Uneven participation and benefit from initiatives, limitations in coordination and importantly, the lack of certainty in financial stability regarding the defence spending plan within the MFF. Addressing these tensions must be taken into consideration, especially given the importance of defence on the EU agenda. The benefits should be distributed accordingly, along with the appropriate alignment of competencies between the actors.

All in all, these initiatives show that the EU is actively working to shift its defence architecture from a reactive framework to a strategically cohesive one. The ability of MS and institutions to close capability gaps, fortify the European defence industrial base, and maintain political unity in the face of protracted geopolitical competition will determine whether this transformation lasts.

Yet one has to bear in mind that, in the end, the final decision is the competence and prerogative of the Member States, which is imprinted in the very design of the European Union competencies. This inherently limits the extent to which the EU can act autonomously as a unified security actor.

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EPIS