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COMMANDERS ORGANISATION

MARCH 2026

INCREASING EUROPEAN DEFENCE BUDGETS: TOWARDS A STRONGER DEFENCE COMMUNITY?

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RESEARCH REPORT



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RESEARCH REPORT

Introduction

Several geopolitical and strategic shifts in Europe's security environment have led to a sharp increase in defence expenditures on the continent. The war in Ukraine and the realisation that American security guarantees are uncertain have led to massive reinvestment in defence capabilities. This strategic re-alignment led to a range of regional and national initiatives, with EU MS defence expenditures rising from EUR 218bn in 2021 to EUR 343bn in 2024 (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025). While increased military spending in the European Union (EU) and its Member States (MS) can strengthen their collective capabilities and integration as a regional defence community, emerging challenges could undermine these long-term gains. This paper aims to assess the impact of these increases in military expenditures on the European defence community and identify key areas for improvement to prevent or reduce potential negative consequences of this shift. To that end, this paper asks: *What are the challenges related to increasing European defence budgets, and how can EU MS mitigate their adverse effects?*

After delving into the context that led European states to increase their defence expenditures, this paper examines foreseeable challenges arising from this change, based on three levels of analysis: domestic dislocation, European differentiation and international alignment. Building on this analysis and on existing literature, several pathways for consideration and improvement are identified.

I. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND AND CURRENT EXAMPLES

For the last three decades, European states evolved under a ‘peace dividend’, provided by the US security shield and the relative external security of Europe, where governments cut down on military expenditure to invest in and expand welfare states (Dorn, 2024; EU Commission, 2025; Fiott, 2025). However, recent geopolitical shifts have prompted EU states to reconsider their passive stance on defence investments. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, marked the return of conventional war on the EU’s doorstep, calling for a reassessment of European security and defence capabilities (Dorn, 2024; Maslanka, 2024; Ostanina, 2025). European support to Ukraine was weakened by years of underinvestment in its defence architecture and an overreliance on American equipment and security provision (Tocci, 2023, p. 5). This sudden awareness of Europe’s own defensive limitations was compounded by the re-election of President Trump in 2024, marked by heightened uncertainty and pressure on EU countries to step up investments in the transatlantic alliance (Maslanka, 2024; Fiott, 2024a; Ostanina, 2025). These new security paradigms underscored the need for Europe to massively invest in key military capabilities, which was recognised in the Versailles Declaration of March 2022 (Fiott, 2024a, 18; Hoeffler et al., 2024; Maslanka, 2024; Fiott, 2025; Ostanina, 2025).

At a regional scale, the EU revised some of its existing tools, like the European Peace Facility, increasing its budget, and introduced new instruments like the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) or European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) (Fiott, 2024a, p. 55; Hoeffler et al., 2024; Ostanina, 2025). Although delving into the specifics of these initiatives is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that they form part of a cohesive effort to address European defence shortcomings by streamlining expenditures, procurement and cooperation between MS. Moreover, the EU unlocked extra funding for defence through its 2025 ReArm Europe Plan (Colijn & Carsten, 2025; EU Commission, 2025). Notable measures include the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) loan instrument to issue EUR 150bn in EU-bonds for joint procurement of equipment (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025) and the creation of fiscal space by enabling countries to exceed the 3% deficit threshold without triggering the Excessive Deficit Procedure (Colijn & Carsten, 2025; EU Commission, 2025). Budgetary flexibility is especially crucial considering NATO’s members pledge to raise defence spending targets from 2% to 5% of GDP in June 2025 (Mang, 2025; Schaefer, 2025).

European national governments have also taken steps in response to the aforementioned challenges. Baltic, northern and eastern European states, who feel most threatened by the war in Ukraine, have significantly increased their defence expenditures (Tocci, 2023, p. 5). For instance, Sweden’s military spending is expected to reach twice that of 2023 by 2030 (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2025). Germany, undergoing a *Zeitenwende*, or ‘watershed moment’, also revised its traditional debt brake rules to “finance the Bundeswehr’s transformation” (Fiott, 2025) and attribute an extra EUR 100bn to defence. On paper, multiple shocks to Europe’s security environment positively impacted its relationship to its defence, as illustrated by measurable increases in defence expenditures.

II. CURRENT AND FORESEEABLE CHALLENGE

While recent increases in European defence spending demonstrate Europe's capacity to respond decisively to an evolving security environment, they also raise important questions about their longer-term effects. Beyond immediate improvements in readiness, these developments introduce a set of political, economic and strategic challenges that risk complicating the sustainability, coherence and legitimacy of Europe's emerging defence posture.

1. *National Dislocation*

In the EU, composed of multiple member states and diverse social groups, disagreements over priorities, methods, and beneficiaries often generate public divisions and fragmentation across opinion groups. A main challenge for European defence integration will include managing such variations.

Fielding Citizen Support. Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, EU citizens' support for stronger European defence cooperation and increased defence spending surged (European Commission, 2023; NATO, 2025). Although measures vary, most surveys suggest that an absolute majority of polled citizens support increased military expenditures after 2022, ranging from 66% [Eurobarometer] to 73% [NATO] in 2023 (European Commission, 2023; Fiott, 2024a; NATO, 2025). In 2025, while support for increasing defence expenditures remained high (NATO, 2025), a Polling Europe survey showed a 7% decrease in support from 74% in 2024 to 67% in 2025 (Neubert, 2025). Some literature highlights the declining salience and relevance of the Ukrainian conflict for people, explaining a potential drop in public support for high military expenditures (Mader & Schoen, 2023; Wang & Moise, 2023). Although impossible to predict future trends in citizens' public opinion, fielding continued support for increased defence expenditures should be a central consideration for European states.

Political Leanings. Likewise, budgetary shifts require political support (Fiott, 2024b). Parties' political leaning and electorates inform their interest and willingness to invest in defence expenditures (Maslanka, 2024). If Mader & Schoen (2023, p. 543) find that the invasion of Ukraine elicited a consensus among established political parties that European defence should be invested in, variations still exist along the spectrum. Raising defence budgets is more popular among centre parties than among the far-right and far-left (Wang & Moises, 2023; Fiott, 2024a; Neubert, 2025). At EU level, centre-right and right leaning parties are more willing to invest in defence than centre-left and left leaning parties (Neubert, 2025). The European People's Party (EPP) is 85% in favour of increased defence spending and calls for a 'European Defence Union', similar to Renew Europe (80%) (Maslanka, 2024; Neubert, 2025). The Party of European Socialists (PES – 60%) and the Greens (51%) are more divided, owing to the traditionally pacifist and socially-oriented preferences of part of their electorates, and advocate for more targeted spending and inclusive definition of security (Maslanka, 2024; Neubert, 2025). Such variations should be kept in mind and addressed, especially considering the growing popularity of Eurosceptic parties which totalled around 28.5% in national legislative elections in 2023 (Rodriguez-Pose, 2025, p. 70).

The 'Guns vs Butter' Dilemma. Another cause for dislocation is the idea that higher military expenditures are “not traditionally seen as a vote-winner in Europe, especially if it is perceived to crowd out other public investment areas” (Fiott, 2025). European publics are accustomed to the peace dividend, and cutting down social expenses risks alienating electorates, fuelling public backlash and union mobilisation (Dorn, 2024; Delanna & Can Yilmaz, 2025; Mang, 2025; Schaefer, 2025). Although this ‘guns vs butter’, or ‘warfare vs welfare’ trade-off often captures public attention, it is perhaps overstated, as other solutions exist to increase defence expenditures, including establishing new funds, increasing taxes or incurring higher levels of debt (Carter et al., 2021; Nicoli et al., 2025). These measures are however also imperfect, and prone to public backlash, with no existing consensus on which to favour. The economic implications of increasing defence budgets require careful reflection and justification, especially considering dissenting opinions regarding associated economic benefits. Focusing on these debates is beyond the scope of our discussion, but some prevalent arguments can be highlighted: (1) defence spending limits the fiscal space of other public expenditures (Ikegami & Wang, 2023; Česká Národní Banka, 2025), (2) civilian investments have a higher economic multiplier effect (Česká Národní Banka, 2025; Mang, 2025; UN Development Programme, 2025). Overall, the literature on the relationship between military spending and economic growth is divided, with no clear consensus on its effects, as results are highly dependent on methodology and time horizons (Cepparulo & Parsimeni, 2024, p. 18), but these debates should be kept in mind when increasing defence expenditures.

2. Regional Differentiation

Similarly, the EU is not a uniform political entity, where varying threat perceptions, unique economic models and spending priorities co-exist (Fiott, 2025). Regional variations can lead to regional differentiation between European states, thus undermining defence integration.

Geography. Proximity to Russia and Ukraine informs states’ interest in and willingness to invest more in defence capabilities (Prochwicz Jazowska & Zerka, 2025). Neubert (2025) highlights a pre-existing north-south split, with polls placing support for higher defence budgets at 59% in Southern Europe in 2024, compared to 76% in central and eastern Europe and 73% in northern Europe. Similarly, Dorn (2024, p. 206) underlines higher willingness among eastern countries to adjust defence budgets after the Russian invasion than western European governments, in line with their geographical proximity to the Russian threat. For instance, Polish support for defence expenditures was extremely high (86%) a week after Russian drones entered Polish airspace (Neubert, 2025). Conversely, EU focus on the eastern border could reduce the prominence of the Mediterranean region, a key issue for the Italian and Spanish governments (Angelucci & Isernia, 2025, 16; Ramos Folch, 2025). Different strategic priorities, based on geography, require more tailored justifications and rationales for increasing military expenditures.

Debt Levels & Fiscal Space. Moreover, European defence budgets are set nationally, which can lead to fragmentation, duplication of efforts and reduced efficiency (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025). Whereas Germany was able to loosen its fiscal rules to unblock defence funds, several EU countries have limited fiscal space because of high debt levels (Dorn, 2024, p. 206). France, Italy, and Belgium are currently under the EU's Excessive Deficit Procedure, their debt deficits exceeding 3% of their GDP (Bounds, 2025; Colijn & Carsten, 2025). Some highly indebted countries have also been the lowest defence spenders, including Italy, Belgium and Spain, requiring significant reinvestment in defence, thus further straining public finances (Schaefer, 2025). By contrast, more frugal states like the Netherlands have vetoed proposals to raise more EU common debt, borrow jointly and further loosen fiscal rules (Bounds, 2025; Ostanina, 2025). Multiple reasons exist for states to oppose increased integration of European defence spending. Examples of multi-paced investments can already be seen, for example through the Belgian locking defence spending at 2% of GDP until 2029 to avoid government collapse last November, despite its pledge to meet NATO's 5% of GDP defence spending target (Schaefer, 2025).

Economic Returns. Much of the current efforts to increase the defence readiness of Europe occurs through the funding of its military reindustrialisation, where differentiation can become problematic when considering the state of different EU countries' industry. Since not all EU MS have a productive defence industry, the benefits of higher military spending will be concentrated in those that possess one, for instance by attracting private research and development (R&D) (EU Commission, 2025; Mang, 2025; Prochwicz Jazowska & Zerka, 2025). The question of economic returns is also contentious with regard to joint procurement, where countries like France perceive the communitarisation of defence investments as potentially harmful to their national defence industrial competitiveness (Fiott, 2024b, p. 192).

Strategic Culture. The strategic outlook of states, informed by historical experiences, traditions and ideological beliefs, also impacts their views on European defence. As previously seen, Poland's willingness to increase defence expenditures is high, but its traditional attachment to the transatlantic alliance constrains its trust in European defence arrangements (European Commission, 2023; Prochwicz Jazowska & Zerka, 2025). Conversely, Italian levels of Europeanism and Atlanticism declined in the past two decades, and public opinion is strongly against military spending (Angelucci & Isernia, 2025, p. 6). A prime example of differentiation linked to strategic culture is Spain's refusal to commit to the 5% GDP NATO target, capping its defence expenditures at 2.1% (Ramos Folch, 2025; Schaefer, 2025). According to Ramos Folch (2025), Spain's "neutrality during both world wars and [...] peripheral role during the Cold War" shaped a "political culture that views defence as secondary to social welfare." This is reflected in Spanish public opinion, which shows low support for the increase of military budgets, and a preference for the prioritisation of healthcare and education (Ramos Folch, 2025).

Evidently, no silver bullet exists to justify the increase in military expenditures in Europe, as they depend on states' threat perception, strategic interests and economic rationales (Fiott, 2025). Efforts to sustainably support high defence expenditures require a thorough acknowledgement and assessment of these issues.

3. *International (Mis-)Alignment*

Finally, the sharp increase in European defence expenditures is at odds with some international standards, especially the 2030 deadline for Sustainable Development Goals and international peace and security (UN Development Programme, 2025; United Nations, 2025). The loosening of fiscal rules to accommodate higher defence expenditures can be expected to crowd out financial resources for development, social investments, and climate mitigation (Mang, 2025; United Nations, 2025, pp. 31-32). In Mang's (2025) words, "if governments can consider raising defence spending to 5% GDP, they cannot in the same breath say there is no money to insulate homes, decarbonise transport, strengthen care or fix the housing crises." As a point of comparison, the UN estimated global military expenditures in 2024 as \$2.7 trillion, where less than 4% (\$93bn) of \$2.7 trillion is needed every year to end hunger by 2030, and around 10% (\$285bn) can fully vaccinate every child (UN Development Programme, 2025).

Moreover, the UN highlights that, historically, military build-ups do not guarantee peace and security, instead fuelling arms race, increasing mistrust and diverting resources from initiatives fostering peace and stability (UN Development Programme, 2025; United Nations, 2025, p. 27). Considering these trade-offs, European states should be prepared to convincingly justify these trade-offs to domestic and international audiences. Shifting strategic priorities and changes in budgets, with the different implications they entail, should be part of broader reflections on the pertaining trade-offs, benefits and issues to anticipate adverse effects.

III. PATHWAYS FOR MITIGATION

Recent events in the direct strategic environment of Europe created impetus for significant investment in European security and defence. The short-term gains associated mostly with the Ukrainian conflict's crisis reaction could be undermined by a range of challenges, including national dislocation, regional differentiation and international misalignment. Turning these advances for European preparedness into long-term gains requires careful consideration, assessment and justification. A few potential pathways for consideration are highlighted in the following section.

Communication. Most obvious from this discussion are the extensive variations not only between states, but also domestic public interests, perceptions, and understandings of European defence. Justifying increases in defence expenditures based on the perceived Russian threat, although representing a critical turning point for most European countries, may not be enough to field continuous support across countries. Raising defence budgets should be accompanied by well thought-out rationales, which most likely need to be tailored to specific countries and their domestic contexts (Delanna & Can Yilmaz, 2025; Prochwicz Jazowska & Zerka, 2025). Moreover, different publics are more or less sensitive to different incentives. A combination of economic, strategic and/or other considerations should become part of wider efforts to make sustainable increases in defence spending acceptable (Fiott, 2025; Prochwicz Jazowska & Zerka, 2025).

Looking ahead, investing in European security and defence should improve the region's capacity to respond to conflicts in its vicinity, but also reinforce its preparedness in connected fields, like border controls, the fight against terrorism or cyberattacks (Prochwicz Jazowska & Zerka, 2025).

Foresight. Recent developments, initiatives and commitments to improve the European defence infrastructure are perhaps overly tethered to reactive stimulus from external crises. Ensuring the sustainability of these investments in the long-term requires planning and foresight. This implies not only coordinating and evaluating budget plans to avoid fragmentation and foster long-term investments, but also reflections on what Europe actually seeks to defend itself against (Dorn, 2024; Ostanina, 2025). A comprehensive assessment of Europe's strategic outlook a thorough threat-based security assessment of force structure, hardware needs, military training and military mobility (Ostanina, 2025). Given the increasingly complicated task for individual nations to develop their own national defence systems, collaborative solutions and the development of European joint platforms, equipment and technology are ever more relevant. Inevitably, this implies more thorough, specific planning and built-in foresight to increase the efficiency and explicability of new measures, especially considering the well-known difficulties European states face when cooperating on defence development projects.

Transparency. Finally, European states should consider improving the accessibility and transparency of information on defence budgets. Rallying diverse publics and states demands their involvement in more open debates to strengthen accountability and democratic oversight, which are critical for sustaining political support over time (Dorn, 2024, p. 206). By embedding transparency into decision-making and implementation, European defence efforts can better balance sovereignty concerns with collective effectiveness, turning crisis-driven momentum into a coherent and durable security architecture. The continuous involvement of European audiences is crucial to foster long-term thinking and to future-proof defence policy at national and regional levels.

Efficient communication, built-in foresight, and increased transparency are necessary components to address dislocation of domestic publics and the differentiation of initiatives at the European level. More thorough application of these concepts can also improve the accountability and explainability of shifting defence budgets, potentially rendering them more acceptable under international standards. Ultimately, more in-depth assessments of country-specific challenges and needs will be necessary to make informed decisions on how best to mitigate the previously mentioned challenges.

CONCLUSION

The sharp increase in European defence expenditures marks a critical shift away from decades of reliance on the peace dividend and American security guarantees. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine and growing uncertainty surrounding long-term American commitments have generated both political will and financial capacity to improve European security and defence. While these developments represent a significant advancement in Europe's defence preparedness, this paper has argued that translating crisis-driven spending into sustainable, long-term gains for the European defence community remains deeply challenging. Looking at three levels of analysis, this paper identified national dislocation, regional differentiation and international misalignment as particularly contentious. Domestically, variations in public opinion, political preferences and fiscal priorities complicate the maintenance of long-term support for higher military budgets. At the European level, divergent threat perceptions, debt constraints, industrial capacities and strategic cultures risk reinforcing fragmentation and uneven burden-sharing. Internationally, expanded defence expenditures raise normative and material tensions with commitments to sustainable development, social investment and conflict prevention.

Addressing these challenges requires more than continued financial commitments. As outlined in the pathways for mitigation, effective communication, built-in foresight and enhanced transparency emerge as key conditions for transforming crisis-driven responses into durable security gains. Better communication, exercising foresight and increased transparency can help reconcile national preferences with collective objectives, while improving the legitimacy and accountability of defence policies. Although no single solution can fully resolve the tensions identified, acknowledging and managing them is essential if increased defence expenditures are to contribute to a more coherent, resilient and sustainable European defence community.

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