

# The EU Is Marching Toward An Independent And Integrated Military



*John P. Ruehl -  
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*04-02-2024 ~ The EU's evolving common defense network is decades in the making, yet remains hindered by its inability to match NATO and apprehension by some member states.*

At the European Defense Agency's annual conference [in November 2023](#), President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen warned member states from buying too much equipment from abroad and called for a European Defense Union. While the defense union is yet to materialize, the first-ever [European Defense Industrial Strategy](#) signed in early March 2024 marked another significant step toward achieving European Union (EU) military autonomy by focusing on improving European weapons manufacturing.

The EU's collective military spending reached almost \$300 billion [in 2023](#), more than China's [official defense budget](#). Yet its collective weapons stocks [remain low](#), its [aircraft](#), [ships](#), and [tanks](#) aren't ready for combat, and its member states lack logistical and coordination experience. With these shortcomings, debate continues over whether the military policies of EU member states are determined in their capitals, Brussels, or Washington, D.C.

Public support in EU states for a common defense and security policy has

nonetheless [remained above 70 percent](#) in the 21st century. Washington has maintained a balancing strategy of encouraging dependency among European [NATO/EU](#) states, while ensuring they remain capable military allies. But fluctuating attitudes by U.S. administrations toward European defense initiatives have exacerbated uncertainty regarding their autonomy, and integration efforts have continued to evolve since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

[France's 1951](#) proposal for a European Defense Community (EDC) among itself, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands found significant support in Washington. Seeking to create a complementary to NATO to collectively face the Soviet Union, U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles threatened an "[agonizing reappraisal](#)" during a 1953 NATO summit of Washington's role in NATO if the EDC failed to materialize.

Despite the rejection of the EDC French parliament, the Western European Union (WEU) military alliance was established in 1954 as a viable alternative. It included the UK and West Germany, paving way for the latter's entry into NATO in 1955. [France's dissatisfaction](#) with the dominance of British and American interests in NATO saw it reduce its participation and integration in NATO during the 1960s, later [emphasizing the WEU](#) for greater European military integration.

However, French attempts to position the WEU as a credible alternative faltered. Even after the end of the Cold War and Soviet collapse, Europe continued to rely heavily on U.S.-led NATO, particularly evident during the 1990s Yugoslav Wars.

Yet U.S. policymakers [viewed the](#) establishment of the EU in 1993 as a challenger to NATO and capable of competing in defense contracts. In 1998, France and the historically euroskeptic UK [signed the Saint Malo declaration](#), committing to create a European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) and envisaging a still-unrealized 60,000 strong European force. The Clinton administration [expressed concern](#) about potential discrimination against non-EU states, duplicating the role of NATO, and delinking it from the EU. Undeterred, the EU established the ESDP framework in 1999, and the WEU was transferred to the EU [in 2000](#).

The burgeoning NATO-EU military rivalry was somewhat tempered by efforts to bolster cooperation and coordination, including the 2001 NATO-EU Framework Agreement and 2003 [Berlin Plus Agreement](#). The creation of NATO's rapid reaction force [in 2003](#) also blunted the EU's ambitions, while Eastern European

states sought NATO assurances, not the EU's, because of concerns over Russia.

However, 2003 also marked the debut of the [Eurofighter Typhoon fighter jet](#), a joint EU project involving Germany, the UK, Italy, and Spain through the Eurofighter GmbH consortium. Originating in the 1980s, this venture marked a major milestone in European defense collaboration, and today European defense firms such as Airbus, BAE Systems, Leonardo S.p.A., and Dassault, can compete with U.S. weapons exports globally.

Nurturing Europe's dependency on U.S. power has historically been an effective strategy for Washington to maintain control of the alliance. During the NATO-led intervention in the Libyan Civil War, the Obama administration [urged European allies](#) to assume a leading role, but they faced challenges due to [limited weapons stocks and coordination](#). France, which rejoined NATO military command in 2009, was then provided significant U.S. assistance in Africa [from 2014](#), including air-refueling flights and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, aligning with broader U.S. initiatives in Africa.

Washington's long-term method of managing the EU's military autonomy suffered a significant disruption in 2016. The UK, traditionally the most skeptical of [further EU military integration](#), voted to leave the institution, while Trump's election victory and [open disdain](#) for NATO added uncertainty to the alliance. With fewer constraints, the EU accelerated efforts to increase its autonomy.

Days after the Brexit vote, the EU unveiled its [2016 European Global Strategy, outlining a path to a more independent military and foreign policy](#). In 2017, the [European Defense Fund](#) was established to secure collective defense funding, as well as the [Permanent Structured Cooperation](#) (PESCO) to develop joint military projects.

The Trump administration cautioned against PESCO excluding non-EU states, fearing it could lead to interoperability issues and amid [pressure from defense firms](#) concerned about being marginalized in Europe's market. And after German Chancellor Angela Merkel endorsed Macron's calls for a European army, [Trump was highly critical of the decision](#).

The momentum of EU military integration continued into the Biden administration. The approval of the [European Peace Facility](#) (EPF) in early 2021 provided the EU with a collective mechanism to procure and supply lethal

weapons systems to other countries, enhancing its ability to influence conflicts beyond its borders and supply weapons to foreign states.

Although the U.S. has reasserted its central role to the Western alliance in Ukraine, its [recent funding setbacks](#) have seen attempts by the EU to seize the initiative and hasten its path to military autonomy. However, due to the EU's limited authority, it relies on member states to drive this process, which they struggle to manage independently or collaboratively.

[Having withdrawn](#) from Africa in 2022 and 2023, France has intensified training programs, equipment transfers, and intelligence sharing and cooperation with Ukraine since the start of its war with Russia. In March 2024, President Emmanuel Macron stated that France has “[no limits](#)” on its aid to Ukraine, and would [not rule out building a coalition](#) to send Western troops to the country.

France's status as the EU's only nuclear power and permanent member of the United Nations Security Council affords it a distinctive position to drive European military integration. Against the backdrop of Trump's America First policies, Macron's 2019 proposal for a bilateral strategic dialogue with Russia calls to create a new “[European security architecture](#)” broke from Washington but elicited outrage among some eastern European countries.

France's shifting stance toward Russia since the start of the Ukraine War reflects its pragmatic approach. But [concerns persist](#) among other European countries over perceptions France is leveraging the EU to further its own ambitions. French weapons exports [have surged to Ukraine, as well as to former Russian markets](#), and France has [received more than a quarter](#) of the European Defense Fund's budget for pilot programs.

In contrast, Germany has [avoided attempting](#) to assume a leadership role in for the EU's policies toward Ukraine but its military gravity in the EU has nevertheless amassed. Two Dutch combat brigades were integrated into German divisions in 2016, as well as some integration [between their naval forces](#). The Czech Republic and Romania have also integrated a brigade each into the German armed forces [in 2017](#), while all three Dutch brigades were integrated [in 2023](#). But Germany appears unwilling to go further, despite being the only one capable of matching France's initiatives.

Adding to the EU's struggle to achieve military cohesion is the pro-NATO

sentiment among certain eastern European EU states. Poland in particular has [dragged its feet](#) in greater EU defense collaboration, while the Baltic States who also prioritize their military partnership with the U.S. and NATO. [In 2020](#), the U.S. and Poland solidified their defense cooperation further through agreements to send 1,000 additional U.S. troops to Poland, and a general preference for integration with U.S. weapons systems has entrenched U.S. influence across the region.

Since the departure of the UK from the EU on January 31, 2020, its capacity to direct and engage with EU states has diminished significantly. In a bid to bypass the EU and maintain connections with member states, the UK has sought to leverage its weapons industry and close military relationship with the U.S. to position itself as the leading European actor in the Ukraine crisis.

In a move that undermines the EU's efforts for unified military integration, Poland and the UK signed the [2030 Strategic Partnership](#) in 2023 to strengthen their foreign policy, security, and defense cooperation. Later that year, the defense ministers of Japan, Italy, and the UK [signed an agreement to form a collaborative organization to develop an](#) advanced fighter jet, providing London with another entry point into the European defense market. [In early 2024](#), UK forces also led the NATO Rapid Response Forces exercises in Poland.

The array of EU institutions, which also include the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Coordinated Annual Review on Defense (CARD), Capability Development Plan (CDP), European Defense Agency (EDA), and the EU's Defense Technological and Industrial Base (EDITB), highlight the challenges inherent in managing a large bureaucracy tasked with coordinating multiple states on military affairs. The EDA [oversees 178](#) major weapons systems alone, while the U.S. manages just 30. The implementation of PESCO meanwhile [suffered delays](#) and the creation of a [Rapid Deployment Capacity](#) (RDC) of 5,000 soldiers by 2025 [faces doubts](#). Additionally, the EU's struggle to supply weapons to Ukraine has been routinely criticized by officials from both sides of the Atlantic.

Adding to this are the lingering and often overlapping security arrangements among European countries. The Baltic Defense Cooperation, Nordic Defense Cooperation, and Lancaster House Treaty, Joint Expeditionary Force and European Intervention Initiative have all decentralized the EU's military cohesion,

with many still including the UK.

The recent decisions by Finland and Sweden to join NATO meanwhile underscore the willingness of EU states to relinquish some autonomy in favor of aligning themselves with the protective cover provided by Article 5 of the NATO charter. In the absence of a cohesive and organized EU capable of projecting power effectively, NATO will continue to be the preferred military alliance, even with the possible reelection of Trump.

Of course, the EU has made significant headway in centralizing European defense over the last three decades. It is currently engaged [in 10 military initiatives](#) across three continents and has also participated in anti-piracy operations. In [early 2024](#), the EU chose to launch its own naval mission to combat Houthi militant attacks on shipping in the Red Sea, rather than operate under U.S. command.

While the EU's defense infrastructure still relies on U.S. assistance, it possesses more than just the foundational elements needed for achieving military autonomy. Despite the protracted nature of this journey, the EU's consistent progress, even in the face of bypassing NATO, signals an even more independent future.

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