



**The European Union's  
Security Dilemma in the  
Absence of a Unified  
Military: Assessing the  
Role of NATO and  
Transatlantic Relations in  
the Post-Trump Era**

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**Abstract**

The research investigates the EU's efforts at strategic independence while focusing on problems and possibilities within its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) defense and security relationship. This research uses qualitative methods to study defense projects Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and European Defense Fund (EDF) and to examine how political transformations affect European security at large. The European Union (EU) successfully developed its defense capabilities, yet current limitations include member state politics blocking coordinated approaches and struggles to create standardized military capabilities. This prevents EU governments from taking autonomous global security decisions. The uncertainty of the Trump administration's foreign policy underlined Europe's exposure to overseas power dependence, leading to increased EU efforts to achieve strategic independence. The research shows that the EU advances its independent security policy, yet building complete independence from NATO poses multiple obstacles that require enhanced EU cooperation and integration at all levels. The research helps explain how European security will develop in the global order, which becomes more complex and unpredictable.

**Keywords:** *Strategic Autonomy, European Union Security, NATO Relations, Transatlantic Defense Cooperation, PESCO and EDF initiatives.*

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## **Birleşik Bir Ordunun Yokluğunda Avrupa Birliği'nin Güvenlik İkilemi: Trump Sonrası Dönemde NATO'nun ve Transatlantik İlişkilerin Rolünün Değerlendirilmesi**

### **Özet**

Araştırma, NATO savunma ve güvenlik ilişkisi içindeki sorunlara ve olasılıklara odaklanırken AB'nin stratejik bağımsızlık çabalarını araştırıyor. Bu araştırma, PESCO ve EDF savunma projelerini incelemek ve siyasi dönüşümlerin genel olarak Avrupa güvenliğini nasıl etkilediğini incelemek için nitel yöntemler kullanıyor. AB savunma yeteneklerini başarıyla geliştirdi, ancak mevcut sınırlamalar arasında üye devlet politikalarının koordineli yaklaşımları engellemesi ve standartlaştırılmış askeri yetenekler oluşturma mücadeleleri yer alıyor. Bu, AB hükümetlerinin özerk küresel güvenlik kararları almasını engelliyor. Trump yönetiminin dış politikasının belirsizliği, Avrupa'nın deniz aşırı güç bağımlılığına maruz kalmasını vurguladı ve AB'nin stratejik bağımsızlığa ulaşma çabalarının artmasına yol açtı. Araştırma, AB'nin bağımsız güvenlik politikasını ilerlettiğini, ancak NATO'dan tam bağımsızlık oluşturmanın her düzeyde gelişmiş AB iş birliği ve entegrasyonunu gerektiren birden fazla engel oluşturduğunu gösteriyor. Araştırma, Avrupa güvenliğinin daha karmaşık ve öngörülemez hale gelen küresel düzende nasıl gelişeceğini açıklamaya yardımcı oluyor.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** *Stratejik Özerklik, Avrupa Birliği Güvenliği, NATO İlişkileri, Transatlantik Savunma İş Birliği, PESCO ve EDF girişimleri.*

## 1. Introduction

The European Union has persistently dealt with security challenges because member states do not maintain a single military organization. The European Union strengthened its economic and political ties between member states, but its defense and military aspects remain divided, forcing it to count on NATO security support from the United States. The evolving transatlantic relationship during and after the Trump administration created issues with NATO reciprocity, mainly because the administration criticized European nations for inadequate defense spending. (Daalder & Goldgeier, 2006: 105-113) During the Trump presidency, the unclear American approach toward European security bolstered EU discussions about developing strategic autonomy along with strengthening military capacity.

During the Trump presidency, there was a significant shift in how the United States managed NATO security alongside European defense policy. European leaders began reassessing their historical approach to American military support after President Donald Trump revealed through his transactional dealings that he would potentially disengage from NATO. (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016: 7-53).

When discussing defense vulnerabilities, the Trump administration revealed EU dependence on American military support and showed that Europe lacks unified military structures. The EU faces strategic challenges that scholars describe as a “security dilemma” since its lack of unified defense structure forces it to rely on external powers, which might endanger its independence and geopolitical capabilities (Lobell, 2010/2017: 1–23).

The ability of security measures such as PESCO and EDF to enhance the EU security apparatus is insubstantially limited by national political differences and inadequate funding and operational support (Fiott, 2015: 159-167).

Both Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and European Defense Fund (EDF) were meant to play a central role in EU defense, but have not worked as planned due to complicated bureaucracy, different views from member states on threats and missing unified leadership. As a result of these challenges, the EU has failed to turn its big goals into actual military strength. Furthermore, a lot of the EU's smaller members are concerned about replicating structures and tend to trust in the Atlantic alliance for safety. Oppositely, France, plus a few others in the EU, believes that having strong defense policies is necessary for Europe's independence and to depend less on the U.S. There is an additional problem since it is unclear how the EU should balance their military plans with the leading role NATO holds (Blockmans & Crosson, 2021: 87-110).

European defense maintains NATO as its foundation, yet speculation about its future tries to balance transatlantic relations during the post-Trump leadership period. Russian aggression in Ukraine, alongside the ongoing conflict, made NATO essential yet put European Union leaders back on track to build their independent security defense policy. Because Europe depends on NATO but wants more independence, the issue has caused EU organizations and member states to discuss it once more. Even though the transatlantic alliance is the primary basis for European security, the war in Ukraine and changes in global power have pushed EU leaders to invest more in standard capabilities, coordinate better in defense purchases and increase the EU's presence in crisis management worldwide. With more attention given to defense in Europe, members of the EU are debating better ways to move troops quickly and build a stronger strategy to address new risks together (Moller & Rynning, 2021: 177-197).

In order to frame this research, this paper presents the idea of a "strategic dependency loop," which explains how EU member states' incentives to commit to autonomous defense measures fully are diminished when they rely on NATO for deterrence. This cycle

inhibits institutional advancement towards strategic autonomy and maintains competence disparities. Additionally, the report uses a typology that makes a distinction between "defensive dependency" (continuing dependency on NATO-led deterrence), "shared autonomy" (combined EU–NATO operational capacity), and "soft autonomy" (symbolic actions with limited functional scope). The EU's security posture from 2014 to the present is assessed using this methodology.

This document evaluates the EU security problem while lacking a unified military framework through an assessment of NATO's evolution alongside post-Trump global relations. The analysis investigates European defense through geopolitical evaluation, institutional analysis, and strategic assessment because these elements provide necessary insights into the EU's strategic position during global security uncertainties. (Biscop, 2020: 231-234)

### **1.1 Research questions**

1. How has the absence of a unified military force affected the EU's security posture in the post-Trump era?
2. What role does NATO continue to play in European defense, and how have transatlantic relations evolved since the Trump administration?

### **1.2 Research objectives**

1. To assess the impact of the EU's fragmented defense structure on its ability to respond to contemporary security challenges.
2. To evaluate the influence of post-Trump transatlantic relations on the EU's dependency on NATO for security.

### **1.3 Hypothesis**

In the absence of a unified military, the EU's continued reliance on NATO undermines its pursuit of strategic autonomy in the post-Trump era.

### **1.4 Significance of the study**

The study's worth stems from its research into EU security challenges during its early years without a combined military force, together with its analysis of Atlantic relations under Donald Trump's presidency. The EU effectively responds to new security threats because it depends on NATO, yet existing strategic and political divisions make efficient action impossible. Global security challenges and rising international turbulence require analysis to understand both the EU's self-sufficiency capabilities and limitations in operating independently.

Even though PESCO and the EDF have taken strong steps, it has been difficult for them to turn their intentions into actual abilities. Reducing division and boosting overall security is the goal, but different countries are proceeding with varying purchase choices, causing some parts of these efforts to overlap. At the same time, some question whether the EU can rely on outside suppliers, given the potential effects such reliance might have on the EU's defenses during global conflicts. As a result, though PESCO and the EDF stand for progress, they also reveal that the EU has challenges transforming political goals into real defense resources.

PESCO's importance in this context goes beyond its operational initiatives. PESCO has 68 active joint projects as of 2025, ranging from cyber defense networks to enhanced military mobility. These efforts are intended to fortify the EU's defense industry base in addition to improving interoperability. Cohesion is hampered by unequal involvement, as some member states participate selectively. Therefore, political dedication and national procurement plans that

are in line with EU aims are both necessary for PESCO to succeed (*Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)*, 2017).

This analysis is important now because the EU is being challenged anew about its part in security, given that some traditional alliances are under strain. The Ukraine conflict and other international disputes have led to greater debates about improving European security, and this study helps explain their background and ongoing issues. The research by comparing European policies and transatlantic dynamics helps to explain how these factors influence the EU's changing approach to security matters and forms the basis for future talks on how to address the gap between the EU's ambitions and actual outcomes in defense policies.

### **1.5 Methodology**

This study uses qualitative descriptive methods to understand the EU's security problems as an organization with limited military unity while focusing specifically on NATO and transatlantic relations after the Trump era. The research bases its findings entirely on secondary sources from scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles and policy briefs, and documented speeches, besides web-based publications by renowned think tanks, including the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) and Real Instituto Elcano, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Official EU and NATO documents, together with reputable news outlets, along with the "Readiness 2030" initiative, have been used to confirm that the analysis incorporates recent strategic policy changes in the EU (Tanti, 2025).

A focused qualitative content analysis of NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, the EU's Strategic Compass (2022), (*European Union External Action Service*, 2022).

and PESCO progress updates from 2017–2024 are included in the study to supplement the literature review. Key theme terms including "deterrence," "resilience," and "operational readiness" are identified

in the analysis. These terms show how NATO and the EU express different but overlapping conceptions of European security (NATO, 2022).

### **Literature Review**

Since its inception, the European Union (EU) has fought against the security challenges that come with no standing military unity. The EU struggles with strategic autonomy because its dependence on NATO and the United States during Nordic defense activities affects its defense capabilities. Strategic autonomy pursuits by the EU have become more crucial as the world political situation has evolved after the Trump presidency era, while transatlantic relationships have come under increased evaluation (Howorth & John, 2003: 3-21).

Since 1999, the EU has created the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) to provide Europe with tools for conducting external crisis management through peacekeeping and stabilization operations. The EU lacked the capacity to operate independently for territorial defense alongside defending against state threats since NATO maintained primary responsibility for those areas. Since the end of the Cold War, this sectoral separation between defense duties has been sustained without change as NATO's members dedicated no more than 20 percent of their collective defense actions to the European region (Bart, 2022).

To fix the divide, countries have advocated for greater money for defense, cooperation in buying weapons and introduced the Strategic Compass from the EU to offer guidance on collective efforts. Still, these aims regularly come up against differences in national policies, sensitive political issues and scarce resources. While all agree that security and defense should be strengthened in the EU, actually carrying out these commitments together has been difficult. We are yet to see if the EU will manage to move past these issues and play a significant defense role that works alongside, rather than the same as, NATO (Friis & Tannes, 2024: 813-824).

Security concerns alongside U.S. uncertainty toward European military defense prompted the EU to create programs, including Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and European Defense Fund (EDF). The defense initiative PESCO entered operation in 2017 to allow EU member states to cooperate on defense projects to improve military capabilities and joint operational readiness. The 2017-founded EDF functions to unite national defense research investments for better military force inter-operation (Finabel, 2023).

The EU defense industry heavily depends on non-EU suppliers because extensive foreign entities contribute to defense-related EU tenders. Member states struggle to develop coordinated defense policies since they lack a unified vision while working through nationally different interests, which delays progress toward a cohesive defense strategy. Even with these activating plans, the EDF and PESCO have come across significant difficulties in carrying out their commitments. While both programs want to solve the fragmentation issue and increase cooperation, some members have been reluctant to truly work together in their purchasing strategies, which has resulted in incongruity in efforts. Because the EU relies on outside suppliers, any weak points in the defense supply chain have come to light, causing worries about strategic dependency and the risks of geopolitical problems. Consequently, PESCO and the EDF show that European defense integration is moving ahead yet highlight the bigger problems the EU encounters in transforming its plans into real military capabilities (Berchev, 2024: 25-49).

The EU member states define strategic autonomy from each other through their understanding of this concept. France demonstrates alignment between national defenses and European defenses since the country believes that evaluation independence and free decision-making, and direct action require mutual support. Germany supports European strategic autonomy by maintaining important national technologies that will benefit from scaled-up cooperation among member states. The EU experiences difficulties in establishing a

unified defense policy because the national priorities of member states remain contradictory (Schramm, 2025: 2-10).

European leaders evaluated their defense reliance after the Trump administration started dealing with alliances through transactions while blaming NATO nations for insufficient defense spending. The European Union recognized fundamental weaknesses in its defensive capabilities because of Donald Trump's diplomatic methods combined with his strategic policies, which proved Europe's essential military alliance with America. European leaders are now accelerating discussions regarding more independence for their strategic defense initiatives (Fabbrini, 2024).

Strategic autonomy has gained new priority in EU policy following the Ukraine conflict alongside NATO conversation re-emergence. President Emmanuel Macron demonstrates increasing European support for autonomous defense by suggesting that France will provide nuclear protection to its European partners. Strategic autonomy at its full capacity demands that EU member states align behind a shared strategic culture while developing stronger defense capabilities across the Union (Dunn & Webber, 2025: 1-9).

The EU continues to deal with multiple obstacles toward strategic independence, even with the deployment of PESCO and EDF programs. The defense industry operated by the EU depends heavily on suppliers who are not members, while non-EU participants play a key role in EU defense-related tender competitions. The EU faces major setbacks in building a unified defense strategy because member states have different visions about defense policy, while their national interests increase the difficulty of policy coordination. National security threats arising from conflicting national defense perceptions and insufficient military capacities between EU member states obstruct their ability to undertake unified military operations (Strategic Autonomy and European Defence, 2021).

The Ukrainian war reveals how these strategic issues create difficulties that different EU member states choose to confront differently while persisting in military alliances with the United States and NATO for defense operations (Celso & Sguazzini, 2025: 110-130).

## **2.2 Theoretical framework**

The study is conducted under the light of structural realism. This analysis examines the security problems faced by the EU by examining how the international environment, as an anarchistic and non-uniform state power, directs the actions of states. According to structural realism, in the absence of a state that dominates, states strive for individual survival through self-help and act based on providing relative security in relation to other states. The investigation of the EU in this context shows why member states did not pursue the complete unity of their military resources. They esteem national sovereignty and work closely with NATO, primarily the U.S., since it offers a firmer and more real security guarantee. Austerity attempts to gain strategic independence through measures such as PESCO and the EDF are hampered by the overwhelming power of NATO, nations competing for aspirations, and the failure to synchronize militaries (Handler, 2024: 285-321). Structural realism explains the push for EU autonomy in defense since the period that Trump took office, and this has become more obvious due to his erratic foreign policy. The increased power of Russia and China in the international system presents new threats that make the EU decide to strengthen its security. Therefore, structural realism provides a clear-eyed view of how the EU needs to operate on its limited autonomy in the area of security in the face of a world where power and survival shape state action (James, 2022: 355-385).

## **2.3 Historical background**

Since World War II, the security framework of the European Union emerged from the historical circumstances of Europe's

reconstruction period through its developments in defence and military strategy. After suffering two world wars, the nations of Europe looked for ways to maintain stability and achieve peace while promoting cooperation. After World War II, economic integration emerged as the primary path toward achieving peace and stability when the European Economic Community (EEC) was formed through the Treaty of Rome in 1957. European institutions started without control over defense or security issues, so NATO used its 1949 foundation to provide collective defense against perceived Soviet advancement primarily through military coordination (Eoin O'Malley, 2024: 17-47).

## **Strategic Autonomy and Europe's Security Evolution**

### **3.1 The Cold War and Europe's Continued Reliance on NATO**

At the start of the 1990s, Europe faced a complete political transformation as both the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact disappeared from the world stage. Despite the withdrawal of the Soviet threat, NATO preserved its status as the essential connection between European and American powers. Europe needed to reassess its defence responsibilities after the security environment changed due to the Maastricht Treaty establishing the modern European Union in 1993 (Holger Draber, 2014: 1-9).

Things were a mix of positive and negative during this shift for the sector of European security policy. As soon as the Soviet Union ended, the strong reason that gave NATO much power disappeared, leaving Europe free to look for different ways to cooperate and act more independently. Besides making countries closer together economically and politically, the Maastricht Treaty also prepared for a sophisticated Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as a hint to Europe's desire to be more active on the international stage. At the same time, the changing nature of security problems brought additional worries, like regional fighting in the Balkans and the arrival of new security threats which tested how Europe handled

emergencies. Because of this, Europe needed to work on both sides: continue with NATO to keep strong transatlantic relations and also start shaping its own security and defense plans as the world keeps changing (Uğur, 2025: 276-293).

### **3.2 The Maastricht Treaty and the Emergence of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP)**

The 1990s saw a shift in EU security development, with the Maastricht Treaty establishing the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in 1992. The 1998 Saint-Malo Declaration emphasized the EU's autonomous capabilities in defense, while NATO remained the defensive foundation. The European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) was created in the early 2000s, but the EU remained heavily reliant on NATO (Molnár & Éva Jakusné Harnos, 2024: 97-100).

### **3.3 The Post-Cold War Era: Growing Calls for European Autonomy**

Throughout the early 2000s, concerns mounted about the European Union's capacity to manage security threats independently from NATO involvement. Security crises after the 9/11 terrorist attack in the United States, along with the Iraq War (2003) and subsequent Middle East instability, exposed the EU's restricted capacity for crisis responses when member states disagreed on military actions. The Iraq War exposed fundamental rifts inside the EU regarding military action because France and Germany rejected U.S.-led intervention, yet the United Kingdom supported it. EU fragmentation demonstrated its lack of cohesive defense capabilities in important global security situations, sparking a significant discussion about independent European defense capabilities (Webber, 2025: 67-81).

To meet safety challenges the EU initiated exploration of strategic autonomy that implied independent defense capabilities outside NATO and United States direction. The notion of strategic autonomy

rose to prominence during the mid-2000s as EU leaders realized their heavy dependence on U.S. leadership through NATO would prove dangerous because of U.S. foreign policy uncertainties. European leaders questioned America's role as a security partner after Donald Trump's 2016 U.S. presidential victory because of his "America First" stance and critiques about NATO's importance (Kohut, 2024).

### **3.4 The Post-Trump Era and the EU's Strategic Autonomy Agenda**

The EU accelerated its defense strategy review after Donald Trump became president and started challenging both NATO membership and European defense budget priorities. Certain European nations pressed forward with defense autonomy projects because Trump's unsteady foreign policy practices and direct NATO questions triggered their urgent need for independence. PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) along with the European Defense Fund (EDF) emerged in 2017 as strategic EU initiatives to improve EU defense industrial capabilities and boost member state military cooperation (Pawlikowski, 2024: 345-382).

Following Trump's presidential term, the EU declared more substantial support for autonomous defense policies alongside new capabilities through European mutual defense initiatives. Ursula von der Leyen as president of the European Commission leads the way among key EU officials by stressing European defense capabilities need strengthening and that Europe should reduce external power dependence while expanding global security governance authority (Fabbrini, 2024).

## **4. Chronology: how Europe's push for strategic autonomy affected transatlantic relations and NATO**

### **4.1 1990s – Post–Cold War Adjustment**

Following the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact led to significant changes in how Europe was protected.

Despite this, NATO remained the cornerstone of Western security. Established by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, Europe's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) allowed the EU to begin working more closely to secure global peace. Based on the 1998 Saint-Malo Declaration by France and the United Kingdom, the EU should be able to act militarily by itself when NATO is not involved. At this point, European countries were starting to integrate their defense, but relying on the United States in NATO was still prominent. Relations between the U.S. and Europe were strong and steady, provided NATO was still considered the main military body (Krzymowski, 2021).

#### **4.2 2003 – Iraq War and European Division:**

In 2003, the U.S. invasion of Iraq brought significant divides in the politics of the EU to the surface. While France and Germany were against the war, the United Kingdom supported Washington. Due to this situation, the EU had difficulties presenting a united front on international matters and borders. After the Iraq War, many Europeans talked about the limited role of their militaries in world affairs and how it affected their decision-making. This situation made it evident that Europe could not totally rely on U.S. leadership if its goals differed from those of the United States. NATO was not actively involved in the Iraq invasion, but the problems between its key members in Europe had an impact on them (Olsen, 2022).

During the Iraq War, it became apparent that the bonds in European defense were weak, and national concerns were sometimes more important than decisions made by the group. As a result, people discussed once again the challenges in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and argued for a stronger and united European position in worldwide security. Some EU member countries demand that the bloc have a bigger impact on international security and support building defense forces that fit alongside NATO as well as allow Europe to operate separately when necessary. As a result of the

Iraq War, European countries were driven to rethink their trust in the U.S. and start working on making the EU more able to face global security challenges (Coffey, 2013).

### **4.3 2011–2014 – Libya Intervention and Russia’s Return**

As a result of the Arab Spring in 2011, the U.S., France and Britain supported NATO in conducting military operations in Libya. As an organization, the EU could not take decisive action and was unable to act quickly during crises which became clear in the conflict. The incident further showed that Europe was not able to operate independently. Everything changed in 2014 due to Russia seizing Crimea and unsettling the region of Eastern Ukraine. As a result, NATO once again focused on security in Europe, especially by deterring aggression and defending the region. European nations enhanced their spending on the military and looked at how to secure their countries. Although sanctions and foreign policy efforts belonged to the EU, NATO, and the U.S. led the way in keeping other nations at bay militarily (Perthes, 2011: 73-84).

The EU and NATO security agendas underwent a sea change in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea. In response, NATO sent forward-deployed battlegroups to Eastern Europe, but the EU mostly used diplomatic efforts and economic penalties. This disparity demonstrated how operationally dependent the Union is on NATO for strong security measures. This trend was further highlighted by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. While the EU mobilized humanitarian help, macro-financial aid, and refugee relocation arrangements, NATO took the lead in providing lethal aid and organizing military support. During this time, the EU launched its Strategic Compass, but it still had little autonomy in high-intensity conflict.

### **4.4 From 2016 to 2020 – Trump’s era and increased independence in the EU**

The way transatlantic security was handled shifted with Donald Trump's presidency. His doubts about NATO, doubts around Article 5 and continuous calls for Europe to increase its military budget were disturbing to many Europeans. European leaders began to doubt the U.S. commitment to their military security after Trump spoke out with his "America First" slogan. Consequently, the EU hastily put measures in place to protect its internal security. In 2017, two programs, PESCO and EDF, were introduced to encourage collaboration on defense and strengthen the defense industry in EU member states. Being able to act independently from the U.S. became the primary focus for Europeans, and France pushed for a Europe that could go it alone if the situation called for it (GÖRGEN, 2021: 1373-1395).

#### **4.5 2021–2024 – Post-Trump Re-engagement and War in Ukraine**

The election of Joe Biden strengthened U.S. support for NATO and for forming alliances with other countries. It was a goal of the Biden administration to mend important relationships and highlight the value of NATO. Despite elections, the country continued to feel weakened by events under the Trump administration. The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine showed that European and transatlantic unity was once again challenged. NATO led the military assistance to Ukraine, whereas the EU provided economic penalties, help for refugees and support for long-lasting security. Because of the war, Eastern European members view NATO as more important for defending them with traditional forces. Furthermore, the EU launched the Strategic Compass to help the Union create stronger and better coordinated defense capabilities. During this period, it became clear that NATO was valuable, yet European leaders were committed to bolstering their resources for future challenges in their partnership with America (Romeo et al., 2024).

#### **4.6 2024–Present – Uncertainty over a Second Trump Era**

Some European countries are once again concerned about the U.S. gaining distance from world affairs now that Trump might return to office. It is now a concern that a new Trump administration could pull back on U.S. commitments to NATO or let NATO weaken. Thus, European Union defense activities are being revitalized, and more substantial efforts are being made to achieve strategic autonomy. France keeps pushing for a stronger European defence identity, and countries in Eastern Europe are concerned about reducing their ties with NATO. European leaders are currently focused on finding a solution to give more power to their own armies while keeping ties to the United States strong. Because the political direction of the U.S. is unclear, Europe finds itself planning for friendship as well as for new challenges (Goodman & Jade McGlynn, 2024: 6-12).

Analysts predict a greater focus on bilateral security agreements over multilateral frameworks in policy debates surrounding a potential second Trump administration, which may put pressure on the EU to boost direct defense spending. Discussions concerning Turkey's place in NATO and EU security alliances have been triggered by this possibility. EU-US-Turkey defense relations are complicated by Turkey's balancing act between its independent foreign policy and its NATO commitments, especially with regard to Russia. Even while Turkey is still a vital NATO ally that controls transit to the Black Sea, there are still strategic issues because of its tense relations with several EU members (Ebru Oğurlu, 2024).

### **Recent developments and the path forward**

Due to rising security risks and the changing geopolitical dynamics, the European Union has strengthened its defense capabilities while pursuing strategic autonomy. The strategic "Readiness 2030" initiative or "Rearm Europe Plan" emerged under European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in March 2025. The strategy brings together diverse defense financing methods which

aim to attract €800 billion defense spending through these mechanisms: national fiscal flexibility and a new €150 billion funding option for collective purchase programs and opportunities to shift cohesion funds and enhanced European Investment Bank involvement. Strengthening Europe's defense infrastructure will be supported through multiple avenues including the savings and investments union which engages in private capital under the plan (Bisaccio & Bisaccio, 2025).

The "Readiness 2030" initiative reflects the EU's determination to decrease dependence on outside military help at a time when the United States suspended military assistance to Ukraine. The plan selects seven key capability domains to guide European military development from existing operational deficiencies and stresses collaborative defense expenditures on essential technologies including missile defense systems and air defenses (Bisaccio & Bisaccio, 2025).

The successful implementation of strategic autonomy faces multiple barriers for the EU despite its stated goals. The European defense industry exists in a severely fragmented state that depends heavily on suppliers outside the EU and struggles with structural inefficiencies. By 2030, Brussels wants military procurement from European companies to reach 50% of total purchases. Progress toward autonomy remains blocked by duplicate systems and outdated defense platforms, which especially impact fighter jets and missile development (Thelen, 2003: 208-240).

The European Union's pursuit of strategic autonomy encounters barriers caused by disorganized military strength capabilities between its member nations. The NATO member state Poland maintains the highest defense expenditure at 4.7% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), but faces difficulties from its old manufacturing base and operational problems in its state-run defense organization. The European defense sector remains behind in

developing high-tech capabilities, including missile defense and artificial intelligence, as well as satellite intelligence (Glib Gusiev, 2025).

Made at an EU level is the identification of critical supply chains that need protection. Microchip strategy-building efforts have encountered strong opposition. A European Court of Auditors issued a report which declared that the EU's target of manufacturing 20% of global microchips by 2030 displays "deep disconnect from reality" because its investments seem scattered and lack proper monetary coordination (O'Carroll, 2025).

EU policy maintains the principle of staying "as open as possible, as autonomous as necessary," which represents a guarded move towards unilateralism because multilateralism has weakened, and geopolitical tensions have intensified. This method stresses both EU accountability for security and the requirement of developing powerful defense capabilities (CELIS Institute, 2025).

Western European security officials nowadays follow a fundamental strategic evolution because of the Ukrainian conflict, alongside shifting US-European ties, along with the recognition that NATO and Washington's leadership cannot assure European safety anymore. The "Readiness 2030" initiative represents a detailed plan to upgrade and modernize European defenses using €800 billion for defense mobilization, but it stands separate from the EU's broader transformation process (Sinem Ünalıdılar et al., 2025).

The EU showed increasing determination to build strategic autonomy through coordinated defense purchases while directing funding to vital capabilities, including missile defenses and AI, along with cyber resilience tools, and aiming to have European manufacturers supply 50% of defense equipment needs by 2030. However, challenges remain. The European defense industry remains fragmented, while Poland demonstrates outdated infrastructure alongside high defense spend levels, which prevents

European defense progress because it maintains dependence on suppliers outside of the EU. The microchip strategy faces criticism because it appears both overly complex and uncoordinated in its implementation for securing defense-related supply chains (MejinoLopez & Wolff, 2024).

Brussels has introduced its principle of being "as open as possible, as autonomous as necessary" to demonstrate its evolving economic and strategic sovereignty policies. The EU incorporates this evolving doctrine to address declining multilateralism and America's unpredictable political developments after Trump, and Europe's requirement to form a strategic unity (Guerrieri & Padoan, 2024).

### **Conclusion**

The study focused on two research questions. First, how has the absence of a unified military force affected the EU's security posture in the post-Trump era? Although initiatives such as PESCO and the European Defense Fund were created with the aim of strengthening Europe's collective security, chronic fragmentation between and among the nations and disparate national agendas continue to blunt functional advancement. As the Trump administration managed NATO, the weakness of too much reliance on outside powers for security measures became apparent. As a result, the hunger for strategic autonomy in the EU has increased, but it has not been fulfilled due to institutional limitations and continued political differences among EU member states.

Second, what role does NATO continue to play in European defense, and how have transatlantic relations evolved since the Trump administration? The organization continues to be relevant in European security, as the alliance represents the core forum for military collaboration and deterrence. Although the EU has recently made efforts to grow its own defense identity, NATO's capabilities and, especially, those supported by the United States, are key to European defense. NATO relations with the continent's transatlantic

partners have been problematic. However, the current approach is all about the middle ground through the enforcement of close alliance with NATO, but the gradual improvement of its own EU defense resources. Through this policy, the EU tries to achieve its security as it progresses toward increased independence over time.

The EU's disjointed military environment continues to hinder European security and influence its strategic stance while assessing NATO's essential stature along with Atlantic relations since Trump's term. Recent years have brought progress through PESCO initiatives together with EDF funding, but the EU still faces significant barriers when pursuing genuine strategic autonomy. The EU's advancement toward autonomous security leadership remains constrained because NATO continues to dominate its security commitments, and member states maintain contrasting political positions and display deficient military coordination. Continued U.S. foreign policy unpredictability since Trump's presidential tenure has motivated European political leadership to push for enhanced Euro-defense capabilities while NATO continues sustaining European security needs.

In the future, the EU's ability to exercise strategic autonomy will be dependent upon fulfilling specific threshold requirements, such as standardizing national defense planning cycles, guaranteeing rapid deployment readiness within 30 days, and reaching the goal of sourcing at least 50% of defense procurement from European suppliers. Strategic autonomy runs the risk of continuing to be desirable in the absence of these fundamental adjustments. In order to ensure that future security issues can be addressed without risking alliance cohesiveness, the Union must seek capabilities development in tandem with preserving NATO relations.

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