

The Europeanisation of NATO

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Introduction

During the second Trump administration, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is arguably experiencing the deepest crisis of credibility in its history, finding itself between reform and obsolescence. On the one hand, the Trump administration pushes forcefully for a reform of NATO that would shift burdens towards the European allies, reduce the alliance to its core functions of defence and deterrence and stop further expansion. The administration pressured its alliance partners to raise the defence spending threshold from 2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to 5% and wants NATO to scale down its peacekeeping missions (such as in Kosovo) and refrain from engaging in ‘out-of-area’ activities (beyond the North Atlantic area to which the NATO Treaty refers).¹ This pressure has yielded success: amongst the European members of NATO, there is broad consensus that the alliance must focus on defence and deterrence and that Europeans must assume a greater share of the burden.

At the same time, however, US policy discourse and behaviour keep undermining the value-based transatlantic community and the commitment to collective defence at the heart of NATO. Still on the campaign trail, Donald Trump vowed to ‘encourage them [the Russians] to do whatever the hell they want’ with NATO members that did not live up to their defence spending promises.² In early 2026, he renewed his push to annex Greenland, initially refusing to rule out the use of military force. During the Iran War, complaining about the refusal of NATO allies to contribute to the fighting, he declared that the United States would not ‘have to be there for NATO’ either³ and publicly considered withdrawing from the alliance.⁴ Threatening the territorial integrity of an ally and making defence commitments conditional on spending and on support for an ‘out-of-area’ war of aggression, on which the allies had not even been consulted, violated major NATO principles and cast severe doubts on the firmness of the US security guarantee for Europe. More broadly, in endorsing a far-right nationalist vision of European politics and ‘cultivating resistance to Europe’s current trajectory within European nations’, the US National Security Strategy of November 2025⁵ breaks with the traditional liberal-democratic and internationalist consensus that underpins NATO (Bergmann, 2025).

Both in European elite circles and in public opinion, confidence in NATO has plummeted. According to a survey of the US-based Institute for Global Affairs, only 28% of respondents in France, Germany and the United Kingdom still saw the United

¹US presses NATO for major reset, ending mission in Iraq – Politico, 19 February 2026.

²Fact-checking Trump’s comments urging Russia to invade ‘delinquent’ NATO members – PBS News, 12 February 2024.

³Trump says ‘we don’t have to be there for NATO’ – Reuters, 27 March 2026.

⁴Trump says he’s considering pulling out of NATO – Politico, 1 April 2026.

⁵National Security Strategy of the United States, November 2025.

States as an at least ‘somewhat reliable’ guarantor to European security in mid-2025 – down from 52% in 2024 (Guyer et al., 2025). And that was even before the Greenland threats and the Iran War. In a Politico poll conducted in March 2026, that is, in the wake of the transatlantic spat over Greenland, the United States was seen as more of a threat than China by citizens in Spain, Italy, Belgium and Germany, with the exceptions of Poland and France. Across the six European Union (EU) countries surveyed, clear majorities (except in Poland) regarded the United States as a threat or competitor rather than a partner or close ally.⁶

In this context, the debate on the future of NATO is gaining further momentum. Whereas the ‘Europeanisation of NATO’ is by no means a new concept, it has acquired new urgency and meaning. In US policy circles, the notion of a ‘dormant NATO’ (Maitra, 2024) has long taken hold according to which the Europeans should shoulder the burden of Europe’s conventional territorial defence whilst the United States would provide the nuclear and strategic backstop as an ‘offshore balancer’ (Maitra, 2024). European elites, too, are now conducting concrete contingency planning for the Europeanization of NATO in case President Trump pulls out of the Alliance.⁷ Substantively therefore, the discussion has moved considerably beyond simply strengthening the ‘European pillar’ in NATO.

In this article, we provide a classification of NATO Europeanisation to do justice to the strategic debate, current developments and possible future pathways. We distinguish three general directions of Europeanisation – within NATO, through the EU and outside of EU and NATO – as well as different degrees of Europeanisation for each direction. We then review recent developments in European defence to assess the direction of travel, with a focus on institutional and organisational developments. Our analysis shows that the Europeanisation of NATO has become an increasingly realistic and urgent response to growing uncertainty about US commitment to European territorial defence. While Europeanisation is unfolding across multiple institutional pathways, these pathways differ markedly in feasibility and trajectory. Europeanisation within NATO, up to a potential complete European takeover of the Alliance, constitutes the most plausible direction, whereas Europeanisation through the EU remains institutionally and politically constrained, and unilateral initiatives beyond both frameworks primarily serve complementary and co-ordinative functions.

I. A Typology of Europeanisation

In the historical development of the transatlantic alliance, the Europeanisation of NATO has acquired diverse meanings. For a long time, strengthening the ‘European pillar in NATO’ has been the most widely used and generally undisputed phrase. By the mid-1980s, the concept began appearing routinely in German (‘europäischer Pfeiler’⁸), British (‘European pillar’⁹) and also French (‘pilier européen’¹⁰) elite discourse. The 1991 NATO Summit made a first official reference to the concept on the part of the Alliance.¹¹ At the

⁶More Europeans see US as threat than China – Politico, 8 April 2026.

⁷Europe Is Accelerating a NATO Fallback Plan in Case Trump Pulls Out – Wall Street Journal, 14 April 2026.

⁸Aufruf der Christlich Demokratischen Union zur Wahl des Europäischen Parlaments am 17. Juni 1984.

⁹Westland Plc, Volume 89: debated on Wednesday 15 January 1986.

¹⁰No 288 Sénat, Deuxième session extraordinaire, 1985–1986.

¹¹The Alliance’s New Strategic Concept – NATO, 1991.

same time, as Leonard Schütte remarks, ‘the concept of the European pillar remains vague and details scarce, thus risking that the concept remains a hollow soundbite’ (Schütte, 2026, p. 6).

In the current context of NATO crisis, the pillar metaphor is too narrow. Steeped in a fundamentally two-pillared (i.e., a European and a North American) understanding of NATO, the concept excludes the by now very real possibility of a US retreat from the Alliance. Nor does the concept foresee the possibility of Europeanisation in other institutional contexts, whether through the EU or bilateral and minilateral initiatives. Moreover, current discussions on burden-shifting no longer concern NATO’s military leadership and conventional military capacities alone but also its most crucial component, that is, nuclear sharing. While the European pillar remains the more established term, we hence argue that the concept of a Europeanisation of NATO is more apt to describe what is currently at stake.

Against this backdrop, we define the ‘Europeanisation of NATO’ as any process that shifts the organisation and provision of European defence away from US dominance in NATO and towards a more important role for European countries and institutions. We propose a three-by-two classification of different types of Europeanisation. For one, Europeanisation can take place within NATO, within the EU or outside of both NATO and the EU. These are the qualitatively different general directions Europeanisation can take. In addition, these options can be characterised by low to high European content or weight in political leadership, financial contributions and capability provision. These describe the possible variations by degree of Europeanisation within each of the qualitative types. Table 1 shows our classification.

The *European pillar* option is directed at strengthening the role of European member states within NATO. It comprises the creation of European structures within the alliance and an enhanced role of Europeans in the leadership and command structure of NATO. The more the European pillar is strengthened, the more the Europeanisation of NATO approximates a *European takeover*. In the extreme case of the United States withdrawing from the alliance, NATO would become a predominantly European (plus Canada) security organisation.

Alternatively, Europeanisation becomes analogous with ‘EU-isation’. *EU-NATO co-operation* is at the low end of the spectrum. In this case, the EU develops defence capacities that are complementary to NATO and co-ordinates its security policy with NATO. By increasing its weight in the co-operation, the EU could grow from a junior partner in defence via a balanced relationship to an autonomous defence organisation. Full *EU defence integration* replacing NATO would be the endpoint of this development.

Finally, Europeanisation might take place outside of both NATO and the EU. *US-led bilateralism* is a possible scenario in which the United States co-operates with and protects individual European countries. This could take the form of bilateral security

¹¹The Alliance’s New Strategic Concept – NATO, 1991.
Table 1: A Classification of NATO Europeanisation.

	<i>Low European weight</i>	<i>High European weight</i>
Within NATO	European pillar	European takeover
Through EU	EU-NATO co-operation	EU defence integration
Outside of NATO or EU	US-led bilateralism	Differentiated defence integration

agreements outside of NATO or co-ordinated with NATO. Multilateral European arrangements for security co-operation and mutual defence, with or without US participation, would increase the European weight in this third option. Ultimately, Europeanisation could take the form of *differentiated defence integration*. In this case, EU member states and non-member states establish one or more (potentially overlapping and complementary) defence organisations outside the EU.

The classification aims to map and structure the possible directions of Europeanisation conceptually. Empirically, the main types of Europeanisation (within NATO, through the EU, and outside of both) are not mutually exclusive, and we expect to observe developments in all directions. Moreover, as the low European weight/within-NATO status quo is coming under pressure, we expect to see incremental developments rather than qualitative shifts. In the following sections, we describe current developments in each of the three main categories.

II. Europeanisation Within NATO

Europeanisation within NATO has three different dimensions. First, it refers to the creation of structures within NATO that could be used independently by the European allies. Second is an enhanced role for Europeans in NATO. Third is a shift of military capabilities and responsibilities from the United States to its European allies. In the period covered by this article, we observe a gradual change both in the NATO command structure and the US–European distribution of military capabilities that indicate a minor Europeanisation within NATO.

In the post-Cold War era, when NATO's primary purposes of territorial defence and (extended) deterrence became less relevant to European security, NATO adopted flexible structures and decision-making procedures so that NATO assets could be used for a variety of purposes beyond collective defence and deterrence and by variable groups of member and non-member states. In the mid-1990s, NATO established the concept of Combined Joint Task Forces, which could potentially have been used for European-led military operations. Although this command structure 'was as close as the alliance had come to a European pillar' (Schütte, 2026, p. 11), the Europeans did not use it in practice. One of the reasons was the concurrent development of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), which built organizational structures and procedures within the EU rather than NATO. Even though the ESDP remained heavily dependent on NATO assets and resources, it fell under 'Europeanisation through the EU' rather than 'Europeanisation within NATO'. A true European pillar within NATO has thus never become operational, and NATO structures would not allow it to include the tasks of defence and deterrence, which are at the heart of current European security needs.

Alternatively, Europeanisation within NATO could be reflected in the distribution of leadership positions in the military and civilian structures of NATO. The norm in NATO foresees that the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) is an American, whereas the Secretary General, heading the political organisation, is a European. Conventionally, the deputy SACEUR is a senior British officer. This distribution of leadership positions has not changed. By contrast, Europeans have gained more mid-level leadership roles. In February 2026, the member states agreed that all three Joint Force Commands will be led by Europeans. The NATO Commands in Norfolk and Naples, which have

hitherto been led by the United States, will be led by the United Kingdom and Italy, respectively, whereas the third Command (Brunssum) will rotate between Germany and Poland. At the same time, the three theatre component commands (air, land and maritime) will be led by Americans.¹² The distribution of leadership positions thus continues to reflect the military dominance and supreme operational authority of the United States in NATO, as well as the close interrelationship between US and NATO command structures. This is unlikely to change anytime soon. Although the Trump administration's ambassador to NATO, Matthew Whitaker, recently suggested a German could take over the position of SACEUR, he also emphasised that 'we're a long way away from that'.¹³

Finally, Europeanisation within NATO could mean a shift in the distribution of military capabilities and responsibilities between the United States and its European NATO allies. The US administration intends to reduce its troop presence in Europe (currently at between 80,000 and 90,000 troops) and demands that Europe 'take ownership of conventional security on the continent'.¹⁴ Whereas general plans and timelines are still to be revealed, the unexpected announcements, in May 2026, that the United States will withdraw 5000 troops from Germany and cancel the deployment of 4000 troops to Poland might signal that the troop reduction process is starting – and that it will be based on unilateral US decisions. At the same time, European countries, especially in the North and East, are expanding their militaries and closing the defence spending gap with the United States. Whereas, historically, US defence expenditure accounted for around 70% of NATO, the share has dropped to approximately 60% due to the recent European defence spending surge (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2026). However, as Lange and Cothier (2026) caution, whilst 'Europe has manpower, armour, aircraft and, increasingly, political will', it lacks 'strategic enablers', which 'bind these assets into a credible fighting force: satellites, intelligence networks, electronic warfare and long-range strike capabilities. These crucial elements remain overwhelmingly American' (cf. also Meijer and Brooks, 2021). In this respect, the US announcement to stop the deployment of a battalion with Tomahawk cruise missiles in Germany raised stronger concerns amongst defence officials and experts than the withdrawal of 5000 troops (e.g., Fix, 2026). Former US president Biden and former German chancellor Scholz had agreed on their deployment to balance Russian intermediate-range missiles until Europeans would be ready to close the strategic gap themselves.

In sum, Europeanisation within NATO is advancing incrementally but not in the form of an institutionally distinct European pillar. Europeans are taking on an increasing share of the conventional defence burden. Whereas the European weight in NATO will grow further, US dominance in nuclear capabilities, strategic enablers and the NATO command structure is likely to persist for the foreseeable future. European member states are therefore not seeking to assume control of NATO, and an unintended takeover following a US withdrawal also appears improbable, despite threats issued by the Trump Administration. The 2023 amendments to the National Defense Authorization Act established high legal hurdles to 'Trump-proof' US NATO membership. Moreover, US facilities in Europe for US global power projection. For now, the announced troop withdrawals are also far from bringing the US

¹²European Allies to take on new leadership roles in NATO's Command Structure – NATO News, 6 February 2026.

¹³US ambassador suggests Germany take NATO's top military role in future – Euronews, 26 November 2025.

¹⁴Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Defense Contact Group (as Delivered) – US Department of War, 12 February 2025.

presence in Europe down to the 75,000-troop threshold required by US legislation. Finally, the considerable institutional lock-in provided by NATO's integrated structures and co-operative routines at the working level serves as a counterpart to White House and Pentagon actions. The threat to NATO consists less in the loss of material power and institutional cohesion than in the erosion of internal trust amongst NATO allies and external credibility towards strategic rivals.

III. Europeanisation Through the EU

Europeanisation through the EU could work along three dimensions. First, it may refer to the strengthening and transformation of the EU's own security and defence policy as an operational framework for European territorial defence. Second, Europeanisation through the EU could take the form of closer EU–NATO defence co-operation. Third, Europeanisation through the EU may consist in the Union's growing role as a 'civilian enabler' of NATO through financing, co-ordinating and regulating the defence of the member states.

First, Europeanisation through the EU could consist in a strengthening and transformation of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as a vehicle for territorial defence. Historically, however, the CSDP was designed primarily for the Petersberg tasks of 'out-of-area' peacekeeping, crisis management and stabilisation rather than territorial defence and deterrence. This historical thrust has remained stable over time. Even after the Lisbon Treaty introduced Article 42(7), the EU's mutual assistance clause, to the Treaty on European Union (TEU), EU documents continue to stress it is fully consistent with NATO, which remains the foundation of collective defence for its members.¹⁵ Although recent developments have increased the EU's weight in European defence, including Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) as a framework for joint capability development,¹⁶ Article 42(7) remains politically and procedurally thin compared with NATO's Article 5. It lacks the unwavering political commitment by all EU member states as well as integrated planning, command arrangements and credible enforcement.

Ongoing discussions amongst EU governments about the concrete 'operationalisation' of Article 42(7) in case Article 5 is unavailable underscore both the renewed political attention and the institutional limits of the provision. These discussions gained particular urgency after the beginning of the Iran war in spring 2026 when non-NATO EU member Cyprus pressed for a practical blueprint on how the Union should respond if Article 42(7) were triggered. At its April 2026 informal summit in Nicosia, the European Council agreed that the Commission should prepare such a blueprint, including scenarios for hybrid and conventional attacks. Simultaneously, the heads of state and government reaffirmed that NATO remains the bedrock of Europe's collective defence. The episode thus highlights both the growing salience of the EU's mutual assistance clause and the continued reluctance of EU member states to treat it as more than a complement or fallback to their preferred option of NATO reliance.^{17,18}

¹⁵ Joint Declaration on EU–NATO Cooperation – European Council, 10 January 2023.

¹⁶ Council Decision (CFSP) 2017/2315 of 11 December 2017 establishing permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) and determining the list of participating Member States – European Union

¹⁷ <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-defense-exercise-mutual-assistance-clause/>, 17 April 2026.

¹⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/eu-prepare-blueprint-mutual-assistance-pact-amid-nato-doubts-2026-04-24/>, 24 April 2026.

Second, Europeanisation through the EU could result in a more formalised operational co-operation between the EU and NATO. The 2002 Berlin Plus arrangements already institutionalised this relationship by allowing EU-led operations to draw on NATO assets and planning where the Alliance as a whole was not engaged. However, few signs have recently pointed to a qualitative deepening of operational co-operation between the two organisations that would enable the Europeans to stem the bulk of territorial defence and deterrence on the continent (Howorth, 2017; Spatafora, 2026; Sus, 2026). Instead, EU–NATO co-operation has expanded primarily in areas such as cyber and hybrid threats, critical infrastructure protection, resilience and defence industry co-operation.¹⁹ These areas are important but remain at the softer end of the security spectrum and affect the core functions of collective defence, deterrence and military planning merely tangentially.

Third, Europeanisation through the EU could result in a division of labour between the EU and NATO. Various signs have already pointed in this direction over the past decade (Ellison and Fiott, 2026). Under such an arrangement, the centre of gravity of EU action would remain of a primarily financial, industrial and regulatory rather than military-operational nature. This has been evident not only in procurement and industrial initiatives but also in the military mobility agenda, which focuses on dual-use infrastructure, regulatory harmonisation and cross-border movement procedures. Since 2022, the EU has responded to Russia's war against Ukraine through sanctions but also through a broadening set of defence finance and industrial instruments. The European Peace Facility (EPF) has become a major vehicle for financing military assistance, whilst initiatives such as the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA)²⁰ aim to incentivise common procurement in response to urgent capability gaps.

Since 2024, the Commission and the High Representative have expanded EU activity further into defence industrial policy and defence financing through initiatives such as the 2024 European Defence Industrial Strategy²¹ and the debt-based 2025 Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument,²² which distributes EUR 150 billion in loans to member states. The European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP),²³ adopted in December 2025, mobilises EUR 1.5 billion in grants to strengthen common procurement, expand industrial production capacities and develop defence projects of common European interest. At the same time, Article 41(2) TEU continues to prohibit the use of the EU budget for expenditure with military or defence implications, thereby preventing the Union from directly financing military operations or equipment and requiring cumbersome workarounds such as the creation of off-budget instruments such as the EPF, relabelling defence as industrial policy, and concocting innovative facilitation instruments such as the loans-based SAFE and EDIP.

The European Commission has expressed ambitions to move the EU beyond the mere role of a civilian enabler and into operationally central domains. Its March 2025 White Paper

¹⁹ Joint Declaration on EU–NATO Cooperation – European Council, 10 January 2023.

²⁰ Regulation (EU) 2023/2418 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 October 2023 on establishing an instrument for the reinforcement of the European defence industry through common procurement (EDIRPA) – European Union

²¹ https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/bbe39bd5-7312-4714-9f5d-7d67483d4d72_en?filename=JOIN_2024_10_1_DE_ACT_part1_v3.pdf.

²² Council Regulation (EU) 2025/1106 of 27 May 2025 establishing the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) through the Reinforcement of the European Defence Industry Instrument – European Union.

²³ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/defence-industry-programme/>.

for European Defence²⁴ identified critical capability gaps in air and missile defence, military mobility, drones and in strategic enablers such as strategic airlift, air-to-air refuelling, space assets and critical infrastructure protection. The subsequent EU Readiness Roadmap²⁵ of October 2025 translated this agenda, amongst others, into four proposed European flagship programmes, namely, the Eastern Flank Watch, the European Drone Defence Initiative, the European Air Shield and the European Space Shield. These initiatives point to a more ambitious EU role in enabling its member states' – and indeed NATO's – defence capabilities. However, not only do they first need to be realised but they also stop short of creating autonomous EU command structures or an EU framework for territorial defence.

Ultimately, the obstacles to a genuine EU-isation of European defence remain as large as ever. As long as NATO remains the acknowledged foundation of collective defence, and as long as the core of deterrence, defence planning and operational command remains tied to NATO structures and US capabilities, the incentives for member states to shift territorial defence into an EU framework remain weak. What has grown instead is the EU's role in generating the material and organisational preconditions of European defence. The more plausible scenario is therefore that NATO continues to provide the core functions of collective defence, deterrence and military planning, whereas the EU emerges as its 'civilian enabler'. The EU is uniquely placed to loosen fiscal constraints on national rearmament, channel common funding, incentivise joint procurement, deepen Europe's defence market and set and enforce common rules in areas such as military mobility, critical infrastructure protection, cyber resilience and defence-industrial co-ordination. Europeanisation through the EU would thus not culminate in an autonomous EU defence organisation. Rather, it would reinforce NATO indirectly by enabling European member states to spend more, more jointly and more effectively.

In sum, Europeanisation through the EU is advancing, but not in the form of EU defence integration. The Union's recent activism has strengthened its role as financier, regulator and co-ordinator, but it has not brought the EU materially closer to assuming the core military functions of NATO. If current trends continue, the likely outcome is not a transfer of collective defence from NATO to the EU, but a more formalised complementarity in which the EU acts as the civilian enabler of European defence whilst NATO remains its central military framework.

IV. Europeanisation Beyond EU and NATO

The Europeanisation of defence beyond the EU and NATO reflects three sets of institutional limitations and asymmetries hampering the 'Europeanisation within NATO' and 'Europeanisation through the EU' options. First, despite the unifying effect of fears about Russian aggression and US abandonment, there remains considerable heterogeneity in defence preferences, interdependence and capacity amongst the EU member states. Several member states are neutral; Eastern and Baltic member states are more vulnerable to Russian aggression than southern member states; national military capabilities vary strongly. Second, whereas intra-EU heterogeneity could be, and has been to some extent as in PESCO, addressed by differentiated EU defence integration, several countries with

²⁴https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dc0-3867b4373019_en?filename=White%20paper%20for%20European%20defence%20%96%20Readiness%202030.pdf, 19 March 2025.

²⁵https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/readiness-roadmap-2030_en, 16 October 2025.

relevant military capabilities for European defence are not EU member states: the United Kingdom above all, Norway and Turkey. Third, whereas NATO brings together the relevant EU member and non-member countries, attempts to establish an institutional European pillar have produced meagre results.

For these reasons, we have seen a flurry of intergovernmental initiatives and networks. This pattern is not new. Bilateral and minilateral defence arrangements such as the Lancaster House treaties between France and the United Kingdom or Nordic Defence Cooperation have existed for some time already. What is new is the density and political centrality of such formats. The European Intervention Initiative, launched in 2018, was explicitly conceived as a flexible, non-binding forum of willing European states outside the EU and NATO, designed to improve strategic foresight, planning and operational co-operation. Since 2024 and especially 2025, minilateralism has accelerated markedly. The European Group of Five (E5), bringing together France, Germany, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom, has emerged as a particularly important core group for consultation on Ukraine and European defence. Its March 2025 statement framed stronger European capabilities as part and parcel of a fair transatlantic burden sharing and brought together not only the five defence ministers but also representatives of the EU and NATO.²⁶

The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) has gained particular relevance. In their March 2026 joint statement, its 10 leaders described it as a flexible and relevant tool for dialogue, deterrence and defence in Northern Europe, explicitly linking it to NATO's northern flank and describing it as a bridge between national and NATO operations.²⁷ More interestingly, the JEF is also viewed by some as a potential 'Plan B' should NATO become politically blocked or operationally impaired.²⁸ Its attractions lie in its ability to act independently of NATO and in the fact that it already possesses standing headquarters functions and some communications, intelligence and logistics capabilities outside of NATO. Yet precisely because the JEF remains regionally anchored and excludes several of Europe's largest military powers such as France, Germany and Poland, it cannot (yet) serve as a full substitute for NATO's integrated command structure.

Another potentially momentous development is France's revived attempt to Europeanise aspects of its nuclear deterrent outside formal EU and NATO structures. In March 2025, President Macron opened a strategic dialogue on extending the protection of France's 'force de frappe' to its European partners.²⁹ In March 2026, he went further by announcing an expansion of the French arsenal and greater involvement of European allies in deterrence exercises and possible deployments.³⁰ Even so, Paris has continued to present these initiatives as complementary to NATO and explicitly not as a substitute for the US nuclear umbrella or for NATO's nuclear sharing framework. Moreover, France's largest opposition force, the Rassemblement National, has already signalled it would reverse Macron's policy of extending French nuclear protection if it were to win the

²⁶ European Group of Five (E5) Defence Ministers' meeting in Paris – UK Ministry of Defence, 13 March 2025.

²⁷ Joint Statement from the leaders of the Joint Expeditionary Force – UK Prime Minister's Office, 26 March 2026.

²⁸ <https://www.economist.com/europe/2026/05/19/europes-secret-plan-b-to-replace-nato>.

²⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/frances-macron-address-nation-late-wednesday-2025-03-05>, 5 March 2025.

³⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/macron-says-france-will-increase-size-its-nuclear-arsenal-2026-03-02/>, 2 March 2026.

presidency in 2027, thereby raising doubts about the long-term reliability of a French nuclear umbrella over Europe.³¹

The Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine, comprising 34 countries, serves to illustrate both the potential and limits of this differentiated integration of European defence. For one, these formats tend to be faster and more agile. The Coalition enabled a rapid grouping of willing states around security guarantees for Ukraine and practical military planning for a post-ceasefire scenario. On the other hand, its own statements also show how dependent such formats remain on the institutional backing of NATO and the EU. When informal initiatives such as the Coalition move from political signalling to concrete action, they require access to the legal, financial and organisational capacities that oftentimes only NATO or the EU can provide, whether in the form of military planning, the passing of sanctions, the mobilisation of common funding or the usage of procurement instruments. In this sense, these initiatives are best understood not as alternatives to NATO and the EU, but as co-ordination devices nested within the broader institutional order of European security.

This also means that the current wave of European minilateralism poses little threat to the core functions of NATO. Quite the contrary, many of these formats are explicitly designed to reinforce European co-ordination within NATO, strengthen particular regional flanks or prepare common positions before larger allied meetings. The JEF openly defines its role in close co-ordination with NATO, especially below the threshold of Article 5.³² The European Intervention Initiative's founding letter likewise states that it is meant to reinforce NATO, which remains the cornerstone of collective defence, whilst also complementing EU initiatives.³³ The same logic applies to the E5, which has brought EU and NATO representatives into its meetings from the outset. The present trajectory is therefore not one of institutional substitution but of enhanced co-operation amongst the more capable and willing European states, co-ordinated as far as possible with the EU and NATO and often intended to strengthen the European pillar inside the Alliance rather than undermine it.

In sum, Europeanisation beyond the EU and NATO is advancing but less as the construction of alternative defence organisations than as the proliferation of flexible minilateral frameworks. These frameworks remain dependent on NATO for collective defence and on the EU for legal, financial and regulatory support. Their most likely role remains therefore to supplement and connect the existing institutions rather than replace them.

Conclusion

In this article, we have provided a classification of different paths towards the Europeanisation of territorial defence and collective deterrence in Europe. We distinguished between Europeanisation within NATO, through the EU and beyond both institutional frameworks, as well as between different degrees of European weight within each of these options. This typology allows us to structure the debate and introduce some more conceptual clarity.

Our analysis suggests a clear hierarchy of plausibility. An increased European contribution within NATO, potentially extending to a medium-term European takeover, is increasingly seen as realistic by national elites, especially in a scenario in which a second

³¹ <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/wir-werden-nationales-recht-ueber-europarecht-stellen-jordan-bardella-von-rassemblement-national-accg-200822399.html>, 12 May 2026.

³² Joint Statement by JEF Leaders – Government Offices of Sweden, 13 October 2023.

³³ Letter of Intent Concerning the Development of the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), 25 June 2018.

Trump administration – or any subsequent US administration – would reduce or even terminate US engagement. By contrast, a critically enhanced role of the EU in territorial defence remains out of reach for the foreseeable future. Despite significant institutional innovation, the EU continues to lack the operational, strategic and legal foundations required to assume the core functions of collective defence. Minilateral initiatives beyond NATO and the EU, too, are gaining in importance, but they are explicitly designed to complement NATO's internal structure rather than to replace it.

At this stage of the process, what is striking is the short- and medium-term convergence between different strategic scenarios. The European strategy for Plan A of a continued US presence in NATO is largely congruent with contingency planning for Plan B of a potential US withdrawal. In both cases, European states need to do much more, and they need to do so fast. The divergence between these two scenarios will only emerge further down the line, when Europeans are forced to answer the question of whether Europeanisation is ultimately tantamount to de-Americanisation. For now, only a premature US exit from NATO would force an immediate and explicit choice.

The Europeanisation of NATO could revive questions many had considered settled. The United States' role as external stabiliser has long dampened intra-European power politics. Its weakening or disappearance could bring back concerns about leadership and hierarchy on the continent. Germany's evolving role illustrates this. According to current estimates, the country will roughly spend as much on defence in 2030 as France and the United Kingdom combined.³⁴ The prospect of Germany becoming the strongest conventional military power in Europe, potentially combined with a German SACEUR as suggested by the Trump administration, is not uncontroversial amongst its partners. Equally, the uneven development of defence industrial capacities raises the question whether current trends point towards a genuinely European consolidation or a more asymmetric pattern dominated by a few large states with deep pockets.

For the time being, however, these questions remain secondary to the immediate challenge of strengthening European defence. In this context, scepticism about far-reaching initiatives outside the tried-and-tested NATO context seems well-founded (Daßler and Weiss, 2026), as channelled by Mark Rutte's quip of 'keep on dreaming'³⁵ to Members of the European Parliament. At the same time, dismissing scenarios of a Europeanised NATO would be misplaced. While the idea of an autonomous EU defence remains remote, a NATO in which Europeans assume primary responsibility for conventional defence, whether by design or as a consequence of US retrenchment, lies within the realm of the possible. The Europeanisation of NATO is therefore no longer a purely theoretical construct. It is a realistic scenario that requires serious consideration in both academic analysis and political practice.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Tobias Bunde (Director of Research and Policy of the Munich Security Conference) and Nicole König (Head of Policy of the Munich Security Conference) for sharing their insights with us. The conclusions we drew from the background interviews are entirely ours. We are also grateful

³⁴ Germany to boost defence spending at faster rate than France or UK – Financial Times, 24 June 2025.

³⁵ <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2026/01/26/remarks-by-nato-secretary-general-mark-rutte-at-the-meeting-of-the-european-parliaments-committee-on-security-and-defence>, 26 January 2026.

to the editors of the Annual Review for their comments on an earlier version. Open access publishing facilitated by Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zurich, as part of the Wiley - Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zurich agreement via the Consortium Of Swiss Academic Libraries.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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