International Journal of Latest Research in Humanities and Social Science (IJLRHSS)
Volume 09 - Issue 02, 2026
www.ijlrhss.com || PP. 61-67

The Transition from EU External Action to a Common European Foreign Policy: Why a European Defense Union Has Become a Strategic Necessity

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the European Union's transition from a broad and fragmented system of external action toward a more coherent Common European Foreign Policy, with specific focus on whether and how a European Defense Union (EDU) constitutes a necessary condition for that transition. Building on postdoctoral research that examined EU strategic discourse and policy documents from 2010 to 2025 (Ftaklaki, P. E., 2025), the article argues that defense integration has moved from a peripheral and politically sensitive field to a central organizing axis of EU external action. The analysis combines a constructivist reading of strategic language with a new intergovernmentalist account of institutional bargaining among member states. It shows that the EU has made meaningful progress through instruments such as the European Defense Fund (EDF), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Strategic Compass, and the 2025 Readiness 2030/SAFE initiatives. At the same time, a persistent expectations capabilities gap, industrial fragmentation, and unanimity-based decision rules continue to constrain strategic coherence. The paper concludes that a European Defense Union is no longer optional if the EU seeks credible geopolitical agency; however, its viability depends on reconciling strategic autonomy with democratic legitimacy, ethical restraint, and a political settlement between supranational coordination and national sovereignty.

Keywords: European Defense Union; Common Foreign and Security Policy; strategic autonomy; Strategic Compass; European Defense Fund; PESCO; new intergovernmentalism; EU external action.

1. Introduction

The European Union's foreign and security policy has evolved through crisis, incremental reform, and institutional experimentation rather than constitutional rupture. For decades, the Union projected influence mainly through trade, regulation, diplomacy, and development cooperation, while hard security remained largely delegated to NATO and national capitals. This model provided flexibility but also generated a structural mismatch between ambitions and capabilities. The mismatch became increasingly visible as geopolitical competition intensified, the transatlantic environment became less predictable, and high-intensity war returned to the European continent.

The period from 2010 to 2025 marks a qualitative shift in this trajectory. A series of strategic and policy documents advanced a defense-centered vocabulary in EU discourse: strategic autonomy, resilience, defense readiness, industrial sovereignty, and collective security responsibility. The 2016 EU Global Strategy, the 2022 Strategic Compass, and the 2025 ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 package, including the SAFE instrument, indicate that the Union now treats defense not as a marginal complement to foreign policy but as a constitutive dimension of external actorness.

This paper asks: what is the relationship between the EU's efforts to establish a European Defense Union and the evolution of its defense strategy within the broader project of common foreign policy? The core argument is that a credible Common European Foreign Policy requires a minimum level of shared defense capability, planning, and industrial integration. Without these, the EU remains rhetorically ambitious but operationally dependent.

Methodologically, the paper draws on qualitative discourse and document analysis of treaty texts, Council conclusions, Commission communications, strategic documents, and relevant academic scholarship. The theoretical approach combines constructivism (to assess identity and discourse formation) with new intergovernmentalism (to explain decision outcomes under state control). This dual lens captures both ideational convergence and institutional constraints.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1 EU external action, CFSP, and the defense question

The Lisbon framework distinguishes between EU external action broadly construed and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as a specific intergovernmental domain. Title V TEU governs CFSP/CSDP,

while other external competences (trade, development, humanitarian aid) are mainly addressed in TFEU provisions. This legal dualism has long complicated coherence. It allows extensive external engagement but fragments strategic authority.

Scholars have repeatedly noted that EU foreign policy is best treated as a multi-level and multi-actor policy domain rather than a state-like unitary process (White, 2004; Jørgensen, 2004). In this view, outputs emerge from interaction among member states, the Council, the High Representative/EEAS, the Commission, and the Parliament. The question is not whether the EU "has" foreign policy in a classical sense, but whether its institutional configuration can produce consistent external action under conditions of crisis.

The defense dimension is central to this question because it reveals the limits of functional external influence without military means. Hill's capability-expectations gap remains highly relevant: expectations directed at the EU have expanded faster than deployable capabilities (Hill, 1993). The debate today is therefore less about whether defense belongs in the EU policy agenda, and more about what level of integration is necessary for strategic credibility.

2.2 Constructivism: discourse, identity, and strategic culture

A constructivist reading emphasizes that strategic language does not merely describe policy; it helps constitute policy possibilities (Larsen, 2004; Milliken, 1999). Terms such as strategic autonomy and European sovereignty signal an attempt to redefine collective role conceptions and acceptable instruments of action. The EU's selfunderstanding as a normative actor has not disappeared, but it is being reinterpreted under conditions of threat and systemic rivalry (Manners, 2002; Sjursen, 2003).

From this perspective, the rise of defense language since 2016 reflects both adaptation and identity reconstruction. The Union increasingly frames military capability as necessary to defend multilateralism, the rule of law, democratic resilience, and territorial security. This reframing reduces the historical tension between "civilian power Europe" narratives and defense preparedness by presenting hard power as a means to preserve normative commitments.

2.3 New intergovernmentalism: state control and institutionalized coordination

New intergovernmentalism explains why integration can deepen in politically sensitive areas without full supranationalization (Bickerton, Hodson, & Puetter, 2015). In this framework, member states remain central principals, but they create dense institutional coordination mechanisms to manage interdependence and crisis pressure. Defense policy exemplifies this logic: progress occurs through consensus-driven instruments (PESCO, EDF governance arrangements, coordinated procurement frameworks), not through transfer of sovereign command.

The implication is a structurally hybrid model. The EU may generate stronger common planning, financing, and industrial cooperation while retaining unanimity rules and national veto points in strategic decisions. This has enabled incremental development, but also produces periodic paralysis and uneven implementation.

2.4 Methodological note: discourse-content triangulation

The analysis combines discourse analysis with structured content review of strategic and legal texts. Primary material includes treaty provisions (TEU/TFEU), Council strategic documents, Commission communications, and implementation-oriented policy packages between 2010 and 2025. The coding logic tracks recurring terms and concepts linked to defense integration, including strategic autonomy, readiness, resilience, sovereignty, capability development, and industrial base.

To avoid reducing strategy to rhetoric alone, the paper cross-checks language shifts against institutional outputs: legal acts, financial instruments, procurement frameworks, and governance procedures. This triangulation follows established qualitative practice in EU foreign policy analysis and helps distinguish symbolic convergence from policy consolidation (Aydın-Düzgit, 2014; Gavras et al., 2022; Schunz, 2010). The approach is interpretive rather than causal-statistical, but it allows robust periodization of change and clarification of continuity versus rupture in EU defense policy.

3. Historical Evolution: From Foreign Policy Coordination to Defense Readiness

3.1 From EPC to post-Lisbon architecture

European Political Cooperation in the 1970s represented the first regularized attempt to coordinate national foreign policies. Maastricht formalized CFSP but preserved intergovernmental control. Amsterdam and later reforms expanded institutional support, while Lisbon introduced key innovations: legal personality, strengthened High Representative functions, the EEAS, and clearer treaty architecture for external action.

These developments increased institutional capacity but did not resolve the strategic authority problem. Defense remained sovereignty-sensitive, largely unanimity-based, and operationally constrained. The result was a long period in which the EU could act diplomatically and economically at scale, but with limited autonomous military credibility.

3.2 Strategic inflection after 2016

The 2016 Global Strategy marked a decisive ideational pivot by mainstreaming strategic autonomy in EU-level discourse. It set the direction for capability development, resilience, and more integrated security planning. The following years translated this orientation into instruments and priorities: activation of PESCO projects, operationalization of EDF funding cycles, and stronger linkage between industrial policy and defense capabilities.

The 2022 Strategic Compass transformed broad orientation into a more concrete implementation framework, including capability targets, readiness elements, and a stronger threat-informed approach. The war in Ukraine accelerated this process dramatically by exposing dependence on external suppliers, munitions shortfalls, and procurement fragmentation.

3.3 ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 and SAFE

The 2025 policy package (including Readiness 2030 and SAFE) signals the strongest institutional commitment to date for scaling defense production, financing, and coordinated procurement. Its significance is threefold.

First, it elevates defense from declaratory strategy to industrial and fiscal policy planning. Second, it links support for Ukraine with medium-term European capability regeneration. Third, it broadens the security perimeter through cooperative mechanisms involving closely aligned partners. Yet this acceleration also intensifies unresolved tensions: burden sharing, procurement sovereignty, compatibility with NATO planning, and democratic oversight of rapid defense funding decisions.

4. Findings from 2010–2025: Narratives, Capabilities, and Constraints

4.1 Six dominant strategic narratives

Across EU documents and elite discourse, six recurrent narratives are visible.

4.1.1 Strategic autonomy: the capacity to decide and act with reduced external dependency.
4.1.2 European sovereignty: protection of critical technologies, industrial base, and infrastructure.
4.1.3 Collective responsibility and solidarity: burden sharing under common threat perceptions.
4.1.4 Europe as a global actor: geopolitical relevance beyond neighborhood stabilization.
4.1.5 Operational readiness and defense industry: urgency of deployable capabilities and production depth.
4.1.6 European strategic culture: gradual construction of shared threat assessment and policy reflexes.

These narratives matter because they create political legitimacy for reforms that would have been difficult to justify in earlier periods.

4.2 The expectations-capabilities gap persists

Despite substantial policy innovation, implementation remains uneven. Three constraints are especially salient.

First, force generation and deployability lag behind declared ambition. Even where financial envelopes increase, delivery timelines for platforms, munitions, and enablers remain long. Second, industrial fragmentation persists across national markets, standards, and procurement practices, limiting economies of scale. Third, decision making rules still privilege unanimity in core strategic choices, reducing speed and coherence during crises.

Consequently, the EU's geopolitical narrative has advanced faster than the operational integration needed to support it. This does not negate progress, but it confirms that strategic credibility requires sustained institutional follow-through beyond policy declarations.

4.3 Institutional balance: Commission activism and state gatekeeping

The post-2022 period demonstrates a more assertive Commission role in defense industrial policy, including financing and coordination proposals. However, member states retain decisive authority over force posture, deployment, and treaty-sensitive political choices. This creates a dual dynamic: supranational entrepreneurship in capability frameworks alongside persistent intergovernmental veto power.

This balance can be productive when major states converge. It becomes obstructive when threat perceptions diverge or domestic political constraints harden. The durability of the EDU project therefore depends on institutional mechanisms that stabilize cooperation across electoral cycles and national preference shifts.

4.4 Empirical patterns: where convergence is real and where fragmentation persists

Convergence is strongest in agenda-setting and industrial framing. Across the period, EU institutions and most member states increasingly adopt a shared diagnosis: Europe faces a deteriorating security environment and must improve readiness, stockpiles, and production capacity. This is reflected in the diffusion of common policy vocabulary and in stronger acceptance of EU-level financial instruments for capability support.

Convergence is also visible in the link between Ukraine support and EU defense modernization. What began as emergency adaptation has increasingly been framed as structural policy transformation. In practical terms, this means munitions, air defense, logistics, and defense-technological supply chains are now treated as European strategic concerns rather than purely national sectors.

Fragmentation persists, however, in four areas. First, procurement nationalism remains resilient despite repeated calls for pooling. Second, force availability and readiness differ substantially across member states, creating asymmetrical burden sharing. Third, doctrinal preferences still diverge on out-of-area operations, deterrence posture, and acceptable risk levels. Fourth, legal-institutional asymmetry endures: supranational tools can support industrial and financial coordination, but strategic military decisions remain constrained by unanimity and domestic political cycles.

The net effect is a layered integration model. The EU has advanced significantly in the "upstream" phases of defense policy (agenda formation, financing, industrial coordination), but "downstream" phases (deployment, strategic command coherence, rapid political authorization) remain uneven. This layered pattern is central to understanding both the achievements and the limits of the current EDU trajectory.

5. Is a European Defense Union Necessary for Common Foreign Policy?

5.1 Why defense integration is now functionally necessary

A common foreign policy without credible defense backing faces three systemic weaknesses.

1. Deterrence deficit: diplomacy has reduced leverage when coercive threats are immediate.
2. Dependency risk: strategic choices become constrained by reliance on external suppliers and security guarantors.
3. Implementation gap: commitments in sanctions, stabilization, and crisis management exceed available capabilities.

For these reasons, the EDU should be understood as a functional precondition for strategic autonomy in practice, not as an ideological end-state.

5.2 What "necessary" does not mean

Necessity does not imply a federal European army in the short term, nor replacement of NATO. It implies a threshold model: shared capability planning, interoperable procurement, scalable industrial production, and credible rapid-response architecture under politically agreed rules. In other words, common foreign policy requires a defense backbone, even if sovereignty remains distributed.

5.3 The ethical and political condition

A defense-centered transition can undermine the EU project if it is perceived as technocratic militarization detached from democratic control. The EU's normative identity remains a strategic asset, not a rhetorical ornament. Therefore, legitimacy conditions are integral to effectiveness: parliamentary scrutiny, legal transparency, civilian protection standards, and explicit linkage between capability development and rule-of-law commitments.

In this sense, the central challenge is not only to build power, but to institutionalize responsible power.

6. Policy Implications and Future Pathways

The analysis supports six policy priorities for the next phase of EDU development.

6.1 Synchronize national and EU defense planning cycles.

Common timelines and shared capability benchmarks should align national procurement with EU-level priorities.

6.2 Consolidate demand through joint procurement mechanisms.

Fragmented purchasing should be reduced through predictable multi-state contracts and common technical standards

6.3 Expand industrial integration beyond R&D.

EDF-type instruments should increasingly connect research with production scaling, maintenance ecosystems, and cross-border supply resilience.

6.4 Improve decision agility within treaty limits.

Where politically feasible, broader use of flexible decision mechanisms should reduce paralysis while preserving national legitimacy.

6.5 Strengthen democratic accountability.

Regular reporting to European and national parliaments should accompany major funding and procurement initiatives.

6.6 Institutionalize EU–NATO complementarity.

Capability planning should avoid duplication and ensure that European autonomy strengthens, rather than weakens, transatlantic security.

These priorities are mutually reinforcing. Without them, the EU risks cyclical reform announcements followed by implementation fatigue.

Three implementation risks deserve explicit attention. The first is fiscal volatility: short term political support for defense spending may weaken if macroeconomic pressure intensifies. The second is strategic overextension: expanding commitments without synchronized capability delivery can widen, not close, the expectations-capabilities gap. The third is legitimacy erosion: if defense integration proceeds without transparent parliamentary oversight, domestic contestation may undermine long-term continuity.

Mitigating these risks requires institutional sequencing. The EU should prioritize deliverables that visibly improve readiness and interoperability in the near term while building governance mechanisms that can sustain cooperation over the long run. In practical terms, this means combining immediate procurement coordination with medium-term industrial consolidation and long-term treaty-compatible reforms of decision procedures.

7. Conclusion

The EU's move from external action toward a more coherent foreign policy has entered a defense-intensive phase. Between 2010 and 2025, the Union developed a more explicit strategic language, created new financial and institutional tools, and accelerated integration under geopolitical pressure. This trajectory confirms that a European Defense Union is becoming a strategic necessity if the EU seeks durable geopolitical agency.

However, necessity should not be confused with inevitability. The project remains contingent on political consensus, institutional design, and public legitimacy. The central tension of the next decade will be whether Europe can convert discourse into deployable capability while preserving the normative commitments that define its international identity.

A viable EDU will therefore be neither purely intergovernmental nor fully supranational, neither purely military nor purely normative. It will be a negotiated hybrid. Its success will be measured not only by budgets and instruments, but by whether it enables the EU to act coherently, rapidly, and responsibly in an increasingly unstable international order.

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