



CONCEPT PAPER

European Security and Defence Union (ESDU)

A Model for an Integrated European Security Architecture

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Executive Summary

Europe's security environment has deteriorated significantly. Military threats, hybrid attacks, political interference and economic pressure are not fundamentally new phenomena. Their intensity, their interaction and the changed geopolitical environment, however, make it more likely that European states will actually have to respond jointly to serious security crises or attacks. Many of these activities also remain below the threshold of an armed attack and are aimed at weakening the functioning of the state and public trust.

This also raises the question of how mutual protection within the European Union would work in practice in an emergency. Four EU Member States are not members of NATO and are therefore not covered by its collective defence framework. At the same time, Article 42(7) TEU obliges Member States to provide aid and assistance in the event of armed aggression, without establishing an operational defence architecture comparable to NATO's. Before a crisis occurs, Europe therefore needs clarity on what support is available, how it is activated and who coordinates its implementation.

Europe also cannot assume that the United States will be willing or able to provide support at the necessary scale in every crisis. The European Union therefore needs a security and defence architecture that enables autonomous European action while strengthening the European pillar of NATO.

The proposed European Security and Defence Union is a model for an integrated European security architecture. It combines political decision-making capacity, defence planning and military capabilities with crisis preparedness, societal resilience and the protection of democratic capacity to act. Security is therefore understood not as the sum of separate policy fields, but as an interconnected system.

At its core is a shift from non-binding cooperation to reliable integration. Where European action is required, common contributions, responsibilities and response procedures should be agreed before a crisis occurs. This allows Europe to react more quickly and makes the use of existing capabilities more credible. Such binding arrangements also strengthen deterrence by reducing an adversary's ability to rely on political divisions or individual national decisions to prevent collective action.

The ESDU combines national and European responsibility. National armed forces and capabilities remain an essential part of the European security architecture. They are complemented by national forces pre-assigned to the European level, standing multinational formations and autonomous European armed forces. Common European capabilities are permanently available for European tasks and are activated through common procedures. A European Security Council provides central political direction, while a permanent European command structure is responsible for military-operational implementation.

The military dimension is closely linked to civil and societal resilience. Effective defence depends on public administration, essential supplies and critical infrastructure continuing to function under severe pressure. Strategic reserves, crisis preparedness and the capacity for industrial replenishment are therefore as much part of the model as military forces. The information environment, democratic processes and societal security literacy are likewise treated as elements of European security.

The ESDU is compatible with NATO but is not confined to NATO structures. It strengthens Europe's ability to assume greater responsibility within the Alliance while ensuring that EU Member States

outside NATO are fully integrated into the common security architecture. Close partners can cooperate extensively without becoming part of the European decision-making framework.

EU enlargement is also understood as a security-policy process. Candidate countries should be gradually integrated into appropriate security structures before full membership. Integration must remain linked to security requirements. Enlargement should strengthen European security and must not create new strategic vulnerabilities.

The ESDU is explicitly defensive in nature. It is designed for the defence of Europe and for managing serious security-related crises. It is neither an instrument for proactive offensive operations nor a general European deployment architecture for military interventions outside Europe.

The model comprises ten system levels, fourteen core elements and four cross-cutting elements. Its development is designed to proceed in stages. Existing national and European structures form the starting point and are more closely connected wherever this is already possible. Further integration follows where additional common decision-making powers, autonomous European capabilities or new legal foundations are required.

Strategic Context

Why are our existing structures no longer sufficient?

1. We are increasingly confronted with security-relevant attacks that remain below the threshold of an armed attack. These include not only cyberattacks and acts of sabotage, but also political interference, economic pressure, the instrumentalisation of migration and numerous other forms of hybrid attack. Such activities often do not aim at territorial conquest, but at undermining the functioning of the state and society.

They are intended to obstruct or block political decision-making, erode public trust and thereby weaken the ability of democratic institutions to act cohesively and effectively. The importance of this dimension is evident, for example, in how strongly the continuity of support for Ukraine can be influenced.

Many of the necessary countermeasures also lie in policy areas in which the EU and its Member States - not NATO - possess the central instruments. Europe therefore needs a security architecture that systematically connects military defence and deterrence with non-military dimensions of security.

2. The EU must remain capable of acting even when the United States is unwilling or unable to provide support at the required scale. This may be due to political choices, but also to US capabilities and resources being committed simultaneously in other regions.

Europe's ability to defend itself must therefore not depend on whether external support is available in a particular crisis. As a matter of principle, the EU must be able to defend itself and remain capable of acting on security matters.

This is not at odds with NATO or the transatlantic partnership. On the contrary, stronger European defence capabilities reinforce NATO's European pillar and thereby increase the Alliance's resilience and capacity to act.

3. The EU cannot outsource its defence entirely to NATO, because four EU Member States - Austria, Ireland, Malta and Cyprus - are not NATO members. NATO's collective defence framework does not apply to them, whereas the EU's security and defence solidarity does.

This creates responsibilities on both sides. The EU and its Member States must ensure that non-NATO members do not find themselves in a security-policy grey zone in the event of an attack, but can rely on dependable support that has been prepared in advance. Conversely, non-NATO members cannot limit themselves to expecting protection and assistance from others in an emergency. They must themselves make a credible, solidarity-based and pre-defined contribution to common security and to the defence of other EU Member States.

A European security and defence architecture must underpin this mutual responsibility institutionally and operationally. A pledge of assistance alone is not enough. Before a crisis occurs, it must be clear which contributions and capabilities are available, how quickly support can be provided and through which procedures it will be coordinated. European solidarity must therefore be prepared in such a way that assistance can be delivered reliably in an emergency rather than having to be negotiated politically from scratch.

4. Strengthening NATO's European pillar helps Europe become a serious partner on an equal footing within the Alliance. The more military, industrial and political substance Europe contributes itself, the stronger its position within the transatlantic partnership. Where Europe can also speak with one voice on shared European interests, that voice carries greater weight both vis-à-vis the United States and within NATO.

5. No European state can sensibly provide every strategic capability required for its security entirely at national level. This applies to larger as well as smaller states. Some capabilities are so expensive or complex that building them nationally makes little sense. Others are rarely required and can therefore be operated more efficiently in common. Common European capabilities make it possible to pool resources, avoid unnecessary duplication and develop capabilities that individual states could hardly provide effectively on their own.

At the same time, collective protection is based on reciprocity. A state that knowingly leaves capability gaps and relies on others to close them with their own personnel and materiel in an emergency shifts responsibility for its own security onto others. Those who expect to be protected and supported in an emergency must in turn be prepared to do the same for others.

6. A multi-level European structure of armed forces and capabilities can reduce costs where parallel national systems are unnecessary. At the same time, it strengthens deterrence and defence readiness because common European resources are available in addition to national ones.

A major problem is the high degree of fragmentation across Europe's defence landscape. Different systems, standards and procurement pathways hamper interoperability and make development, procurement and operation more expensive. Common European planning and more closely coordinated procurement can reduce this fragmentation and help translate available resources more effectively into the capabilities that are actually needed.

7. Non-binding coalitions of willing states remain dependent on national political interests and changing majorities. Election results, changes of government or shifting domestic priorities can mean that pledged contributions or joint measures are no longer available to the agreed extent at the decisive moment. That is not sufficient for a reliable security and defence architecture.

Genuine integration therefore creates not only greater reliability, but also makes the system more resilient to deliberate attempts from outside to divide and destabilise it. Established European structures, binding procedures and jointly sustained capabilities are far harder to block or roll back through individual national vetoes or political shifts than loose commitments to cooperate.

8. If key decisions have already been taken in advance, Europe can act more quickly in an emergency. Instead of having to negotiate new political agreements under time pressure, agreed measures can be activated immediately.

This very predictability also strengthens deterrence. A potential aggressor assesses not only what military and other capabilities Europe possesses, but also how likely it is that they will actually be used. The more national decisions remain open in a crisis, the greater the perceived chance that Europe will fail to agree on a common response in time.

Integration reduces this uncertainty. Procedures agreed in advance and response mechanisms that can be triggered automatically make the consequences of certain actions clearer. This makes it harder

to rely on political disunity, delays or deliberate division. Precisely because hybrid attacks often target political decision-making itself, binding integration is an important element of credible deterrence.

9. A European Security and Defence Union must understand security more broadly than in purely military terms. Defence capability also depends on whether the economy and critical infrastructure continue to function, essential supplies remain secure and the information environment is resilient. State institutions and the population must likewise remain capable of acting during a crisis.

Military defence can fail even when sufficient armed forces are available if logistics and energy supplies collapse, communications fail, or public administration and industrial replenishment cease to function. The same applies when a society is unprepared for a crisis and thereby places additional strain on state structures. Crisis preparedness and resilience are therefore not supplementary 'soft' issues, but prerequisites for military defence capability to remain effective in an emergency.

This requires preparation long before a crisis occurs. People need to understand the risks they may face, how they can prepare themselves and why certain protective measures may become necessary.

Good preparation strengthens society's capacity to act. A population that can assess risks and knows how to behave in a crisis can cope with severe strain more effectively. Fear, disorientation and a lack of preparation, by contrast, consume additional resources and can themselves hamper crisis management. Societal crisis preparedness and resilience are therefore part of effective defence.

10. Defending Europe is not only about preserving peace and territorial security. The democratic order itself can also become a target of attack - for example through interference in political processes, targeted disinformation, polarisation or attempts to undermine trust in institutions and elections.

A functioning democracy contributes substantially to political stability, public trust and the peaceful resolution of conflict. If its ability to decide and act is systematically weakened, Europe's security is directly affected.

This protection cannot be organised through military mutual-defence mechanisms alone. NATO Article 5 is a central framework for collective defence, but it does not encompass the full range of attacks directed at democratic processes, the information environment and societal resilience. A European security architecture must therefore systematically protect this dimension as well.

11. EU enlargement has long since become a question of European security. Especially in the changed geopolitical environment, Europe can no longer afford to leave states in its immediate neighbourhood in a political and security-policy limbo for years or decades. The alternative to a credible enlargement perspective is not automatically a stable status quo. Such a limbo can facilitate external influence, reinforce political instability and intensify strategic competition over these states. The speed of integration is therefore itself relevant to security. This applies in particular to the Western Balkans, where persistent instability has direct consequences for European security. The same is true of Ukraine and other candidate countries.

Candidate countries must meet the conditions for accession, but responsibility for progress does not rest with them alone. The EU must also develop its own procedures and structures so that reform progress can translate more quickly into concrete integration. Acceleration, however, must not be confused with lowering security or democratic requirements. Enlargement can strengthen European security only if new members can be reliably integrated into the common political and security order.

Existing dependencies, avenues for external influence and potential risks of obstruction must therefore be considered during the accession process itself.

Candidate countries also possess experience and capabilities from which the EU itself can benefit. Ukraine in particular has gained extensive practical experience through the ongoing war in modern warfare, hybrid attacks and societal resilience. Enlargement should therefore be understood not only as the adoption of European standards, but also as a mutual process of security-policy learning and integration. Security cooperation should consequently be deepened step by step before full membership.

What is the European Security and Defence Union?

The European Security and Defence Union is a model for an integrated European security architecture. It combines political decision-making capacity, common planning and defence capabilities with crisis preparedness, societal resilience and the protection of democratic capacity to act. These areas are not treated as separate policy fields, but as parts of a common security system.

The starting principle is that European security should be organised jointly wherever national structures alone are insufficient or common structures provide a clear additional security benefit. National responsibilities and capabilities therefore remain an essential part of the system. They are complemented by binding, integrated European structures. The level at which a task is organised depends on its function and on where it can be performed most effectively.

The decisive difference from mere intergovernmental cooperation lies in binding commitments. Common threat assessments, plans and contributions should not have to be negotiated only once an acute crisis has begun. Where joint action is required, responsibilities, available capabilities and decision-making procedures are defined in advance. This makes European action more predictable and less dependent on short-term national decisions.

The Union encompasses more than military defence. Effective defence requires political institutions to remain capable of acting, critical infrastructure to continue functioning and essential supplies to remain secure under pressure. Societal crisis preparedness, a resilient information environment and the ability to detect hybrid attacks early and respond in a coordinated manner are equally important.

The European Security and Defence Union is designed to be compatible with NATO. It is not intended to duplicate existing Alliance structures, but to strengthen Europe's own capacity to act in security and defence. European capabilities should therefore be developed so that they can be used both for autonomous European action and within NATO. At the same time, the European security architecture fully encompasses those Member States that do not belong to NATO.

The ESDU is conceived as a gradual process of integration. Existing national and European structures form the starting point and are connected more closely wherever this is already possible within the current legal framework. Further integration follows where common decision-making powers, genuine European capabilities or new legal foundations are required.

Purpose and Scope

The European Security and Defence Union serves the defence of Europe and the management of serious security-related crises that directly affect the European Union or its Member States. Its purpose is to ensure Europe's political, military and societal capacity to act in such situations and to prepare the necessary structures before a crisis occurs.

The ESDU is therefore explicitly defensive in nature. It is not an instrument for proactive offensive operations and not a general European deployment architecture for military interventions outside Europe. Its common armed forces and capabilities are intended for the defence of the Union, the support of Member States under attack and the management of crises with direct security relevance.

This is distinct from operations undertaken by Member States within other organisations or under international mandates. Military contributions to NATO or UN missions, as well as other deployments outside the immediate defence and crisis-management framework, remain separate decisions of the respective states. The ESDU creates no automatic European deployment obligation for such operations.

The ESDU's concept of security is broader than military defence alone. Hybrid attacks, serious cyber incidents or deliberate disruptions of critical infrastructure can directly endanger European security without reaching the threshold of a conventional armed attack. Depending on the situation, civilian, economic and other security instruments can therefore be activated and combined.

What matters is therefore not only the form of a threat, but its significance for Europe's security and capacity to act. The ESDU provides the common framework for identifying such situations early, assessing them politically and responding with the appropriate European and national instruments.

Core Principles of the ESDU

The European Security and Defence Union follows the principle of integration where cooperation alone is insufficient. Common European structures are established where security requires reliable availability, common planning or rapid decisions. National responsibilities remain where tasks can be performed more effectively at that level.

Security is understood comprehensively. Military defence, crisis preparedness, economic security, the protection of critical infrastructure and societal resilience form part of a common system. The information environment and democratic capacity to act are also elements of European security.

The Union is based on shared responsibility and mutual solidarity. Any Member State that can rely on the protection of others must itself make a reliable contribution to common security. Solidarity should therefore not be politically demanded only once a crisis has begun, but prepared in organisational and material terms beforehand.

Europe's capacity to act must be organised in a binding and forward-looking manner. Where possible, contributions, responsibilities and response procedures are defined before a crisis occurs. This allows decisions to be implemented more quickly and common capabilities to be made genuinely available.

The ESDU combines European autonomy with NATO compatibility. European capabilities should be planned in a way that strengthens NATO's European pillar while enabling autonomous European action. EU Member States outside NATO must be fully integrated into the common security architecture.

As integration deepens, the need for democratic and legal oversight grows as well. European decision-making powers, common armed forces and intelligence structures must be accompanied by clear political accountability and effective parliamentary and judicial oversight.

The ESDU follows the principle of capabilities rather than institutional symbolism. New institutions and structures are not ends in themselves. What matters is whether they fulfil a clearly defined security function and are backed by the necessary resources, responsibilities and capabilities.

The architecture must remain capable of acting even in the face of potential obstruction. Individual states should not be able to prevent strategically necessary European security decisions indefinitely. Decision-making procedures must therefore reconcile political legitimacy with the Union's collective capacity to act.

The ESDU is designed to develop gradually and remain adaptable. Existing European and national structures form the starting point. Further integration takes place where it creates additional common security benefits and where the necessary political and legal conditions can be established.

The institutional design has not yet been finalised in every respect. Where several implementation models are possible, they should be examined and weighed against one another as the concept develops further. This Concept Paper therefore sets out the common target model and its central functional principles without attempting to settle every detail at this stage.

Finally, the ESDU treats enlargement and partnerships as part of European security. Candidate countries should be gradually integrated into appropriate security structures. Close partners can cooperate extensively without thereby becoming part of the European decision-making framework.

Architecture of the ESDU

The European Security and Defence Union is designed as an interconnected system. Its individual elements perform different functions but are interlinked and follow a common security-policy logic. Threats must first be identified and politically assessed before planning requirements can be derived from them. These in turn determine which forces and capabilities are needed, how they are financed and provided, and under what conditions they can be employed.

This logic is described through ten system levels. They are not separate institutions, but represent the fundamental functions that Europe must be able to perform on a permanent basis - from threat assessment and planning to readiness, political decision-making and societal resilience.

The fourteen core elements provide the institutional and operational structures through which these functions are performed. A single core element may serve several system levels at the same time. The common situational picture, for example, feeds into political decisions, defence planning and crisis preparedness alike.

Four cross-cutting elements operate across several or all areas. Democratic oversight, readiness and exercises, and the integration of candidate and partner countries are therefore treated not as isolated components but as requirements for the architecture as a whole.

What matters is how these levels interact. The ESDU is not intended to create a collection of separate European initiatives, but a continuous cycle in which lessons from situational analysis, planning, exercises and real-world crises feed back into political priorities and the further development of European capabilities.

The Ten System Levels

The ESDU follows a common security-policy logic. The Ten System Levels describe not institutions, but functions that Europe must be able to perform on a permanent basis.

1. Situational and Threat Assessment

What threatens Europe?

2. Political Objectives and Strategic Priorities

What does Europe seek to protect, prevent and achieve?

3. Common Planning

What must the EU and its Member States be able to do and prepare?

4. Resources, Capabilities and Readiness

Which forces, systems, reserves and common capabilities and assets are required?

5. Financing and Burden-Sharing

How are national, common and European capabilities financed?

6. Command and Operational Coordination

Who plans, coordinates and commands?

7. Activation and Political Decision-Making

Who decides, when, and through which procedure?

8. Societal and State Functioning

How does Europe remain capable of acting under pressure or attack?

9. Democratic and Societal Resilience

How are free and informed political choice, the information environment and society's capacity for judgement protected?

10. Partnerships and External Integration

How does the ESDU fit into NATO, enlargement and partnerships?

The following components are the institutional and operational structures through which these functions are performed.

The Architecture at a Glance

Fourteen core elements form the institutional and operational core of the ESDU:

1. European Security Council
2. European Common Situational Picture
3. European Intelligence Structure
4. European Defence Planning
5. European Integrated Force Model
6. European Command Structure
7. Common European Capabilities
8. European Defence Industrial and Innovation System
9. European Hybrid Threat Coordination System
10. European Framework for Democratic Resilience and Security Literacy
11. European Crisis Preparedness and Resilience System
12. European Strategic Reserves System
13. European Mutual Assistance and Rapid Response System
14. European Civic Service and Union Citizenship

Four cross-cutting elements connect several or all components:

- A. Democratic, Legal and Parliamentary Oversight Architecture
- B. Common Readiness, Exercises and Stress-Testing System
- C. Candidate Country Integration Framework
- D. Partner Cooperation Framework

1. European Security Council

The European Security Council is the central political decision-making body of the European Security and Defence Union. It brings the common situational and threat assessment together with the Union's political interests and strategic objectives and derives priorities for European action from them. In serious security crises, it decides on those measures that require a common European decision.

One of its core tasks is to activate common European instruments and capabilities. Depending on the situation, these may include European forces, common strategic capabilities or reserves. It can also raise readiness levels. The Security Council defines the political mandate and the objective to be achieved by a measure. It sets the political limits of action and, where necessary, the permissible parameters of escalation. Military or other operational command, however, rests with the designated specialist and command structures.

The decision-making architecture is based on agreeing as many fundamental response options as possible before a specific crisis occurs. For foreseeable scenarios, trigger criteria, available capabilities and possible responses are defined in advance. The European Security Council can activate these prepared measures when the specified conditions are met and adapt them to the situation at hand. This avoids having to rebuild the entire political consensus from scratch in every crisis.

Not every security situation can be anticipated. If a fundamentally new situation arises that is not covered by existing mandates or prepared response options, the European Security Council does not decide on a fundamental expansion of its own powers. Politically far-reaching decisions for which no common framework yet exists are referred back to the competent European decision-making level. In the meantime, the Security Council may initiate preparatory measures that fall within its existing powers. This allows Europe to remain capable of acting in unforeseen situations without bypassing the political legitimacy required for fundamentally new decisions.

The European Security Council is not intended to absorb all security-related decisions of the Member States or the European Union. Its remit is limited to questions that require common European action or concern common European capabilities. Decisions that can sensibly be taken at national or sectoral-policy level remain there.

The Security Council is deliberately designed as a small body capable of acting quickly. Its permanent members are the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. A limited number of Member States are represented on a rotating basis. A Member State directly affected by a given security situation participates in the relevant deliberations and decisions regardless of the rotation. Where particular national capabilities are of essential importance to a specific crisis, the Member States concerned may also be included.

The model thus combines continuity at European level with rotating participation by the Member States and the necessary involvement of states directly affected by a security situation. At the same time, the body remains small enough to make decisions under severe time pressure.

The European Council remains responsible for the European Union's overall political direction. Within that framework, the European Security Council assumes specialised security and defence policy

direction and activates the instruments provided for this purpose. Fundamental strategic decisions therefore remain at the broader political level, while prepared crisis decisions can be taken rapidly.

Voting procedures must follow the same logic. Strategic European security decisions should not, as a rule, be blockable by the veto of a single Member State. Higher decision thresholds are appropriate for particularly far-reaching fundamental decisions, while acute crises require faster procedures. Where appropriate, a state should be able to abstain from a specific measure without automatically preventing the rest of the Union from acting.

As political decision-making powers grow, democratic and legal oversight mechanisms must grow with them. The European Parliament is not part of the Security Council's operational decision chain, but exercises parliamentary oversight and ensures political accountability. Sensitive areas such as intelligence or military operations require appropriate procedures that combine effective scrutiny with the necessary protection of classified information.

2. European Common Situational Picture

The European Security and Defence Union requires a common, continuously updated security situational picture. It brings together information from different domains and derives a shared European assessment of security-relevant developments. Alongside military threats, it must take account of hybrid activity, cyber incidents and economic dependencies. Developments affecting critical infrastructure and societal vulnerabilities are equally relevant where they may affect Europe's security and capacity to act.

The European Common Situational Picture must do more than compile national reports. National findings remain a central foundation, but must be jointly assessed at European level, placed in relation to one another and complemented by European analysis. Only then can developments become visible that may initially appear unrelated from a purely national perspective.

A particularly important capability is the ability to identify connections across different security domains. A cyberattack, economic pressure or an information campaign may appear limited in isolation, yet together form part of a coordinated strategy. The European Common Situational Picture must therefore identify patterns that only emerge when several events are considered together. This allows hybrid campaigns to be identified earlier and their potential strategic significance to be assessed more accurately.

On this basis, a common risk and threat assessment is produced. It should not only evaluate current developments but also provide early warning of changes from which new risks may emerge. Such an early-warning function is essential if political and operational decisions are to be taken before a crisis has fully materialised.

The common situational picture therefore forms a central foundation for the ESDU as a whole. It supports the setting of political priorities and feeds into defence planning. It also helps identify requirements for crisis preparedness and resilience at an early stage. Political decision-making, military planning and civilian preparedness thus draw on a common security information base.

3. European Intelligence Structure

European decision-making capacity requires European information capacity. Common political and security decisions can only be robust if they rest on an independent, reliable and as complete as possible information base. The European Security and Defence Union therefore requires a stronger common intelligence structure.

National intelligence services remain the central operational actors. They possess established structures, access to sources and national responsibilities that cannot simply be transferred to the European level. The aim is therefore not to replace national services wholesale with a central European intelligence service, but to complement them more strongly at European level.

The European level should in particular bring together information from the Member States and assess it jointly. Individual national intelligence inputs must be capable of feeding into a European overall assessment that reveals connections which may not be visible from a purely national perspective. This requires permanently available common analytical capacities and clearly regulated procedures for exchanging sensitive information.

In addition, dedicated European analytical capabilities should be developed where there is a shared intelligence requirement. This applies in particular to strategic developments that affect several Member States simultaneously or have direct implications for the security of the Union as a whole. Such European capacities can complement national intelligence and help reduce dependence on individual sources of information.

Another priority is more reliable intelligence sharing within Europe. Information must be made available more quickly and systematically where it is needed for common situational assessments or decisions. At the same time, source protection, classified information and differing national security interests must be taken into account.

The intelligence structure is closely linked to the European Common Situational Picture. It provides a substantial share of the security-relevant intelligence on which the common situational and threat assessment is based. The situational picture, however, goes beyond intelligence information and combines it with military, economic, infrastructure-related and societal indicators. The intelligence structure therefore feeds intelligence into the situational picture but does not replace it.

4. European Defence Planning

The European Security and Defence Union needs its own common planning process, beginning with the threat assessment and deriving concrete requirements for Europe's defence capability from it. European defence planning must not simply be assembled from 27 national plans. It must translate common political objectives into European capability requirements and then determine which contributions are required at national level and which at European level.

The planning process follows a continuous logic: political objectives and relevant scenarios are derived from the common threat assessment. These determine the armed forces and capabilities Europe requires. Those requirements must in turn be translated into procurement, industrial capacity and strategic reserves. The end point is not merely the nominal existence of a capability, but its actual readiness for use.

Common capability targets for the Member States are derived from this process. These should not remain abstract but must be linked to concrete planning requirements. Forces and capabilities must be assignable to specific tasks, scenarios and readiness levels. This makes clear which contributions actually exist, where gaps remain and which capabilities need to be developed jointly.

National and European defence planning must be interlinked. Member States retain their national planning processes but align them more closely with jointly agreed European requirements. Conversely, European planning must take account of which national capabilities exist, are available and can be further developed. The aim is not a parallel second planning system, but a common planning logic in which national and European levels are aligned.

Defence planning involves far more than determining troop numbers or weapons systems. It must also consider whether sufficient trained and available personnel exist, whether equipment can be maintained and replaced, and whether the necessary logistics function. Ammunition stocks, repair capacity and industrial replenishment must likewise be incorporated from the outset. Only then is it possible to assess whether a capability will not only be available in the short term during an emergency but can also be sustained over time.

European defence planning must be compatible with NATO and take existing Alliance planning into account. Unnecessary duplication should be avoided for EU Member States that are also NATO members. At the same time, the EU needs its own planning capability for tasks, capabilities and scenarios arising from its own security interests, its non-NATO members or its broader security architecture. European planning therefore complements NATO planning without being limited to it.

5. European Integrated Force Model

The integrated European force model combines national armed forces with permanently available European structures. Member States retain their own armed forces, while selected national forces are assigned to the ESDU in advance and planned for common tasks. This removes the need to negotiate from scratch during a crisis which units will be made available.

The ESDU's integrated force model combines different degrees of European integration. Not all forces need to be organised according to the same model. What matters is which form provides the necessary availability, efficiency and political control for a particular task. As integration deepens, decision-making powers also shift from the national to the European level. The legal foundations, parliamentary oversight and political accountability must be designed accordingly.

1. Purely National Units

Purely national units remain entirely under the responsibility of the Member States. They are organised, financed and commanded nationally and are primarily available for national tasks. Their participation in European operations occurs only if the respective state decides to contribute them in the specific case. The political decision on their deployment is likewise governed by the relevant national constitutional rules. The European level has no direct authority over these forces.

2. National Units Pre-Assigned to the ESDU

These units remain part of national armed forces but are assigned to specific European tasks and plans already in peacetime. Their availability, readiness and intended function are defined in advance, so that a crisis does not begin with a new negotiation over which national forces are in principle available to the ESDU. The model seeks to create the highest possible degree of binding European availability without removing the units' national character. The assignment must therefore specify which decisions can be taken in advance and which steps continue to require national approval.

3. Standing Multinational European Formations

National units from several Member States are permanently combined into common formations. They train together, operate within integrated command structures and are oriented towards common operational tasks. The individual contingents remain national forces in legal terms but are organisationally much more closely integrated. This creates a higher degree of integration than merely pre-assigned national units. Politically and legally, the model must prevent the operational effectiveness of the entire formation from being undermined at the decisive moment by divergent national authorisations or caveats. Member States must therefore define in a binding manner, when committing forces permanently, under which conditions those forces are actually available to the common formation.

4. European Armed Forces

European armed forces are organised directly at European level and are permanently available for ESDU tasks. Their financing, command and readiness are governed at European level. They are therefore not merely assembled from nationally provided contingents, but constitute autonomous common armed forces of the Union.

They perform two central functions. First, they operate and secure those common European capabilities that cannot sensibly be assigned to individual Member States. These may include strategic transport assets, intelligence and reconnaissance capabilities, common communications systems or other jointly provided key resources.

Second, in the event of a military attack, European armed forces should be available as an immediate reinforcement for national forces. They thus form a European rapid-response component that does not first have to be assembled through national force-generation decisions. Their activation and deployment are decided by the European Security Council within the pre-defined political and legal framework. This is precisely where their particular strategic value lies: they can quickly support a Member State under attack while additional national or multinational forces are mobilised subsequently if required.

Politically, this represents the highest degree of integration within the force model. Decisions on activation and deployment are taken under common European decision-making procedures rather than through subsequent individual decisions by all Member States. This requires clear European political accountability and correspondingly strong parliamentary and legal oversight.

The model is based on availability and readiness defined in advance. Forces and capabilities are assigned to specific tasks and must meet defined readiness requirements. This replaces the frequent short-notice search for national contributions with a more predictable structure. What matters is not only which forces nominally exist, but which are actually available and deployable in time.

Planning is joint across the armed services and domains. Land, air and maritime forces are considered alongside cyber defence, space capabilities, special operations forces and logistics. The aim is an integrated overall model in which the different military domains are aligned with common scenarios and tasks.

The European force model must be fully compatible with NATO structures and standards. For Member States that are also NATO members, forces and capabilities should wherever possible be planned so they can be used both in the European framework and within the Alliance. At the same time, the ESDU must fully integrate EU Member States that do not belong to NATO. European defence capability must therefore be neither organisationally nor operationally dependent on NATO membership.

6. European Command Structure

The European Security and Defence Union requires a permanent European military command structure. It must be able to plan, prepare and command European operations. Command arrangements cannot be improvised only once a crisis has already begun. Responsibilities, communications channels and command procedures must therefore be defined, exercised and regularly reviewed in peacetime.

A clear distinction must be maintained between political decision-making and military-operational command. The European Security Council decides on the political mandate, the objectives of an operation and its limits. The military command structure implements that mandate operationally. Within the political mandate, it decides on the concrete military conduct of the operation and commands the forces deployed.

Different tasks require clearly defined levels of command. Strategic military command translates the political mandate into military objectives and overall planning. At the operational level, concrete operations are developed and conducted from this basis. Where the scale and nature of an operation require it, tactical command structures must also be provided below that level. These levels must be permanently connected and operate on the basis of common procedures.

The command structure is directly linked to European defence planning and the integrated force model. It knows in advance which forces are assigned and at what level of readiness, and it works with prepared operational plans. In a crisis, it can therefore draw on existing structures instead of having to create a new chain of command and a new allocation of forces.

National headquarters nevertheless remain an essential part of the system. The European command structure must therefore establish clear interfaces with national military commands. The specific chains of command and responsibility differ depending on whether purely national, pre-assigned, standing multinational or European forces are employed. These arrangements must be clearly defined before an operation begins.

The European command structure must be fully interoperable with NATO command structures and procedures. For EU Member States that are also NATO members, forces must be usable in both systems without fundamental structural breaks. At the same time, the European command structure is autonomous and fully integrates those EU Member States that do not belong to NATO. Their participation in the planning and command of European operations must not depend on NATO membership.

Finally, the structure must be designed for the actual requirements of European defence. A command capability able to handle only small overseas deployments or limited crisis responses is not sufficient for the ESDU. It must also be able to command large-scale defence operations on European territory and manage several simultaneous crises. Its scale, staffing and technical equipment must therefore be based on realistic defence and crisis scenarios.

7. Common European Capabilities

Common European capabilities are strategically important assets that are not merely procured jointly but made permanently available at European level. Their activation and use are decided by the European Security Council within the established political and legal framework. Their availability therefore does not depend on renewed national decisions every time they are required.

Such capabilities are particularly suitable where a purely national solution would be very expensive, only rarely required, or where their strategic importance makes guaranteed common availability desirable. Examples include strategic transport, intelligence and reconnaissance, satellite-based services, air defence, secure communications, cyber capabilities and selected medical and logistical capacities.

A defining feature of common European capabilities is their binding availability for European tasks. Their financing, operation and prioritisation must therefore be governed jointly. As a rule, common European capabilities should be operated by European units, ensuring that personnel, training and technical readiness are permanently secured at European level. Their activation and use are decided by the European Security Council.

Common European capabilities complement the national capabilities of the Member States. They should close gaps in particular where a common solution is more effective in security terms, more efficient economically or more reliable politically than several separate national systems.

8. European Defence Industrial and Innovation System

The European Security and Defence Union needs a defence industrial and innovation system that consistently translates military requirements into capabilities that are actually available. The starting point is therefore not which technologies can be funded, but which capabilities are required by common defence planning. Common requirements are derived from these needs and then guide research, development and procurement.

Industrial development follows a continuous chain from identified need through development and testing to series production. End users must be involved early in development so that technical solutions can be tested under realistic conditions and adapted in time. Innovation only generates security value once it has been translated into deployable systems that are available in sufficient quantities.

Common requirements should, wherever possible, be defined before major development and procurement programmes begin. This allows systems to be designed from the outset to work together within Europe and to be employed jointly. Divergent national bespoke solutions should be avoided where they provide no additional military value but make procurement, maintenance and cooperation more difficult.

Production capacity must be considered from the development stage onwards. A technically convincing system is not enough if it can only be produced in small numbers or if production cannot be scaled up rapidly in a crisis. Capacity, supply chains and access to critical components must therefore form part of security planning. Particular dependencies on individual suppliers or third countries should be reduced where they could endanger Europe's ability to act.

The period after procurement is equally important. Maintenance, spare-parts supply and software support must be considered from the outset. Systems must be kept operational and technologically up to date throughout their service life. This also includes the ability to replace consumed or lost materiel quickly enough during a prolonged crisis.

Industrial replenishment capacity is therefore itself part of credible deterrence. A potential aggressor must consider not only what capabilities Europe possesses at the beginning of a conflict, but also whether they can be sustained over time and losses replaced.

Finally, a European defence industrial and innovation system must prevent national industrial-policy interests from perpetuating the fragmentation of European capabilities. National industrial strengths remain important, but should be embedded more firmly in common European capability and procurement planning. The decisive criterion is which solution best meets the common security requirement.

Procurement from outside Europe remains possible and may make sense in many areas. What matters is that it does not create dependencies that endanger Europe's operational capability in a crisis. Critical systems must continue to be operable, maintainable and supplied with spare parts even if a third country restricts deliveries or reduces political support.

This also applies to close allies such as the United States. Strategic partnership does not guarantee that particular capabilities, components or support services will remain fully available in every future

crisis. The risk is even greater with states whose political orientation may change or which may themselves become security adversaries. Europe's experience of past dependencies on Russia, particularly in the energy sector, shows how vulnerable security-relevant supply can become when critical resources depend too heavily on individual external states.

Procurement decisions must therefore always take security of supply, maintainability and long-term availability into account. Where external dependencies could become strategically critical, Europe needs its own production capacity, sufficient reserves or reliable alternative sources of supply.

9. European Hybrid Threat Coordination System

Hybrid threats cut across traditional areas of responsibility. Disruption of major transport routes, the instrumentalisation of migration, cyberattacks, interference with satellite or navigation services, or disinformation campaigns may all form part of the same campaign. Such activities are often initially handled separately by different authorities and policy areas. The ESDU therefore requires a European coordination system that brings these developments together and assesses them as a possible overall pattern.

This system is not intended to create a new parallel security structure alongside existing specialist areas. Its task is instead to connect intelligence, cyber defence, counter-sabotage, economic security and internal security. Findings from the information environment are also incorporated.

The key capability is to avoid viewing individual incidents only in isolation. Several activities that initially appear unrelated may together form part of a strategically directed campaign. The coordination system should identify such connections early, assess their significance and enable a coordinated response.

Action, effect and success must be clearly distinguished. An attempt at influence or coercion remains security-relevant even if it fails to achieve its objective. Attribution, possible direction and intent must likewise be analysed separately. In hybrid attacks, the evidentiary picture is often incomplete or ambiguous at first.

Protective measures must therefore not always depend on final attribution having already been achieved. Where credible indications of a coordinated threat exist, appropriate protective and precautionary measures must be possible beforehand. More far-reaching countermeasures, by contrast, must reflect the quality of the evidence, the severity of the attack and the risk of escalation.

Responses to hybrid threats must be graduated and proportionate. Depending on the situation, civilian, economic or diplomatic instruments may be used; in certain cases, military measures may also become relevant. The added value of the coordination system lies in combining these instruments into a coherent European response rather than employing them separately.

10. European Framework for Democratic Resilience and Security Literacy

The European Security and Defence Union must also protect the resilience of democratic societies. Attacks on the information environment, targeted influence operations and disinformation can distort political decision-making, undermine trust in institutions and intensify societal conflict. Protecting democratic processes is therefore part of European security.

One focus is the detection and analysis of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). This includes identifying coordinated campaigns across different platforms and actors and establishing their links to other hybrid measures. Artificially generated content, deepfakes and automated manipulation must be considered alongside more traditional forms of covert influence.

Elections and other democratic decision-making processes require particular protection. The aim is not to control political debate or restrict legitimate opposition. Rather, it is to expose covert foreign interference, identify attempts at manipulation at an early stage and protect free and informed political choice.

Crisis communication is another central element. National and European institutions must be able to communicate quickly, clearly and credibly in tense situations. Missing or contradictory information creates additional space for rumours and manipulation and can make practical crisis management more difficult. Strategic communication must therefore be a permanent element of security preparedness and must not begin only once a crisis has already escalated.

Protecting the information environment is complemented by strengthening societal security literacy. Citizens should be able to assess security-relevant developments, understand responsibilities and evaluate information critically. This also includes the ability to distinguish between legitimate political communication, unintentional misinformation and deliberate manipulation. Security literacy should strengthen judgement and enable people to make informed decisions independently even under conditions of uncertainty.

Media and information literacy are important components, but are not sufficient on their own. Security literacy also includes a basic understanding of threats, crisis preparedness and the ways in which public authorities can respond. It should also convey the role that individuals, organisations and societal structures play in the resilience of a democracy.

The European framework establishes common objectives, quality standards and analytical capabilities. Much of the concrete educational and outreach work can take place at national, regional or local level. What matters is that democratic resilience and security literacy are not treated as separate tasks. A society that is better able to recognise manipulation, assess risks realistically and retain its capacity for judgement under pressure is harder to destabilise from outside.

11. European Crisis Preparedness and Resilience System

The European Crisis Preparedness and Resilience System connects civilian crisis preparedness, civil protection, the protection of critical infrastructure and the continuity of essential state and societal functions. It is intended to ensure that Europe remains capable of acting under severe pressure and that essential supplies and services can be maintained. Crisis preparedness is understood as a whole-of-government and whole-of-society task. Public authorities, businesses and municipalities are involved alongside civil society and the population. Preparedness should already be taken into account in infrastructure planning, regulation and public investment.

The European level connects national preparedness structures into a common planning framework. Cross-border dependencies and shared vulnerabilities are systematically identified so that disruptions are not assessed from a purely national perspective. European minimum standards apply in key areas, defining the required level of preparedness and redundancy and the emergency capacities that must be available. On this basis, it is determined where national capacities are sufficient and where additional European capabilities or support mechanisms are required.

A particular focus is the continuity of state and societal functioning. This includes maintaining essential government functions, basic services and the protection of critical infrastructure. Healthcare, civil protection and preparedness for chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear hazards are also incorporated into common planning. Implementation remains national and local where that is appropriate; at European level, gaps are addressed where individual states cannot provide sufficient protection on their own.

Mutual support is prepared before a crisis occurs. Where national capacities are insufficient or several states are affected by the same situation, additional European assets must be rapidly available and deployable under common procedures. Military capabilities can also support civilian structures, for example where specialised transport, logistics or medical capacities are required. Planning also includes from the outset the restoration of damaged infrastructure and disrupted state functions.

High resilience also has a deterrent effect. The lower the prospect that attacks or deliberate disruption can cause lasting damage to Europe's ability to function, the lower the expected strategic benefit of such measures. Crisis preparedness and resilience are therefore not only protective mechanisms, but themselves part of credible deterrence.

12. European Strategic Reserves System

The European Strategic Reserves System is intended to ensure that critical goods and materials remain available when supply chains fail or demand rises sharply at short notice. It begins with a common assessment of requirements based on European risk, crisis and defence planning. This determines which reserves are needed, in what quantities and at which level they should most sensibly be held.

The system combines national, multinational and common European stockpiles. Not every reserve needs to be organised centrally at European level. What matters is that common minimum requirements apply to strategically relevant goods and that there is transparency about which stocks are actually available, usable and capable of being mobilised at short notice. These may include medical supplies, energy resources, critical components and spare parts. Industrial inputs and resources for protection against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear hazards are also relevant.

Reserves must be geographically distributed so that individual attacks or disruptions do not result in the complete loss of critical stocks. Geographic redundancy is therefore as much a part of the system as the continuous renewal of stocks. Critical goods must remain technically current and genuinely usable; nominal stockpiles alone do not constitute robust preparedness.

Before a crisis occurs, criteria must also be defined for allocating scarce reserves. This is particularly important when several Member States are affected simultaneously or when civilian and military requirements compete. Prioritisation must therefore not be negotiated only under acute time pressure.

Logistics and transport are integral parts of the reserves system. A stockpile has security value only if it can be moved to where it is needed in time. Storage, transport routes and distribution mechanisms must therefore be planned together.

Strategic reserves do not replace industrial production capacity. Their purpose is to buy time until production can be scaled up, supply chains stabilised or alternative sources of supply secured. The reserves system must therefore be closely linked to European industrial and procurement planning.

13. European Mutual Assistance and Rapid Response System

The European Mutual Assistance and Rapid Response System is intended to prepare mutual support among Member States so that it does not have to be renegotiated politically and organisationally in an emergency. For assistance in the event of armed aggression, Article 42(7) TEU provides an important legal starting point. This mutual-assistance commitment should be operationalised through concrete planning, defined responsibilities and available capabilities. The rapid-response component goes further and also covers serious security crises below the threshold of armed attack.

Before a crisis, the forms of support envisaged for different scenarios are defined. These include both military and civilian contributions. For specific situations, forces, capabilities and specialised support modules are identified in advance and assigned clear readiness timelines. This enables faster responses to serious cyberattacks, large-scale failures of critical infrastructure, chemical or biological emergencies and other security-relevant crises.

Activation is graduated according to the nature and severity of the situation. Not every crisis requires the same instruments or the same level of political decision-making. What matters is that it is clear in advance which support can be prepared automatically, which measures require political activation and which capabilities must be immediately available.

The central added value is reliability. In an emergency, Europe should not first have to search for voluntary national contributions. The required assets are already planned, assigned and verified for availability. This makes mutual support faster and more predictable.

Several simultaneous crises require common prioritisation rules. Scarce European capabilities must be deployable where they provide the greatest benefit for the security of the Union as a whole. Such decisions should not have to be made for the first time under acute time pressure.

In civilian crises, the affected Member State generally remains the central operational interface. European support complements national leadership and is integrated into existing crisis-management structures. In military attacks, by contrast, the designated European command and decision-making structures apply.

The long-term objective is a mutual-assistance system on which all Member States can rely equally. Solidarity should not only be pledged politically but prepared in practical terms. Every Member State must know what support it can count on in an emergency and what contribution it is expected to make to the security of others.

14. European Civic Service and Union Citizenship

The European Civic Service is intended to build a broad pool of trained personnel for crises and the defence of Europe while making shared societal responsibility a practical experience.

Civic Service should be compulsory for all genders, with a choice between military and civilian service. It should generally be completed in young adulthood. The standard period for beginning service should be between the ages of 18 and 25, while allowing for circumstances such as vocational training, university studies or care responsibilities.

Service may in principle be completed in one's own Member State or in another. Preferences regarding the place of service should be accommodated wherever possible, but must not create shortages in particular regions or functions. Assignments must therefore be aligned with actual needs.

EU citizens should in principle be able to complete military service in the armed forces of another Member State. This requires common European baseline standards for training, operational readiness and mutual recognition. It can facilitate personnel mobility within Europe and gradually deepen military integration.

Civilian service should likewise focus on concrete tasks relevant to security and resilience. These may include civil protection, healthcare, technical assistance, logistics or support for critical infrastructure. The key point is that the training should not only be useful in a possible crisis. The knowledge and skills acquired should also have practical value in everyday life, employment or civic engagement.

The European service can also fulfil an integrative function. Those who serve for a period in another Member State work directly with people from other parts of Europe and assume responsibility across national borders. This experience can strengthen understanding of common European security and solidarity.

Regardless of whether service is military or civilian, a common basic security education should form part of every service track. It provides fundamental knowledge of security and crisis situations, democratic institutions and the functioning of the European security architecture. Participants should understand how hybrid influence works, how disinformation and deliberate manipulation can be recognised, and what role individuals can play in protecting democratic processes and societal resilience.

The service thus combines practical training with security education. Its purpose is not to instil a particular political position, but to develop the ability to assess threats, understand democratic decisions and remain capable of judgement and action under pressure. This common foundation should be taught in all forms of service and then supplemented by the relevant military or civilian specialist training.

At the same time, the service can add a dimension of shared responsibility to Union citizenship. Union citizenship would then be associated not only with rights and freedom of movement, but also with a practical contribution to the security and resilience of the community. Particularly where service can be completed in another Member State, it creates a direct experience of European solidarity and shared responsibility across national borders.

A. Democratic, Legal and Parliamentary Oversight Architecture

As Europe's capacity to act increases, democratic, legal and parliamentary oversight mechanisms must develop accordingly. Where decisions, resources or powers are transferred to the European level, effective political accountability and oversight are required there as well. National parliaments and courts remain responsible for areas in which competences continue to rest with the Member States.

Parliamentary oversight must cover both strategic direction and the concrete exercise of European security and defence powers. This applies in particular to deployments of European armed forces, the use of common capabilities and exceptional crisis measures. Rapid decisions must remain possible in acute situations, but must not create lasting accountability gaps. Where urgency makes prior parliamentary involvement impossible, binding ex post oversight and political accountability are required.

Judicial and legal oversight must keep pace with integration as well. Decisions that interfere with rights must remain reviewable. Fundamental rights and data protection apply in security-sensitive areas too and must not be effectively suspended through blanket references to secrecy or urgency.

Intelligence activities require specific oversight mechanisms that combine the necessary protection of classified information with effective scrutiny. Confidentiality may limit public transparency, but it must not prevent parliamentary, judicial or independent oversight. The same applies to procurement, financing and the use of common European resources. Clear responsibilities, traceable decisions and effective financial and procurement oversight are required.

Extraordinary powers in crises should be time-limited and reviewed regularly. Extensions must be explicitly justified and politically confirmed. This prevents powers created for exceptional situations from becoming a permanent norm.

As a general principle, every major security-policy decision must be documented in a traceable manner and be reviewable afterwards. The more power is exercised at European level, the clearer it must remain who took the decision, on what basis and who bears political and legal responsibility for it.

B. Common Readiness, Exercises and Stress-Testing System

The Common Readiness, Exercises and Stress-Testing System is intended to ensure that existing capabilities are not merely present on paper, but are genuinely available and effective in an emergency. This requires common, verifiable standards for readiness, availability and responsiveness.

Readiness is tested regularly. This applies to military forces as well as civilian crisis structures and their interaction. Cyber defence, critical infrastructure and crisis communication must also be tested under realistic conditions. The focus should not be limited to individual systems, but also include complex situations in which several domains come under pressure simultaneously.

A particular focus is on large-scale cross-domain scenarios. Such exercises should demonstrate whether political decision-making, military command, civilian crisis management and public communication continue to work together under severe stress. Equally important is whether cross-border support and common European capabilities can be activated in time.

Stress tests complement conventional exercises where full-scale real-world exercises would be impractical or impossible. They can, for example, assess how resilient energy supply, communications networks or transport routes are to prolonged disruption and what cascading effects could result.

The results are evaluated systematically. Identified weaknesses must feed back into planning and priority-setting rather than remaining without consequence. Where capabilities are lacking or existing structures are insufficiently robust, this must lead to consequences for financing, procurement and training.

This creates a continuous cycle of planning, testing and adaptation. Readiness is therefore understood not as a condition achieved once, but as a permanent requirement for European capacity to act that must be continuously verified.

C. Candidate Country Integration Framework

The security integration of candidate countries should begin gradually before full membership. Between complete exclusion and full participation as a Member State, graduated forms of involvement are needed. This allows countries, in line with their progress, to be increasingly included in areas where early cooperation strengthens both their own security and European security.

The extent of participation depends on clear conditions. Alongside progress in the accession process, security-policy reliability and institutional maturity are particularly important. The more sensitive an area, the higher the requirements for information security, the rule of law and alignment with the Union's foreign and security policy. Integration must not create new vulnerabilities or opportunities for obstruction.

Early steps can include alignment with common standards and procedures. This includes cooperation on crisis preparedness and resilience as well as participation in appropriate exercises. Defence industry and joint procurement can also be opened gradually where the necessary conditions are met. This creates common structures and practical cooperation even before accession.

Closer involvement is also valuable in countering hybrid threats and in security education. Candidate countries can benefit from European experience while also contributing their own insights. States already directly confronted with military or hybrid attacks may in particular possess capabilities and practical experience that are relevant to the Union as a whole.

As reliability increases, candidate countries may also gain access to selected planning and information structures. A distinction must be made between areas that can be opened at an early stage and those that, because of their particular political or intelligence sensitivity, should only become accessible at a later stage of integration.

The objective is a continuous process of security integration. Formal accession should, as far as possible, not mark an abrupt shift from extensive exclusion to full security responsibility. By that point, new Member States should already be familiar with the relevant standards, procedures and structures and be practically integrated into appropriate parts of the common security architecture.

D. Partner Cooperation Framework

The Partner Cooperation Framework governs cooperation with states and organisations that are closely linked to Europe in security terms but are not becoming part of the European Union. These partnerships must be clearly distinguished from the gradual integration of candidate countries. Cooperation may be extensive, but does not confer participation in the European decision-making framework.

NATO and close partners such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Norway are particularly important. Cooperation with them can be deepened in areas where common capabilities, aligned standards or mutual support provide concrete security benefits. This includes exercises, interoperability and intelligence sharing. Cyber and space security, defence industry, research, military mobility and resilience may also form part of such partnerships.

Partner states may also participate in specific European operations, projects or common capabilities under clearly defined rules. From the outset, it must be clear which rights and obligations participation entails and what access partners receive to information, planning processes or common structures.

Political decision-making authority nevertheless remains at European level. Partners can be closely involved without gaining co-decision rights over strategic direction or the activation of European instruments. The model thus combines far-reaching security cooperation with clear European decision-making autonomy.

Implementation Logic

The European Security and Defence Union should be built gradually. Existing national and European structures form the starting point; these should first be connected more closely and made more binding where this is already possible within the current legal framework.

Further integration follows where common European decision-making powers, autonomous European capabilities or new legal foundations are required. Not all elements need to be implemented at the same time. What matters is that each step moves towards the common target model and tangibly increases Europe's capacity to act.

About CESR

The Center for European Security & Resilience (CESR) is an independent Vienna-based think-and-do tank focusing on European security, resilience and crisis preparedness. We analyse security challenges, develop concepts for a more capable and resilient European security architecture, and translate research and policy ideas into practical approaches.

Our work connects security and defence policy with societal resilience and security literacy. Through publications, dialogue, education and practice-oriented projects, we generate knowledge, foster exchange across different sectors of society and strengthen the capacity of institutions, organisations, municipalities and citizens to understand security-related developments and act responsibly.

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