

European Defence: The European Union Framework as a Dead End

Vincent Laborderie

**GGI Briefing
No. 3/2026**



**GLOBAL
GOVERNANCE
INSTITUTE**

About The Global Governance Institute (GGI)

The Global Governance Institute (GGI) is an independent, non-profit research and education institute based in Brussels. GGI brings together policy-makers, scholars and practitioners from the world's leading institutions in order to devise, strengthen and improve forward-looking approaches to global governance.

Our mission is to promote comprehensive research, cutting-edge analysis and innovative advice on core policy issues, informed by a truly global perspective. This also includes raising awareness about major challenges of global governance among the general public.

Our vision is a more equitable, peaceful and sustainable global order based on effective but accountable international organizations, the global rule of law and the empowerment of the individual across borders and cultures. GGI places particular emphasis on the improvement of the United Nations system and its mutual reinforcement with strong regional organisations.

About the Author

Vincent Laborderie is a Senior Fellow in the Peace and Security section. He is Professor of International Relations and European Studies at UCLouvain in Belgium. He also teaches Geopolitics at IHECS (Brussels School of Journalism & Communication). After completing his doctoral studies at Laval University (Canada), he was awarded his PhD by UCLouvain in 2017. He is affiliated to the Institute for European Studies Saint-Louis and the 'Groupe Voisinage', which focuses on enlargement and neighbourhood policy of the European Union.

How to cite: *Vincent Laborderie (2026) European Defence: The European Union Framework as a Dead End, GGI Briefing 3/2026, Brussels: Global Governance Institute.*

Global Governance Institute
Cours Saint Michel 30A
1040 Brussels, Belgium

info@globalgovernance.eu
www.globalgovernance.eu

GGI Briefing Series

Published 22 July 2026
© Global Governance Institute

The Global Governance Institute (GGI) ASBL is a non-profit association registered under Belgian law. Registration No. 831.178.152

EUROPEAN DEFENCE: THE EUROPEAN UNION FRAMEWORK AS A DEAD END

Vincent Laborderie

1. Introduction

Europe is currently facing a security challenge unlike any witnessed since the end of the Second World War. It is still difficult to fully grasp what distinguishes the current situation from what it was just over four years ago, before Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine. To appreciate the scale of this unprecedented deterioration in security, one must recognise that the current situation is the result of two events that, considered separately, seemed impossible only a few years ago. The first is, of course, the outbreak of war in Ukraine, which has brought the UN system of collective security to its knees. This represents the largest interstate war in Europe since the end of the Second World War. But it is also the first overt act of aggression on this scale by a major power with the aim of annexing part of a neighbour's territory. It is clear that Russia has openly violated the fundamental principles of the United Nations Charter. Yet not only has it not been sanctioned, but Russia still holds its permanent seat on the UN Security Council, where it can exercise its right of veto as it sees fit. Nor has it become the international pariah that Western nations might have

hoped for. In Africa and Asia, the war in Ukraine is primarily seen as a confrontation between two powers (the West versus Russia), rather than as a violation of international law. Nevertheless, faced with this unprecedented threat, Europeans could still count on their American ally, which spared no effort in helping Ukraine. In a way, we were back to the logic of the Cold War: Russia had replaced the USSR, and Ukraine, with some differences, had replaced Afghanistan.

But at the start of 2025, another traumatic event occurred: Donald Trump, the newly re-elected president, made direct contact with Vladimir Putin in an attempt to end the conflict, then publicly humiliated the Ukrainian president at the White House, and abandoned, albeit temporarily, Ukraine. The worst was yet to come, however, in early 2026, when the US President even threatened to invade Greenland, a territory belonging to a NATO member state, Denmark. This represents a fundamental rupture. In the event of an attack, how can one rely on an ally who engages in dialogue with the aggressor without consulting its allies and even

threatens a member state of the alliance?

Beyond this abrupt rupture, which can be attributed to Donald Trump's personality, it must be emphasised that US disengagement from Europe is a long-term process that is set to continue. For the United States, the priority is, and will remain, the Indo-Pacific and the rivalry with China. In very practical terms, support for European states is no longer the subject of a bipartisan consensus in the United States, as was the case until very recently. This uncertainty is, of course, unacceptable when it comes to the security and very existence of European states.

If NATO can no longer guarantee European security due to the United States' failure to fulfil its obligations, it stands to reason that the continent's other major organisation, the European Union, is likely to take over. The EU has recently developed its defence capabilities and institutions to an unprecedented extent.

Launched with the Treaty of Maastricht, the defence dimension of the EU's activities has undergone continuous development, notably with the transition from the ESDP to the CSDP (Treaty of Lisbon) and the creation of the European Defence Agency (2004). In practical terms, the European Union has carried out several peacekeeping operations, whether on the European continent, in Africa or in the Red Sea. Since Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU's investment in

defence has taken on a new dimension: the development of the European Peace Facility (EPF), the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), and the unveiling of the 'ReArm Europe' plan, worth over €800 billion. At the heart of the latter, the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) programme is particularly innovative. With a budget of €150 billion, it enables Member States to benefit from loans at preferential rates for their arms purchases. In December 2024, the Commission even created the post of European Commissioner for Defence. In the meantime, European support for Ukraine grew ever stronger, particularly as Europeans have largely had to step in to replace US support, which has, to say the least, diminished since Donald Trump's return to power.

It would therefore be logical to assume that, by developing the CSDP and other instruments, the European Union would be able to provide a security framework for the European continent. However, it seems that the European Union, despite recent developments, may not be the appropriate framework for building a credible common defence for European states.

2. The scale of the challenges

Before addressing the substance of the issue, it is important to define the tasks that an organisation seeking to replace NATO in ensuring the defence of

European states would need to fulfil. These would fall into four categories. The first task consists of collective defence in the event of an attack by a third state against a Member State. The European treaties affirm the solidarity of the Member States of the Union in this area, as Article 42(7) TEU stipulates: 'If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power'. However, it must be acknowledged that such a provision is in practice difficult to enforce, as the Member States would hardly be able to coordinate their actions to counter such an attack. It should be remembered that this provision was included during the negotiations on the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007. At that time, the main threat facing European states was a terrorist attack. Moreover, we were in a context where US support was a given. Ensuring this security today requires far more than a declaration in a treaty. The objective here is to achieve a level of coordination between national armed forces and an integrated command structure modelled on NATO. The second challenge is posed by hybrid threats. This term encompasses [a wide range of threats](#), some of which fall not within the remit of defence but within that of the security and intelligence services. In terms of coordination between European states on these issues, there is still a great deal of work to be done. The problem with hybrid attacks is precisely that they fall below the official threshold for armed conflict.

Consequently, they challenge the cohesion of European states, which may interpret such actions differently. Some might decide that a military response is warranted, whilst others might consider that such a response would risk dangerous escalation. A European doctrine on this matter has yet to be established. Whilst Russia is the 'usual suspect' when it comes to the first two threats, we must bear in mind the possibility of a crisis arising on the Union's southern flank that would require an intervention force in an African country. This force is still to be established. Finally, the establishment of an autonomous European defence capability presupposes that it consists largely of equipment manufactured in Europe. Indeed, the defence industry is not a production sector or a trade like any other. The choices made regarding suppliers create strategic dependencies, as the long-term effectiveness of the equipment purchased depends on the goodwill of the original supplier (supply of spare parts, maintenance, software updates, etc.). According to the European External Action Service (EEAS), 78% of arms acquisitions by EU member states were made [outside the EU](#). Moreover, Europe is highly dependent on critical weapons systems such as fighter aircraft.

3. A 'European' defence still managed at state level

Given the scale of these challenges, we must first put the progress made within

the European Union into perspective. Whilst this progress is remarkable, we are still a long way from a 'Europe of defence', as this area remains dominated by the Member States.

Thus, whilst the European Peace Facility (EPF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) represent unprecedented and certainly useful steps forward, their significance within the overall European defence effort should not be overestimated. Indeed, the EPF has an annual budget of €1.6 billion, whereas PESCO has no budget of its own. The ASAP programme, for its part, has a budget of €500 million over three years. When compared with the €458 billion in combined annual defence spending by the 27 Member States, it becomes clear that EU-level spending is relatively marginal. The 'ReArm Europe' plan, with its stated expenditure of €800 billion over four years, is more impressive. However, a distinction must be made between actual expenditure and mere announcements. Indeed, the European Union as such will not spend a single euro under this plan. Of this €800 billion, €650 billion consists of spending authorisations granted by the Commission to the Member States.

The Commission undertakes not to impose sanctions under the excessive deficit procedure on Member States that increase their defence spending, up to this limit of €650 billion – which is unlikely ever to be reached. The remaining €150 billion relates to the SAFE programme, which provides loan

guarantees for defence expenditure. These loans are backed by the EU and can therefore be raised on the markets at a lower rate than if taken out directly by the Member States. In short, the Commission is encouraging the Member States to spend more on defence, but without any coordination of this expenditure.

Every decision is essentially taken by states in light of their own objectives. Poland's stated ambition to hold the most powerful ground army in Europe, and Germany's to field the leading army on the continent, are indicative of this situation. The scrapping of the FCAS joint fighter aircraft project is another example of this shift towards a national approach. We are faced here with a fairly obvious problem of spending efficiency, given that a defence policy at European level would enable more effective defence whilst spending less. Instead of helping to achieve this objective, the Commission is encouraging Member States to continue spending on their own.

At the operational level, the European Union has managed to coordinate external operations. However, these consisted mainly of peacekeeping operations rather than of imposing peace or pacifying hostile areas. More importantly, these achievements do not compare with ensuring collective defence for the benefit of its Member States.

4. Three fundamental problems: who is out, who is in, and how it works

The gap between what has already been achieved and what is required is therefore enormous. In our view, the European Union is not the appropriate framework for building an effective European defence, for at least three reasons. Firstly, because several states that are crucial to a European defence are not EU Member States; secondly, because, conversely, a number of states that are EU Member States cannot participate effectively in its defence; and finally, because of the decision-making process in this area.

4.1 Non-EU Member States

The most obvious objection to the idea that the European Union could provide the framework for a future European defence system concerns those European states that are not members of the Union. Four of these must be addressed: Norway, the United Kingdom, Türkiye and Ukraine.

By virtue of its [geographical position](#), Norway is [essential to a European defence system](#). It is worth recalling a little-known fact here: neither Sweden nor Finland has access to the Arctic Ocean. Indeed, Norwegian territory extends along the entire northern coast of Scandinavia, reaching as far as Russia, a country with which Norway shares a 196 km border. At a time when the main threat to European security is

posed by Russia and when securing Arctic routes is essential, it is difficult to do without Norway.

Nevertheless, it is still possible to envisage some form of partnership with a country which, whilst occupying a key strategic position, holds relatively modest military forces. Although Norway is an essential component of a defence system, it would not necessarily belong to its core. The situation is quite different for the United Kingdom. As the only European nuclear power alongside France, the British also possess one of Europe's most powerful armed forces and an unrivalled projection capability thanks to their navy. Their troops are battle-hardened and have proven their effectiveness in a variety of challenging contexts. Historically, the United Kingdom has always been at the heart of European security, from the creation of the Western Union (1948) to the Saint-Malo declaration (1998). Today, it is one of the most committed players in the continent's security and in supporting Ukraine. A European security architecture simply cannot be built without the United Kingdom.

The issue of Türkiye is of a different nature. NATO's second-largest army in terms of troops, the country has developed a [unique military capability](#), characterised in particular by its expertise in drone production. However, this military power is coupled with a fully asserted [diplomatic and strategic autonomy](#), which means that it now seems highly unlikely that Türkiye could be integrated into a

European alliance. Ankara prefers to chart its own course and, where appropriate, take on the role of mediator, as has been the case on several occasions in relation to the Ukrainian issue. Nevertheless, a European alliance will have to forge agreements with Türkiye to ensure its security. However, the European Union faces a definite liability in this regard, linked to the deadlock in accession negotiations. Were the EU to become responsible for Europe's security, this would leave it exposed to Turkish attempts to link the two issues and demand concessions regarding accession progress.

The issue is much the same with regard to Ukraine. Having been at war for four years, the Ukrainian army has developed *invaluable expertise in modern warfare*. Unlike Türkiye, the future European security architecture could fully integrate Ukraine. But this is where the difficulty of a security structure that is an integral part of the EU becomes apparent: to join this alliance, Ukraine would have to join the European Union. However, this integration raises many other questions and requires progress, particularly in terms of good governance and the fight against corruption – to name but a few – which hinder such a *development within a timeframe compatible with European security imperatives*.

4.2 EU Member States: multiplicity and disparities

The objections mentioned so far could be overcome if one were to envisage a functional European defence structure integrated into the European Union but open to non-EU Member States, modelled, for example, on the Schengen Area, which includes Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein.

But this would then overlook another fundamental problem facing the European Union: not the states that are not members, but rather those that are. The first problem is one of numbers: 27 Member States. Can we really hope to build a security structure that suits all these actors? It is worth noting here that we are faced with extreme heterogeneity amongst the Member States, both in terms of their military capabilities and their diplomatic and strategic positions on this issue.

Let us begin with military capabilities. What makes the European Union unique is that it comprises a few large states, five if we include Spain and Poland, and many states of modest or even very modest size. The five largest European states (Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Poland) account for 65 per cent of the EU's total population and GDP. Conversely, 20 of the 27 Member States have a population of fewer than 12 million, and 12 have a population of no more than 6 million. This imbalance is, unsurprisingly, reflected in military capabilities. One need only examine these figures to realise that the five largest EU Member States *account for 69 per cent* of the Union's total military expenditure. If we

add Belgium, the Netherlands and Sweden to these five, we see that eight Member States account for 82 per cent of the EU's military expenditure.

But if we look not at expenditure but at operational capability, the gap is even wider. Indeed, for a small state, the armed forces are very often sized to focus solely on defending their own territory. The resources required to

develop a projection capability sufficient to help an ally under attack are simply not available. In very concrete terms, were a Russian attack to occur on the eastern flank of the Union, which stretches from Finland to Romania, the contribution of many Member States to the defence of the attacked states would be marginal or even insignificant, if not purely symbolic.

Table 1: Military expenditure in Europe (source: [SIPRI Military Expenditure Database](#))

	Defence expenditure in 2025 (in billions of US dollars)	Share of total EU27 expenditure
Germany	113.6	24.8%
France	68	14.8%
Italy	48.1	10.5%
Poland	46.76	10.2%
Spain	40.2	8.8%
G5 total	316.8	69.1%
Netherlands	28.9	6.3%
Sweden	16.5	3.6%
Belgium	14.5	3.2%
G8 total	376.8	82.2%
Total EU27	458.3	100%
United Kingdom	89	19.4%
Türkiye	30	6.6%
Norway	17	3.7%
Ukraine	84.1	18.4%
Russia	190.4	41.5%

In addition to this disparity in operational capacity, significant differences in diplomatic positioning and willingness to participate actively in a European defence policy must be acknowledged. The four remaining neutral countries in the European Union (Austria, Ireland, Malta, Cyprus) are not the main problem. Above all, it must be noted that the wave of solidarity with Ukraine has subsided and that, after four years of war, the sense of unity on this issue has faded. The case of Viktor Orbán is, of course, an extreme one, but other leaders still in office, such as [Robert Fico \(Slovakia\)](#) and [Andrej Babiš \(Czech Republic\)](#), offer limited support for Ukraine. Similarly, whilst all European states declare their intention to strengthen Europe's defence capabilities, differences emerge when it comes to taking concrete action. The most emblematic case is that of Spain, whose government [has refused](#) to increase its defence spending to the 5 per cent target set at the NATO summit in June 2025, [acknowledging that it has other priorities](#). More generally, it is apparent that defence spending is inversely proportional to a country's [distance from Russia](#)¹. Unsurprisingly, the Russian threat is not perceived in the same way in Warsaw or Tallinn as it is in Lisbon, Madrid or Dublin. As a consequence, including all 27 EU Member States within a defence structure risks perpetuating or even exacerbating the 'free-riding' phenomenon currently criticised by the United States. This phenomenon would

be all the more problematic within the European Union given that its Member States, to varying degrees, face public finance challenges and have a welfare state to fund.

4.3 Veto power for all: paralysing and potentially fatal

The number of EU Member States and their diversity is in itself a fundamental problem, suggesting that the EU is not the ideal framework for building a European defence system. This becomes a certainty when one recalls that, within the European Union, any decision on defence matters must be taken unanimously. We find ourselves in this absurd situation where, for decisions concerning the continent's security, countries such as Cyprus, Malta or Slovenia have the same ability to block decisions as a nuclear power like France, or a Poland that prides itself on soon having the Union's most powerful land forces. Who can believe that an ambitious project can come to fruition, or that bold decisions can be taken, when 27 Member States each have the power to block them?

The problem is obvious, so much so that calls are regularly made for a switch to qualified majority voting on foreign policy and defence matters. It is doubtful whether such a reform will ever materialise. It would, in fact, require a revision of the treaties, which in turn requires unanimity. Each of the 27 Member States would therefore have to

¹ See in particular Figure 6, p. 23.

relinquish its veto power – in effect its power. One can, of course, imagine a great surge of momentum that would overcome this political reality: no actor voluntarily relinquishes their own power. It may therefore be a long time before such a reform comes about.

Yet we must bear in mind that this generalised veto right constitutes a threat to the security of the European Union. Whilst Viktor Orbán is no longer in power in Hungary, the extent of his collusion with Moscow [has since been revealed](#). This ranged from the near-instantaneous sharing of information with the Kremlin to coordination between Budapest and Moscow in blocking EU support for Ukraine through Hungary's opposition within the European Council.

Yet such collusion between a Member State and a foreign power could well happen again in the near future, and not just with Russia. Indeed, numerous powers pose a threat to the EU, or are simply in competition with it: Russia, China, but also Türkiye or the United States, to name but a few. The number of small-sized Member States gives these external powers ample scope to turn one of them into a lever of influence within the EU. This can be achieved through political or ideological ties with the government in power, support for opposition political forces, or simply by exploiting the economic promises and threats that a major power can exert on a smaller economy. Not only would the foreign power obtain information via the Member State in question, but it could also use the right of veto to its

advantage. It is worth recalling that in several European countries – [Bulgaria](#) and [Romania](#) in particular, though France could also be cited – there are political opposition forces which, whilst not necessarily pro-Russian, hold a fundamentally different view of the nature of the Russian threat.

All things considered, the European Union would find itself in the same situation as 18th-century Poland, where the practice of the liberum veto ultimately led to the partition of the country. In that country, each of the approximately 150 noble members of the Polish Sejm had the power to block debates and prevent any decision-making by their will alone. Ultimately, hostile foreign powers (Russia, Prussia, Austria) used certain members of the Sejm to block any reforms, leading to the downfall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Even if the general right of veto were to be lifted, it remains that the European Union's system of operation and decision-making is ill-suited to the fields of defence and security. Indeed, the requirement for a qualified majority to adopt a decision, coupled with actual negotiating practices, tends to favour consensus-building. This tendency is exemplified by the incorporation [of the Ioannina compromise](#) into Council negotiations. This mechanism allows a minority to request that discussions continue in the event of disagreement. This minority may consist of as few as three Member States representing at least 19 per cent of the European population. Thus, even though no single

Member State can block decisions on its own, these decisions take time, and successive rounds of negotiations can create a significant gap between the initial ambitions and the final outcome. A switch to qualified majority voting would certainly be a solution if the EU had 15 or even 20 Member States. But with 27, the risk of deadlock or stagnation still remains.

This touches on the fact that, beyond voting rules, the European Union was built to manage 'low politics' rather than 'high politics', to which defence belongs. To understand this, we must go back to the origins of the European Economic Community (EEC), the EU's predecessor. The EEC was formed precisely because the integration of 'high politics' through the European Defence Community (EDC) had failed. The idea was then to build concrete solidarity between European countries by integrating economic and social policies ('low politics'). In these areas, negotiation can lead to a fair balance being struck between different viewpoints. In the realm of 'high politics', typically defence and foreign affairs, the issues at stake are different political choices and perspectives that may be difficult to reconcile. The outcome of such negotiations is therefore not a fair balance but a consensus that leads to the lowest common denominator. However, even though the EEC has changed its name and developed a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the overall mode of operation has remained the same. Building a European defence

system using a framework and an administration designed to manage economic and social norms and standards is, in a sense, like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. This is fundamentally why a new instrument is needed.

The same argument can be made regarding the number and military capabilities of EU Member States. Indeed, successive rounds of enlargement took place according to criteria that have nothing to do with the ability to contribute to Europe's defence. By focusing on economic and legal integration, the Union has expanded to include small states without making this defence capability a membership criterion. This is entirely logical, as at the time these enlargements were decided, the division of roles between the institutions was clear: NATO dealt with security, the EU with the economy. The Union as it stands today is the product of this history. It would be a remarkable coincidence if the EU, conceived and built to manage economic issues and to define the rules of new membership around these issues, were also well suited to manage defence matters.

5. Outline of a new structure dedicated to European defence

The creation of this new structure would, in theory, be fairly straightforward. It would take the form of an alliance between European states.

The level of integration and the question of whether this new entity would be intergovernmental or supranational remain open. Looking to historical precedents, the first scenario would amount to recreating an enlarged Western European Union (WEU). The second would be closer to a revival of the European Defence Community project.

But what matters most is not 'what' it would be, but 'who' will be part of it. Building on the critique of a 27-member European Union, a selective approach seems necessary. Firstly, states deemed indispensable must be identified. They will form the core of the new entity. Then, other states may join if they share both the same vision of international relations and the same assessment of the security challenges facing Europe, along with the willingness to make the necessary budgetary and political choices to tackle them collectively.

Adopting this selective approach, four states whose participation is crucial can thus be identified: the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Poland. These four states include the two European nuclear powers, which also have the two most powerful and battle-hardened armed forces, the continent's economic leader, whose military expenditure accounts for almost a quarter of the EU's total, and Poland, which aspires to have the continent's leading land forces and already constitutes the spearhead of Europe's defence in the East. These four states alone account for 58 per cent of the combined defence budget of the

EU and the United Kingdom. Other states may be considered very useful, though not indispensable: Italy, Spain and Sweden. Sweden is particularly significant, both because of its strategic position on the Baltic Sea and its highly efficient arms industry. However, the absence of any one of these three states would not fundamentally hinder the overall structure. This core would naturally be joined by states with a pressing need for security. These states would therefore be willing to accept the framework established by the core states. This category includes all the Nordic and Baltic states: Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark. The Baltic and Scandinavian states would join the new structure out of fear of the Russian threat. Denmark would do so because of the American threat and, in the future, possibly a Russian or Chinese one, to Greenland. Romania might follow the same path in order to defend Moldova, a country threatened by Russia and with which Romania shares a common culture and history. Other states would certainly be useful, such as Belgium and the Netherlands, which have pioneered the merging of their navies. But none of them is essential.

Assuming a group comprising the four essential states (the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Poland), Italy and the eight members of the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8), this would bring together 13 states representing around three quarters of defence spending across the EU, the United Kingdom and

Norway², amounting to a total of 428 billion dollars in 2025. By way of comparison, Russia had a military budget of 190 billion dollars in the same year. But such a figure is reached at the height of a war economy that appears difficult to sustain. The critical mass therefore exists and, whilst it is certainly useful to further increase defence spending, the participation of other

European states is by no means essential.

Within this new structure, the right of veto, if it exists at all, should be limited to a few states. It could be restricted to two, namely France and the United Kingdom, or extended to the four states deemed indispensable: France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Poland.

² Iceland does not officially have a defence budget.