

# EU–NATO cooperation

## SUMMARY

The cooperation between the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has deepened significantly in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has reshaped Europe's security environment and highlighted the complementary roles of both organisations. NATO remains the cornerstone of collective defence, backed by United States (US) capabilities, while the EU has emerged as a key actor in financial aid, military assistance and sanctions. Both institutions have formalised their partnership through joint declarations and strategic documents, including NATO's Strategic Concept, the EU's Strategic Compass and White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030.

Practical cooperation now spans a wide range of areas including cyber defence, countering hybrid threats, military mobility, critical infrastructure protection, and joint crisis preparedness. Regular staff-level coordination, shared exercises, and technical arrangements – such as the NATO–EU task force on critical infrastructure – have improved resilience and interoperability. The EU has also significantly ramped up its defence role. It has delivered €50.8 billion in military aid to Ukraine (EU plus Member State contributions). It has introduced industrial policies such as EDIRPA, ASAP, and the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 plan to reinforce the European defence industrial base. Despite progress, persistent challenges remain. Political tensions – in particular between Cyprus and Türkiye – continue to block intelligence sharing and formal joint planning. The EU still relies heavily on NATO, particularly US assets, for operational capabilities. Growing uncertainty over US commitments under the second Trump Presidency has reinforced the EU's drive to strengthen strategic autonomy and ensure greater burden-sharing within NATO.

The European Parliament supports stronger, complementary EU–NATO ties focused on interoperability, resilience and avoiding duplication, while stressing the need for Europe to take greater responsibility for its own security. At the NATO summit on 24–25 June in The Hague (the Netherlands), key challenges include agreeing on higher defence spending targets, maintaining alliance unity, managing the Russia threat, and rapidly scaling up Europe's defence capabilities.



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## Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), established in 1949, is an alliance of 32 countries from Europe and North America committed to safeguarding the security and territory of its member states. It is based on the principle of collective defence: an attack against one ally is considered an attack against all (Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty). The EU is a key partner for NATO, with both organisations united by shared values, strategic priorities and overlapping membership. They collaborate closely on crisis management, capability development, countering hybrid threats, and responding to increasing strategic competition, among other areas. In addition, they work together to strengthen the capacities of their mutual partners in eastern and southern regions. They share 23 member states. Only four EU Member States (Ireland, Cyprus, Malta and Austria) are not NATO members.

## History of EU–NATO cooperation

While NATO's founding on 4 April 1949 is marked each year, it is often forgotten that a defence cooperation treaty between several European countries predates it. The 1948 [Treaty of Brussels](#) established the Western Union – an alliance between Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (UK). This treaty was revised in 1954 to become the Western European Union ([WEU](#)). Initially composed of the Western Union countries and later joined by Germany, Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal, the WEU functioned as a defensive alliance focused on collective defence and mutual military support. However, as NATO gradually [assumed](#) the role of Europe's primary security provider, the WEU became largely inactive, earning it the nickname 'sleeping beauty'. NATO's dominance was tacitly acknowledged in the WEU Treaty, which explicitly noted the undesirability of duplicating NATO's military command structures.

As the Cold War neared its end, a new phase in transatlantic relations and the global order began to take shape. In this context, efforts to enhance cooperation between the WEU and NATO were initiated in 1990. However, it soon became clear that NATO needed to redefine its primary mission. Rather than focusing on nuclear deterrence and conventional warfare against the Soviet threat in Europe, the alliance began to prioritise **crisis management and peacekeeping or enforcement operations**. NATO's [1991 Strategic Concept](#) reflected these significant changes in the European security landscape, particularly in relation to European integration. It explicitly welcomed an expanded role for the alliance's European members, noting that strengthening the European dimension would benefit both Europe and NATO as a whole.

In the 1990s, the EU's growing interest in security policy led to the adoption of the '[Petersberg tasks](#)', allowing WEU forces to carry out humanitarian, peacekeeping and crisis management missions. The WEU, backed by NATO, was seen as handling operations where the US did not want to be directly involved. In 1998, France and the UK agreed at [St Malo](#) that the EU needed its own crisis-response capability, leading to the creation of the common security and defence policy (CSDP). This marked a shift from the WEU to the EU in defence matters, balancing French ambitions for autonomy with British loyalty to NATO.

In the early 2000s, significant efforts were made to foster cooperation between the EU and NATO. The 2003 '[Berlin Plus](#)' agreement served as a foundational step towards establishing a closer and more structured partnership between the two organisations, allowing the EU to make use of NATO's resources and capabilities for its own crisis management missions. Despite progress in joint crisis management efforts during the early 2000s, the EU and NATO largely maintained **distinct focuses**: NATO handled collective defence and deterrence, while the EU concentrated on economic, social and regulatory development, as well as broader, non-military aspects of security. The '[peace dividend](#)' and the 2008 financial crisis contributed to reduced defence spending and a shift in political priorities. NATO's mission evolved accordingly, turning its attention to crisis management and out-of-area operations. But a series of disruptive events soon challenged this status quo: Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Brexit, the election of Donald Trump as US President

in 2016, and escalating threats from cyber and hybrid threats and a general global trend toward rearmament and increased military budgets. These developments affected both the EU and NATO.

A first joint [EU–NATO declaration](#), signed on 8 July 2016, formally recognised the organisations as essential partners in ensuring Euro–Atlantic security. The declaration was followed in December by 42 joint proposals [covering](#) key areas such as hybrid threats, cybersecurity, defence capabilities, industrial cooperation, joint exercises and capacity building. An additional 32 proposals were added in December 2017, addressing topics such as counter–terrorism, military mobility, and the Women, Peace and Security agenda. In July 2018, a [second joint declaration](#) reaffirmed the shared commitment to the original goals while acknowledging EU initiatives such as the European Defence Fund (EDF) as contributions to collective security. To monitor and evaluate these efforts, yearly progress reports are [published](#).

## The Russian war on Ukraine: New impetus for cooperation

The onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 [represented](#) a pivotal moment for both the EU and NATO. It reshaped Europe's security landscape significantly, compelling both organisations to reassess and reinforce their roles within it. In doing so, it also influenced the dynamics of their mutual relationship. In this context, the dominant characteristic of EU–NATO cooperation has been their **complementarity**, with each institution engaging in security-related actions that align with their institutional strengths. NATO's primary [mission](#) in this crisis has been to prevent Russia from escalating the war beyond Ukrainian borders and threatening the territory of NATO members. As a military alliance rooted in binding treaty commitments and supported by the capabilities of the US – including its nuclear deterrent – NATO remains the most credible actor in terms of providing collective defence for its members. This enduring relevance of the alliance in European defence matters was underscored by Finland's and Sweden's swift decisions to apply for NATO membership – and subsequently to join NATO – after the Russian invasion began; something that was [considered](#) unlikely prior to the war, given those countries' history of neutrality.

The Russian invasion has prompted NATO to further consolidate its strategic orientation around **deterrence and defence**. Since the 2022 [Madrid NATO Summit](#), in particular, the alliance has taken several significant steps to bolster its posture on the eastern flank, including increasing the number of [forward-deployed forces and developing new regional defence plans](#). The summit's most important outcome was the adoption of NATO's new (eighth) [strategic concept](#) – a document that sets out the alliance's strategy and outlines its defence and deterrence posture, its core tasks and the security challenges it faces. The new concept states that the EU is a 'unique and essential partner for NATO'. A new [force model](#) has been introduced, aimed at scaling up the number of troops capable of rapid deployment from the previous target of 40 000 to 300 000. Moreover, NATO has revised its approach to **defence spending** by [clarifying](#) that the 2 % of gross domestic product (GDP) target should be seen as a minimum threshold rather than a maximum goal, indicating a more robust and consistent commitment to defence investment across the alliance.

Nonetheless, NATO's direct involvement in [supporting Ukraine](#) has remained limited. Most allies are cautious about actions that could lead the alliance to become a formal party to the conflict, which could escalate tensions with Russia. As such, NATO's assistance has largely been limited to strong political support and [non-lethal aid](#) through NATO, including training, strategic advice, capacity-building and equipment to support defence reform and NATO interoperability (NATO allies provide significant military aid bilaterally and through the EU, see below). At the 2024 [Washington NATO Summit](#), NATO allies [agreed](#) to create the NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU) initiative to coordinate the delivery of military equipment and training by allies and partners. They also unveiled a long-term security assistance pledge for Ukraine, [agreeing](#) to collectively contribute at least €40 billion over the following year through proportional funding. This target was surpassed, with over €50 billion provided in 2024 – of which nearly 60 % from European allies and Canada. NATO has also continued to play a role in Ukraine's long-term security sector reform and capacity-building through its pre-existing frameworks of cooperation. Although NATO

has officially acknowledged that Ukraine's future lies within the alliance, there remains no unified agreement among its members on when and how this membership should materialise.

The EU has imposed unprecedented [sanctions](#) against Russia. In parallel, it has [facilitated](#) the integration and resettlement of millions of Ukrainian refugees, provided [substantial humanitarian](#) and [macro-financial assistance](#), and [opened](#) the door to Ukraine's future accession to the EU. A key institutional difference between the EU and NATO is that the EU has a substantial [annual budget](#): in 2025, total commitments are set at €192 million, while total payments amount to €149 million, excluding the appropriations allocated to special instruments outside the multiannual financial framework (MFF). This includes funding for defence through initiatives such as the European Defence Fund. NATO, by contrast, relies on limited common funding mechanisms [totalling](#) some €4-5 billion annually through direct or indirect member contributions. While NATO has launched targeted tools such as DIANA, these do not amount to a redistributive budget such as the EU's.

The EU has also stepped up its efforts in defence: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has served as a stark warning to the EU, underscoring the pressing need to improve its ability to respond, increase both the quantity and quality of defence spending, reinforce its military capabilities, and strengthen its defence industry – priorities outlined in the [Versailles Declaration](#) and the [Strategic Compass](#), a concrete plan of action for the EU's security and defence until 2030. In response, EU Member States have significantly boosted their collective defence budgets, reaching [€326 billion](#) in 2024, up from around €218 billion in 2021. An extra €100 billion is [expected](#) by 2027.

Days after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, EU Member States agreed to jointly fund the delivery of lethal weapons to Ukraine. This support is financed through the European Peace Facility ([EPF](#)), an off-budget instrument with a total [value](#) of €17 billion, which includes a dedicated Ukraine Assistance Fund (UAF). As of June 2025, €6.1 billion has been allocated to Ukraine through the EPF. When national bilateral contributions from Member States are added, the total [support](#) rises to €50.8 billion. EU and NATO members coordinate weapons deliveries within the Ukraine Defence Contact Group ([UDCG](#)), also referred to as the Ramstein group, which is a coalition of 57 countries – including all 32 NATO member states, 25 additional nations and the EU – united in support of Ukraine's defence following Russia's 2022 invasion. The group convenes monthly to coordinate the continual delivery of military assistance. On 21 May 2024, the Council [approved](#) the use of windfall profits from frozen Russian assets to further support Ukraine militarily, strengthen its defence industry and assist in reconstruction efforts. In addition, the EU Military Assistance Mission ([EUMAM](#)) Ukraine, established in November 2022, provides individual, collective and specialised training to Ukrainian forces, coordinating efforts across Member States. To date, over 75 000 Ukrainian troops have received training under the mission.

The EU has also stepped up efforts to enhance defence industry cooperation and investment through several initiatives. These include the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act ([EDIRPA](#)), designed to promote collaborative defence procurement. To address rising demand, the Act in Support of Ammunition Production ([ASAP](#)) aims to ramp up the production of ammunition and missiles. In March 2024, the Commission unveiled its first European Defence Industrial Strategy ([EDIS](#)), intended to maximise the potential of the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). It also put forward a proposal for a European defence industry programme ([EDIP](#)), which is meant to serve as a bridge between short-term tools such as EDIRPA and a longer-term plan to strengthen the EU's defence readiness. In April 2025, the European Parliament [adopted](#) its position and agreed to begin negotiations with the Council, which has yet to reach a general approach.

On 4 March 2025, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, [unveiled](#) the **ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030**, a five-point strategy designed to significantly increase defence spending and enhance EU Member States' military capabilities. A central feature of the plan is the Security Action for Europe ([SAFE](#)) instrument, which offers up to €150 billion in EU-backed loans to support national defence investments. SAFE was [adopted](#) in May 2025. The plan also recommends activating the stability and growth pact's national escape clause to permit greater

defence spending (16 Member States have so far [activated](#) the clause), allowing the use of cohesion funds for defence purposes, and mobilising private capital through the European Investment Bank and the savings and investment union. EU leaders welcomed the initiative. Also in March 2025, the Commission released the [White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030](#), focusing on closing capability gaps and reinforcing Europe's defence industrial base. It encourages joint procurement of military equipment and identifies seven priority areas: (i) air and missile defence; (ii) artillery; (iii) ammunition and missiles; (iv) drone systems; (v) military mobility; (vi) emerging technologies (artificial intelligence (AI), quantum, cyber and electronic warfare); and (vii) strategic enablers, including infrastructure, such as airlift, refuelling, maritime surveillance and space asset protection. The white paper sets out proposals for deepening support for Ukraine, expanding joint investment in defence, fostering strategic partnerships and improving overall readiness. It emphasises that NATO remains the cornerstone of collective defence in Europe, with EU–NATO cooperation being essential and complementary. The EU supports Member States in meeting NATO capability targets through regulatory and financial tools, joint procurement and infrastructure investment. The paper calls for closer coordination to address shared defence gaps and strengthen transatlantic ties, in line with the US expectation that Europe take greater responsibility for its own security.

According to an [expert](#), taken together, these developments demonstrate that the war in Ukraine has underlined the essential and complementary roles of both NATO and the EU in safeguarding European security. It has also made clear that the boundaries between their roles are not as distinct as previously assumed. While each institution retains its specific strengths, their areas of activity increasingly intersect, necessitating closer coordination. However, despite the increased urgency of cooperation, the war has not fundamentally changed the nature of the EU–NATO relationship; there has nevertheless been substantial progress.

## Strengthening ties amid structural frictions

There has been a notable [increase](#) in **joint activity and dialogue**. For example, representatives from both organisations now participate more frequently in each other's summits and working meetings. Staff-level coordination has also been enhanced in several key areas, including a dedicated [NATO–EU coordination cell on Ukraine](#) and a [joint task force addressing the resilience of critical infrastructure](#). The intention to strengthen EU–NATO ties is also reflected in strategic documents adopted by both institutions. The EU's [Strategic Compass](#), published in March 2022, calls for an enhanced EU–NATO partnerships, and NATO's [Strategic Concept](#), released in June of the same year, mirrors this, underlining that the EU 'is a unique and essential partner for NATO'. It also recognised that stronger EU defence will contribute to transatlantic security. In January 2023, a [third joint EU–NATO declaration on cooperation](#) was issued. This document laid out an ambitious vision for expanding the partnership into new and evolving areas, such as geostrategic competition, resilience, the protection of critical infrastructure, space, emerging and disruptive technologies, climate-related security risks, and foreign information manipulation and interference. While leaders such as Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda have [praised](#) the declaration as a 'highly important manifesto' that strengthens the strategic partnership between NATO and the EU and signals strong transatlantic unity, [others](#) regard it as largely symbolic. Indeed, an [expert](#) has noted 'NATO–EU declarations still bear a 1990s flavour, failing to establish clear priorities, and to afford deterrence the centrality it deserves'.

Despite these formal declarations and new frameworks, many of the **longstanding sensitivities and institutional limitations** that have traditionally constrained EU–NATO cooperation continue.

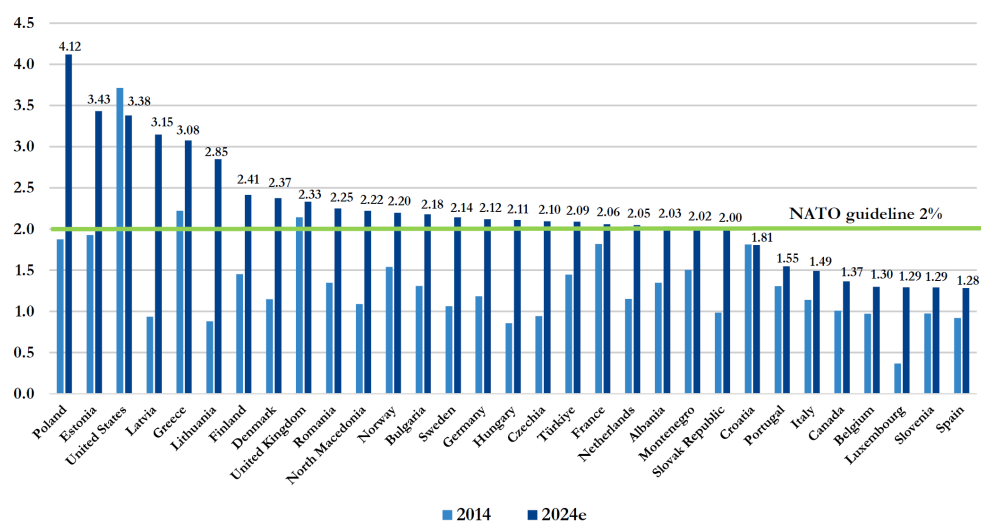
- Political tensions – particularly the Cyprus–Türkiye dispute – undermine collaboration. Türkiye, a NATO member, blocks formal cooperation with the EU, limiting information-sharing and joint planning.
- Strategic differences over Europe's defence role cause friction. The EU's push for 'strategic autonomy' has been [viewed](#) by some NATO allies, notably the US and eastern European countries, as a threat to NATO's centrality.

- Institutional limitations hinder integration: despite overlapping membership, the EU and NATO [lack](#) a **formal framework for intelligence sharing or coordinated command structures** because of the Cyprus–Türkiye issue.
- Geographic priorities also diverge: NATO focuses on collective defence, particularly in eastern Europe, as the alliance was created to fend off an invasion of Europe by the Soviet Union, while the EU [addresses](#) much broader security issues.
- Differing memberships – e.g. NATO includes members such as Canada, Iceland, Norway, Türkiye, the UK and the US, while the EU includes Ireland, Cyprus, Malta and Austria – create coordination problems.
- Operationally, the EU [lacks military capabilities](#) and relies heavily on NATO, in particular US assets, for nuclear deterrence, logistics, surveillance and mobility. This is strongly connected to the perennial issue of '[burden sharing](#)' within the alliance. The NATO burden-sharing dilemma centres on how defence costs and responsibilities are distributed among member states. The US has long criticised European allies for under-contributing.

## Defence spending

In 2014, NATO members committed to spending at least 2 % of GDP on defence by 2024. In 2021, only [seven](#) of the 21 Member States that were also NATO members spent 2 % of GDP on defence. EU Member States have chronically [under-invested](#) in defence for decades. During the Cold War, many European countries – including Germany, France and the Netherlands – allocated between 3 % and 4 % of their GDP to defence. Today, some countries such as the Baltic States, Greece and Poland have returned to or surpassed those levels, while Nordic countries are rapidly increasing their spending (see Figure 1). By 2022, the EU's total annual defence budgets had already [risen](#) to €240 billion. In 2023, Member States collectively spent €279 billion on defence (1.6 % of GDP), increasing further to €326 billion in 2024 (1.9 % of GDP).

Figure 1 – Defence expenditure as a share of GDP (%) (based on 2015 prices and exchange rates)



Source: [NATO](#), Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2024), press release, 2024.

Overall, defence spending grew by over 30 % in real terms between 2021 and 2024, with projections indicating more than €100 billion in additional real-term spending by 2027. Among the 23 EU countries that are also NATO members, defence expenditure reached 1.99 % of their combined GDP in 2024, with expectations to surpass 2.04 % in 2025. Across NATO's 32 members, 23 were

anticipated to hit the 2 % GDP target in 2024, including 16 EU countries. However, others [remain](#) significantly below.

Despite these very significant increases, the US is pushing for a higher defence spending target, proposing up to 5 % of GDP under the second Trump administration. In 2024, the US is estimated to have spent US\$967 billion, equivalent to 3.38 % of its GDP. The NATO Secretary General, Mark Rutte, has [written](#) to all NATO members, stating that he expects the alliance to commit, at the June 2025 summit, to spending 3.5 % of GDP on core military capabilities by 2032, along with an additional 1.5 % on related areas such as infrastructure and cybersecurity, to be achieved by 2032, as well. NATO defence ministers [met](#) in Brussels on 5 June 2025 to adopt updated capability targets (classified), setting short- and medium-term goals to strengthen collective defence. Meeting these targets will require increased defence spending (see above), which was also discussed in preparation for the NATO Summit in The Hague. Ministers signed a joint declaration to enhance security cooperation in the Baltic Sea region, and called for deeper EU–NATO cooperation. The NATO–Ukraine Council also met. NATO's Secretary General reaffirmed continued allied support, highlighting over €20 billion in additional security assistance pledged in 2025. He welcomed further commitments made at the UDCG meeting the day before.

Critics [argue](#) that assessing equal burden-sharing solely through defence budgets ignores other contributions. Some [analysts](#) advocate reframing the debate as 'responsibility-sharing' to reflect broader contributions, such as hosting bases and troop contributions, beyond budgets. The NATO burden-sharing issue affects EU–NATO cooperation directly. The US shift in its stance on Ukraine and Europe and strong pressure on its NATO allies has [strained](#) political trust, triggering [calls](#) for European defence autonomy and contingency planning. Operationally, uneven defence investments can hinder joint missions and reduce readiness, particularly in crisis response or cyber defence. A coordinated, balanced [approach](#) to burden-sharing is deemed essential for stronger EU–NATO cooperation.

## EU–NATO cooperation in a changing transatlantic context

During a 2024 campaign rally, President Trump [declared](#) he would not defend NATO allies failing to meet the alliance's defence spending target of 2 % of GDP (this was prior to the push for 5 %). He further stated that he would 'encourage' Russia to 'do whatever the hell they want' to such countries, calling on members to 'pay your bills'. Trump's remarks have intensified concerns about the US commitment to NATO and the principle of collective defence. Then NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg responded by warning that any suggestion of not defending allies undermines the security of all members, including the US, and increases risks for both American and European soldiers. Trump has also [suggested](#) repositioning US troops to countries that meet defence spending targets. These moves have raised concerns about Washington's commitment to NATO's Article 5 mutual defence clause, [unsettled](#) many European governments, who view them as undermining the alliance's credibility and cohesion, and led to the significant steps taken on EU defence initiatives described above – an issue that has been rendered all the more important given President Trump's stance on the Ukraine war.

Giuseppe Spatafora of the EUISS [warns](#) that Donald Trump's return could severely weaken NATO by reducing US commitments, risking greater Russian aggression and internal EU divisions. While Europe is not yet ready to fill the gap, EU leaders are reinforcing NATO cooperation rather than pursuing strategic autonomy. Spatafora proposes three responses: assess which capabilities would be most affected by US disengagement; invest in key areas such as Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), cyber and air defence; and adopt a unified 'one-theatre' approach linking the Euro-Atlantic, Middle East and Indo-Pacific. Crucially, he stresses the need for significantly higher EU defence spending to uphold credibility with NATO and the US.

Sven Biscop of the Egmont Institute [urges](#) the EU to act independently – supporting Ukraine, boosting its own defence, and preparing to respond to threats without US backing. Europe must

choose: abandon Ukraine or take charge of its strategic future. Biscop further contends that Europe must take full responsibility for its conventional defence by acquiring capabilities previously provided by the US and making operational use of NATO's command structure. He advocates European autonomy within NATO, particularly in guaranteeing Ukraine's security, and insists that a European coalition must be ready to act if Russia attacks again – regardless of US participation. With the US no longer a guaranteed ally, Europe faces historic choices: to abandon Ukraine or stand by it, and in doing so, define its strategic destiny. In this context, Spatafora [outlines](#) two possible Trump trajectories: full US disengagement from Europe or using abandonment as a bargaining chip. Either scenario would fracture NATO and increase Europe's vulnerability. The EU must, the expert argues, build an independent deterrent and deepen EU–NATO cooperation, particularly on Ukraine.

Jamie Shea, former NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General, [notes](#) that Europe is better prepared than in 2016 but still faces daunting challenges. He stresses that EU rearmament must move beyond ad-hoc coalitions and invest seriously in defence industry and civil-military resilience. Europe, Shea insists, must plan now for a potential US exit from Ukraine, and take ownership of the endgame. Alexandra de Hoop Scheffer, President of the German Marshall Fund, [argues](#) that President Trump's demands could be used to accelerate European defence investment. While buying US weapons may bridge shortfalls, the focus should be on building domestic industrial capacity. A 3.5 % defence spending target could be a realistic compromise, but fiscal and political costs would be high. Finally, Rosa Balfour, Director of Carnegie Europe, [calls](#) this Europe's gravest moment since World War II. With US disengagement accelerating, she argues for a strong, 'Europeanised NATO' supported by deeper economic and defence integration. However, internal fragmentation, far-right political pressures and weak institutions threaten the EU's ability to act decisively. For Balfour, Europe's challenge is not capacity but leadership.

### NATO Article 5 vs Article 42(7) TEU

NATO's collective defence is anchored in [Article 5](#) of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states that an attack on one member is regarded as an attack on all. However, the Lisbon Treaty also includes a mutual defence clause in [Article 42\(7\)](#) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), requiring EU Member States to offer 'aid and assistance by all means in their power' to any Member State that falls victim to armed aggression on its territory. Article 42(7) TEU and NATO Article 5 [differ](#) in wording, threshold and scope. Article 42(7) is seen by some as more strongly worded, requiring Member States to assist using all means in their power, unlike NATO's Article 5, which allows each country to decide what action is necessary. The threshold to invoke Article 42(7) (armed aggression) may be lower than for Article 5 (armed attack), although some argue this difference may result from translation rather than legal intent. Lastly, Article 42(7) allows opt-outs for neutral EU countries such as Ireland, Malta and Austria, while NATO's Article 5 applies equally to all members.

## Areas of Cooperation

The EU and NATO [cooperate](#) in a wide range of areas, as outlined in the three EU–NATO joint declarations (2016, 2018, 2023) covering 74 common proposals for concrete action. Cooperation spans across several strategic areas, reflecting an increasingly structured and pragmatic partnership (Figure 2 below). Efforts to **counter hybrid and terrorist threats** centre on developing shared situational awareness and enhancing collective resilience against future crises. **Staff-to-staff consultations** have increased to enhance cooperation between the two organisations and prevent overlap in their efforts. The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats ([Hybrid CoE](#)), based in Helsinki (Finland), serves as a platform for dialogue between NATO and the EU, fostering closer ties between them. In the field of **defence capabilities**, both organisations work to improve the coherence of their respective development processes. Twenty-three NATO allies are also EU Member States, each with limited resources and a single set of forces, making interoperability between NATO and EU defence capabilities a shared priority. Efforts are ongoing to align the EU's Capability Development Plan, Headline Goal Process and Coordinated Annual Review on Defence with NATO's Defence Planning and Review Processes, supported by joint meetings and staff coordination. EU and NATO staff also collaborate on capability development through EU

defence initiatives and [NATO's High Visibility Projects](#). Russia's war against Ukraine has further intensified joint work on munitions and on replenishing stockpiles. During his confirmation hearing, Defence Commissioner Kūbilius [announced](#) a strong focus on standardisation, including EU Member States' adoption of NATO standards and alignment on certification. **Cybersecurity and cyber-defence cooperation** [includes](#) information-sharing, partner capacity-building, and joint cyber exercises and training. Lastly, both organisations conduct parallel and coordinated exercises to boost crisis preparedness and overall resilience. EU and NATO personnel maintain regular dialogue on cybersecurity and defence policy developments to ensure a shared understanding of the threat landscape. This cooperation also covers cyber crisis management, response mechanisms, and capacity-building efforts for partner countries. Both organisations take part in each other's cyber-defence exercises, including those led by the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence ([CCDCOE](#)) in Tallinn (Estonia). Ongoing exchanges involve doctrines, concepts, training and education – particularly between the EU Military Staff and NATO's International Military Staff. A Technical Arrangement between the NATO Cyber Security Centre (formerly NATO Computer Incident Response Capability) and CERT-EU facilitates structured information sharing and the exchange of best practice between their respective response teams. They also assist **partners in building capacity and strengthening resilience**, with a focus on the Western Balkans and the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood.

Figure 2 – Areas of EU–NATO cooperation



Source: Compiled by the author, 2025; graphic by Stéphanie Pradier, EPRS.

Facilitating **military mobility** across Europe has [become](#) a flagship area of EU–NATO cooperation. The US and several other non-EU NATO allies have joined the EU's [PESCO project](#) on military mobility, which has now become a flagship initiative of EU–NATO cooperation. Following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, it became clear that NATO lacked the tools to move troops and equipment swiftly across Europe. The EU's regulatory and logistical capacities have since proven essential in addressing this gap. Key examples of cooperation include a joint agreement on military requirements and the alignment of customs forms (notably Form 302) to ease cross-border movements. Regular exchanges, briefings and the launch of a structured dialogue in 2018 have

helped ensure coherence, avoid duplication and strengthen trust. It has facilitated coordinated EU–NATO discussions on shared priorities – including infrastructure, customs and host-nation support – while consultations intensified on key corridors, energy security and fuel logistics, with joint participation in major conferences and briefings. **Cooperation on Defence Industry and Emerging Disruptive Technologies** is also a key area. The third joint declaration stresses concrete progress in defence industry cooperation and a commitment to deepen it. The [ninth progress report](#) on EU–NATO cooperation (June 2024) confirms continued dialogue on industrial issues, alongside new initiatives such as NATO's Defence Production Action Plan and the EU's EDIP, with EDIS promoting structured staff exchanges on shared priorities. Emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs) are now a key focus for both the EU and NATO, as reflected in the Strategic Compass, NATO's Strategic Concept and the third EU–NATO joint declaration. NATO has significantly advanced in this area through the creation of [DIANA](#), an independent entity with its own legal and financial structure, which supports innovation. NATO has also endorsed an [EDT strategy](#). DIANA is complemented by the [NATO Innovation Fund](#), a €1 billion, 15-year initiative enabling government investment in defence-related innovation. In July 2024, the fund [formalised](#) a partnership with the European Investment Fund to enhance support for start-ups, small and medium-sized enterprises and midcaps in defence, security and resilience.

**Operational cooperation** is supported through the exchange of information on missions and the pursuit of greater coordination. NATO and the WEU began coordinating operations in the early 1990s. In 1992, their naval and air patrols jointly enforced the UN embargo against Yugoslavia, later unified under Operation Sharp Guard in 1993 with a single command. NATO's first major crisis response followed in 1995 with IFOR and SFOR in Bosnia. In 2004, the EU took over with Operation Althea under the Berlin Plus arrangements, using NATO assets and command from SHAPE. The [Commander](#) of Operation Althea also serves as the Vice-Chief of Staff at SHAPE, where the EU Operation Headquarters is based. SHAPE is NATO's strategic command for operations. This marked continuity in personnel and operations despite shifting political control. A similar transition occurred in North Macedonia, where NATO's Operation Allied Harmony became the EU's Operation Concordia in 2003.

To support ongoing cooperation, permanent military liaison teams were established: NATO at the EU Military Staff (since 2005) and the EU at SHAPE (since 2006). In maritime security, the EU's Operation Sophia (2015–2020) coordinated with NATO's Sea Guardian, focusing on shared situational awareness and logistical support. This cooperation continues under Operation IRINI. Elsewhere, both organisations are active in the Middle East. NATO supports the [Global Coalition against Daesh](#), while the EU participates as a civilian partner. In Iraq, the EU ([EUAM Iraq](#)) and NATO ([NMI](#)) run parallel advisory and training missions, with efforts aligned in areas such as security sector reform, governance and crisis management. The EU and NATO were central actors in the international mission to stabilise Afghanistan. NATO's ISAF, and later the Resolute Support Mission (RSM), cooperated with the EU's EUPOL mission (2007–2016), which advised on police reform and supported the Afghan Ministry of Interior. The EU also promoted justice reforms and co-funded civilian initiatives within NATO-led Provincial Reconstruction Teams led by EU countries. In April 2021, NATO agreed to begin withdrawing RSM troops from 1 May, officially ending the mission in September 2021. Furthermore, for several years, NATO's [Operation Ocean Shield](#) (2009–2016) and the EU's [Operation Atalanta](#) operated alongside each other and other international partners off the coast of Somalia to combat piracy.

**Joint exercises and training** are [recognised](#) as key tools for fostering shared experience and aligning operational practices. Indeed, since 2016, EU and NATO leaders have formally included exercises in their cooperation agenda. These activities aim to strengthen direct engagement between personnel, while also boosting resilience and reinforcing mutual trust. NATO and the EU have deepened their cooperation in crisis management exercises, enhancing both organisations' resilience and readiness. In 2022–2023, they implemented the Plan for Implementation of Parallel and Coordinated Exercises ([PACE](#)), which facilitated NATO staff involvement in the planning and

execution of the EU's Integrated Resolve exercise ([PACE22](#)). In turn, personnel from the European Commission, the Council of the EU and the European External Action Service contributed to NATO's 2023 crisis management exercise (PACE23). The PACE framework for 2024–2025 was agreed in February 2024. In relation to NATO military exercises, the EU institutions [took part](#) in [STEADFAST JUPITER](#) 2023 and [STEADFAST JACKAL](#) 2023, [STEADFAST DETERRENCE](#) 2024 and [STEADFAST DAGGER](#) 2024.

**Political dialogue** remains a key tool for fostering mutual understanding, building trust and ensuring transparency. NATO and the EU hold regular meetings at multiple levels – ministers, ambassadors, military officials and advisers – to address shared concerns. Staff-to-staff contacts span NATO and key EU bodies such as the EEAS, European Commission, EDA and European Parliament. Dedicated dialogues cover resilience, military mobility, space, cyber, climate-related defence issues and new technologies. Coordination has deepened since Russia's war on Ukraine, with joint briefings and updates by senior officials. NATO leaders also brief key EU committees, while military staff from both sides co-chair meetings to align activities and priorities. For instance, the NATO Secretary General participated in the June 2023 European Council meeting and a November 2023 meeting of the College of Commissioners, and the Presidents of the European Council and European Commission [attended](#) the NATO Summit in Vilnius in July. In May 2024, NATO took part in the EU Schuman Security and Defence Forum and was present at the EU–Ukraine Defence Industries Forum. In October 2024, the EU and NATO [agreed](#) to establish a new high-level task force to enhance existing EU–NATO cooperation. In May 2025, EU and NATO ambassadors – the EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC) and NATO'S North Atlantic Council (NAC) – [met](#) for the first time since 2022 to boost joint support for Ukraine, focusing on defence cooperation, military aid, and Ukraine's reform and integration efforts.

The evolving security landscape has brought renewed attention to **civil preparedness and societal resilience**. NATO and the EU have stepped up cooperation in this area to reduce vulnerabilities and improve military mobility, including better coordination of cross-border laws and procedures, particularly for transporting hazardous materials. To strengthen these efforts, the then NATO Secretary General and the President of the European Commission launched a [Task Force on Resilience and Critical Infrastructure Protection](#) in January 2023. The group sought to assess current security risks, and highlight the need for resilience in sectors such as energy, transport, digital networks and space. Its [Final Assessment Report](#), published in June 2023, set out key recommendations to bolster NATO–EU collaboration, including enhanced information sharing, identifying alternative routes for civilian and military movement, and closer cooperation on security-related research.

Many experts [stress](#) the importance of a clear division of labour between the two organisations. One opinion [voiced](#) is that, as NATO remains the cornerstone of collective defence, the EU should focus on resilience against non-military threats. Others [argue](#) that a division of labour 'may seem rational ... [but] it would not work'. An expert from the Finnish Institute for International Affairs [argues](#) that while dividing NATO and EU roles neatly may seem logical, it is unrealistic and potentially counterproductive because of their distinct memberships and mandates. Instead, both organisations will continue adapting, often into overlapping areas such as cyber defence and hybrid threats. Such overlaps are not necessarily harmful and may be preferable to leaving gaps. NATO offers military expertise, while the EU brings economic and regulatory tools. However, real synergy requires more than parallel efforts – structured cooperation and joint planning are essential to addressing Europe's evolving security challenges effectively. One analyst has [suggested](#) several initiatives to strengthen NATO–EU cooperation: (i) reviving the Eurogroup of Defence Ministers to prepare for NATO North Atlantic Council meetings; (ii) establishing a transatlantic defence technology and industrial forum to improve coordination on capability development and procurement across NATO, the EU and individual states; and (iii) enhancing interoperability by incorporating the EU's Rapid Deployment Capacity into NATO exercises and operations. Another [analyst](#) argues that NATO should leverage the EU's regulatory authority, while the EU should refine

its regulations by drawing on NATO's strengths in strategic airlift and operational experience. The EU should concentrate on its regulatory and funding capabilities, aligning with and implementing NATO's standards and requirements. In terms of operational cooperation, experts advocate more frequent meetings between NATO's NAC and the EU's PSC, with certain agenda items [escalated](#) to Coreper when needed. The need for secure information sharing between NATO and the EU is widely acknowledged, although progress remains hindered by the unresolved Cyprus issue. Luis Simón of Elcano Royal Institute [argues](#) that EU–NATO cooperation must shift toward deterring Russian aggression and supporting Ukraine. He urges both organisations to move beyond outdated frameworks, align their strengths and better integrate EU defence efforts into NATO planning. He also stresses the need to respond to US expectations for Europe to take more responsibility for its own security.

## European Parliament position

The European Parliament has consistently supported stronger EU–NATO cooperation. It is the [only](#) EU institution that has a formal relationship with a NATO body. In particular, Parliament – through its Delegation for relations with the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (PA) – may present draft reports (on invitation) and texts in NATO's PA. Parliament's April 2025 resolution on the implementation of CSDP [stresses](#) the importance of a strong, complementary EU–NATO partnership based on transparency, reciprocity and inclusiveness. It supports deeper cooperation in areas such as capability development, military mobility and hybrid threat response, while avoiding duplication. The resolution calls for enhanced coordination between the EU High Representative and NATO Secretary General, welcomes Finland and Sweden's NATO accession, and highlights progress under the joint declarations and implementation reports to strengthen interoperability and collective defence across both organisations. At a plenary [debate](#) on 18 June 2025 ahead of the 2025 NATO Summit, MEPs clashed over defence spending, strategic autonomy and support for Ukraine. While centrist and liberal factions pushed for stronger defence integration and transatlantic unity, others decried the militarisation of the EU and the financial burden on citizens.

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