

# NATO and European Defence during the Trump Administration: A Stocktaking

by Alessandro Marrone

## ABSTRACT

Donald Trump's administration has approached NATO with two key priorities: increasing defence spending among member states, and decoupling the fate of Ukraine from that of the Atlantic Alliance by pursuing a settlement with Russia to end the conflict. Meanwhile, Moscow continues its war of aggression, aimed not only at occupying the neighbouring country but at altering the European security architecture to the detriment of both NATO and the European Union. The combination of these two elements – the Russian threat in the east and the shift in American strategic posture in the west – has led European countries to take unprecedented decisions regarding investment in their own armed forces also by using EU financial toolbox. However, there are no real plans for a European defence, either militarily or politically, and NATO remains the best available framework for the deterrence and defence of Europe vis-à-vis the Russian threat through a stronger European leadership in the Alliance.

*NATO | European Union | Ukraine | Defence budget | Defence industry |  
Transatlantic relations | Italian military policy*

**keywords**

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by Alessandro Marrone\*

## 1. A NATO with less America

Trump's second Administration has pursued a NATO agenda based on two assumptions. The first is a deep scepticism towards multilateral organisations and enduring alliances that entail structural and long-term commitments for the United States, and a corresponding preference for bilateral relationships that can be flexibly and swiftly redefined through top-level political negotiations. The second is a deep-rooted belief, widely shared by the American public and electorate, that European countries have taken advantage of the American security umbrella for too many decades, thereby saving on defence spending. On the basis of these assumptions, the Trump Administration's agenda within the Atlantic Alliance includes two key points: increased defence budgets as a condition for the continued validity of NATO's collective defence, and the pursuit of negotiations with Russia and Ukraine even at the cost of significant concessions by the latter. These two themes have become central points of political debate among the allies, while the southern flank of the Atlantic Alliance continues to be deprioritised – in line with the 2022 Strategic Concept<sup>1</sup> and the past three years of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which have pushed NATO to focus primarily on collective deterrence and defence.<sup>2</sup>

Concerning military spending, numerous statements by President Trump and Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth have pointed to a target of 5 per cent of GDP for defence, compared with the current 2 per cent threshold. A threshold which was surpassed in 2024 by 23 out of 32 member states – with the exceptions being Italy,

<sup>1</sup> See on this regard: Alessandro Marrone, "NATO's New Strategic Concept: Novelties and Priorities", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 22|20 (July 2022), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/15667>.

<sup>2</sup> Alessandro Marrone (ed.), *Russia-Ukraine War's Strategic Implications*, Rome, IAI, February 2024, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18118>.

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Spain, Canada, Belgium, Portugal, Croatia, Slovenia and Luxembourg.<sup>3</sup> Further negotiations among allies led to the decision by NATO Defence Ministers on 5 June 2025 to propose "to invest 5% of GDP in defence, including 3.5% on core defence spending, as well as 1.5% of GDP per year on defence and security-related investment, including in infrastructure and resilience".<sup>4</sup>

The request for European allies to invest more in their armed forces has been made, in varying tones, by nearly every American administration since NATO was established in 1949. The major difference introduced by the Trump Administration lies in its harsh, explicit and repeated threat not to defend allied countries that fail to meet national military spending targets in the event of a Russian attack against them.<sup>5</sup> A threat reiterated several times both before and after the 2024 presidential election, and seriously taken into account particularly by member states in Central Eastern and Northern Europe, which are deeply concerned about the likelihood of a Russian aggression. The NATO summit of heads of state and government, scheduled for 24-25 June 2025 in The Hague, will likely serve to establish a new shared target for national military spending and the timeline for achieving it, in order to preserve the credibility and effectiveness of collective deterrence and defence.

These latter continue to be substantiated militarily through two elements. First, the implementation of regional plans for the eastern flank, whereby Italy plays an important role particularly for South-Eastern Europe. Second, through the increase in size of several of the multinational forces already deployed under the Enhanced Forward Presence and Enhanced Vigilance Activity – from battalion level (about 1,000–1,500 troops) to brigade level (up to 5,000 troops) – across eight member states from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. In particular, Germany has announced a rise of its military presence in Lithuania, and Italy in Bulgaria.

Another key component of the allied posture for deterrence and collective defence is the New NATO Force Model, which foresees the deployment of 100,000 troops to the eastern flank within ten days, up to 200,000 within thirty days, and as many as half a million within six months (including the previous waves). The bulk of these troops is expected to come from European countries and Canada, placing pressure on all major Western European states to prepare armed forces fit for NATO requirements in both quantity and quality terms. The pressure is especially acute for Italy,<sup>6</sup> which deploys its armed forces not only for military tasks in

<sup>3</sup> NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)*, 17 June 2024, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_226465.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_226465.htm).

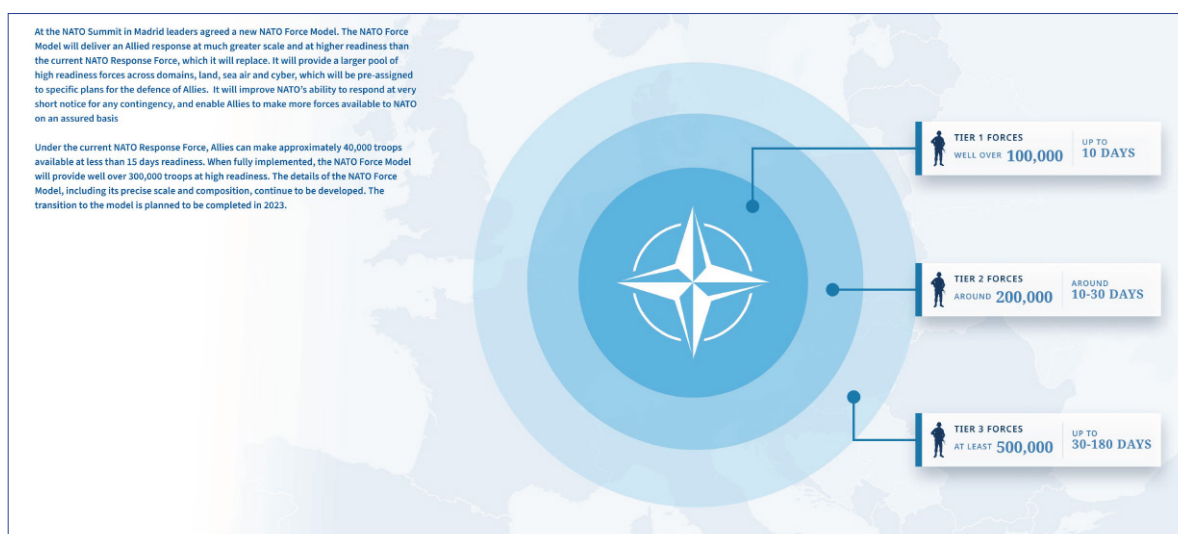
<sup>4</sup> NATO, *NATO Defence Ministers Agree New Capability Targets to Strengthen the Alliance*, 5 June 2025, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_235900.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_235900.htm).

<sup>5</sup> "Trump Casts Doubt on Willingness to Defend NATO Allies 'If They Don't Pay'", in *The Guardian*, 7 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xytyb>.

<sup>6</sup> See in this regard, among others: Alessandro Marrone and Gaia Ravazzolo, "NATO e Italia nel 75° anniversario dell'Alleanza: prospettive oltre il Vertice di Washington", in *Focus euroatlantico*, No. 5 (January-May 2024), p. 67-90, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18554>.

missions abroad – around 7,600 troops as of 2025<sup>7</sup> – but also (almost uniquely in Europe) in a domestic policing role, with 5,000 army units currently assigned to the *Strade Sicure* (“Safe Streets”) operation.<sup>8</sup> In this context, Trump has not taken strong positions regarding the operational aspects of NATO’s posture, which his administration presumably supports to the extent that a greater European military role alleviates the burden on American forces stationed in Europe.

**Figure 1** | New NATO Force Model



Source: NATO, *The New NATO Force Model* (infographic), 29 June 2022, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220629-infographic-new-nato-force-model.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220629-infographic-new-nato-force-model.pdf).

## 2. Why Ukraine matters to NATO

The second central point of the Trump Administration’s NATO agenda – namely negotiations to bring an end to the Russia–Ukraine conflict – is crucial for the Atlantic Alliance for at least three reasons.

Firstly, following the Russian invasion in 2022 and Ukraine’s subsequent request to join NATO, President Joe Biden had indefinitely postponed such enlargement, effectively taking it off the table already at the Vilnius Summit in 2023.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, in agreement with NATO institutions and the vast majority of member states,

<sup>7</sup> Italian Ministry of Defence website: *Operazioni internazionali in corso*, <https://www.difesa.it/operazionimilitari/op-intern-corso/operazioni-int/26752.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Italian Ministry of Defence website: *Operazione Strade Sicure*, <https://www.difesa.it/operazionimilitari/nazionaliincorso/stradesicure/default/26814.html>.

<sup>9</sup> The exact phrase that established the non-invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance is: “We will be in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when Allies agree and conditions are met.” See NATO, *Vilnius Summit Communiqué*, 11 July 2023, point 11, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_217320.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm).

Biden administration maintained a strategic communication in favour of a future accession of Kyiv to the Atlantic Alliance.<sup>10</sup> Several key representatives within the Trump Administration, starting with Secretary of Defence Hegseth, have instead explicitly ruled out that possibility,<sup>11</sup> thereby completely changing the narrative on NATO–Ukraine relations and accommodating one of Russia’s demands before diplomatic negotiations with Moscow have even begun.

The second reason why Trump’s agenda on Ukraine matters for NATO is that at 2024 Washington Summit allies had decided to coordinate and deliver military aid to Kyiv, along with training, within a NATO framework through the NATO Security Assistance and Training Ukraine (NSATU) mechanism, in order to ensure greater continuity, reliability, and effectiveness of Western efforts. The Trump Administration rather decided to withhold further aid to Ukraine while initiating bilateral negotiations with Russia, and even suspended the provision of intelligence to Kyiv for several days as part of the pressure on Ukraine to accept the terms of a ceasefire to then be proposed to Moscow. Moreover, for the first time in the three years of activity of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group – which met regularly at the NATO base in Ramstein, Germany, and is therefore known as the “Ramstein Group” – Hegseth only participated remotely.<sup>12</sup> The Pentagon has also decided to withdraw its personnel from the logistics hub in Jasionka, Poland, which handles a significant portion of Western military assistance bound for Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> This, too, marks a substantial and drastic shift in the American position towards Kyiv and NATO, to which allied countries have responded by continuing to operate the Ramstein Group and the logistics hub in Poland, with greater European political and military commitment. As of June 2025, NATO allies – except the US – have pledged over 20 billion euro in additional security assistance to Ukraine.<sup>14</sup>

The third and broader reason why the American stance on Ukraine directly concerns NATO lies essentially in the Russian threat against both Kyiv and the Alliance. The prevailing political-military assessment within NATO<sup>15</sup> and the EU<sup>16</sup> is that if Russia were to succeed in controlling the majority of Ukraine, it would

<sup>10</sup> The 2024 NATO Summit in Washington defined Ukraine’s path towards NATO membership as “irreversible”. See NATO, *Washington Summit Declaration*, 10 July 2024, point 16, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_227678.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm).

<sup>11</sup> Natasha Bertrand, Clare Sebastian and Haley Britzky, “Hegseth Rules out NATO Membership for Ukraine and Says Europe Must Be Responsible for Country’s Security”, in *CNN*, 12 February 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/12/politics/hegseth-ukraine-rules-out-nato-membership>.

<sup>12</sup> Lauren Kent and Anna Chernova, “Ukraine’s European Allies Say Russian Aggression Is Pushing Peace out of Reach, as US Envoy Meets Putin”, in *CNN*, 11 April 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/04/11/europe/ukraine-defense-summit-brussels-intl>.

<sup>13</sup> Wojciech Kość, “US Pulls Presence from Key Ukraine Arms Aid Hub in Poland”, in *Politico Europe*, 8 April 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=6440436>.

<sup>14</sup> NATO, *NATO Defence Ministers Agree New Capability Targets to Strengthen the Alliance*, cit.

<sup>15</sup> Chatham House, *NATO Chief Mark Rutte Warns Russia Could Use Military Force against Alliance in Five Years*, 9 June 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/36597>.

<sup>16</sup> European Commission, *White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030* (JOIN/2025/120), 19 March 2025, p. 4, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52025JC0120>.

be incentivised to push further after a few years of consolidation: Moscow could decide to forcibly take control of other former Soviet Union states, from Moldova to the Baltic countries. The latter have been members of both NATO and the EU since 2004. Thus, a Russian attack against a Baltic state would trigger allied intervention in their defence, leading to a war between the Russian Federation and the Atlantic Alliance. In such a scenario, the Baltic country under attack would also invoke the solidarity and mutual assistance clauses of the Treaty of Lisbon, which are legally binding for the European Union and its members, thereby effectively bringing about a war between Russia and the EU as well.

To avoid such a dramatic scenario for the whole of Europe, a free and sovereign Ukraine – capable of defending most of its territory, including its major cities and its access to the Black Sea – is therefore considered an essential component of NATO's collective deterrence and defence, as well as of the EU's security and stability in the face of Russian threat. This is also why Europe and Canada are increasingly concerned about the concessions the United States may force upon Ukraine in order to secure a diplomatic agreement with Russia. It is in this context that the Anglo-French initiative has taken shape, backed by the near-totality of European NATO members, aimed at planning a European military mission on Ukrainian territory to guarantee a peace settlement or, at the very least, an armistice.<sup>17</sup> During his very first NATO defence ministerial in January 2025, Secretary Hegseth ruled out both the deployment of US troops to Ukraine<sup>18</sup> and the possibility that any such European mission would fall under NATO's collective defence commitment as defined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. In other words, despite pressure from the United Kingdom and other allies for some form of American support, if a group of European countries were to undertake this mission in Ukraine, they would not be able to rely on any automatic provision of US military assistance, nor likely on NATO structures involving American personnel or assets, should they come under attack from Russian forces.

In light of the three reasons outlined above, the US position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict is a central issue on NATO's agenda, just as vital as national defence spending. Secondly, it is worth recalling that during Trump's first presidency, China entered NATO's strategic discourse, remaining there under Biden administration in terms increasingly framed as "challenge" and "concern" by allied governments. These concerns range from Beijing's expanding nuclear arsenal and military capabilities, to cyberwarfare, growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, and large-scale investments in critical infrastructures in Europe. Such worries have only intensified given China's commercial and technological support for Russia during the Ukraine invasion – to the extent that the 2024 Washington Summit

<sup>17</sup> "Paris to Host New Ukraine Coalition Summit on March 27, Macron Says", in *France24*, 21 March 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20250321-macron-says-coalition-of-the-willing-to-hold-fresh-ukraine-peace-talks>.

<sup>18</sup> "U.S. Will Not Send Troops to Ukraine, Pentagon Chief Hegseth Says", in *Reuters*, 11 February 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/us-will-not-send-troops-ukraine-pentagon-chief-hegseth-says-2025-02-11>.

declaration labelled Beijing an “enabler” of Russia’s war effort.<sup>19</sup>

The second Trump Administration clearly sees China as a systemic rival, as demonstrated by the vertiginous escalation of the tariff war. However, it remains unclear if, how and to what extent the White House will seek to carry the China file into the NATO framework. Nor is it evident how Canada and Europe would react to such an initiative, given the political and trade tensions already triggered by Trump’s policies against allies. It is therefore plausible that NATO’s agenda in the coming years will remain focused on the priority area where compromise among allies is both more necessary and feasible: collective deterrence and defence against Russia. Such a compromise will inevitably rest more heavily on Europe’s shoulders – politically, militarily, and economically – starting with national defence budgets.

**Figure 2** | Defence spending by NATO countries in Europe as percentage of GDP



Source: Anthony Reuben, “How Much Do NATO Members Spend on Defence?”, in *BBC News*, 18 February 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-44717074>.

### 3. More EU military spending, but not a European defence

In the ten years between the first Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the 2024 deadline to reach the target of 2 per cent of GDP in defence budget set by the NATO Wales Summit – and reaffirmed by the allies’ heads of state and government at every subsequent Summit – the average spending among European countries has reached the threshold. In absolute terms, the aggregated military expenditures of

<sup>19</sup> Amy Hawkings, “China a ‘Decisive Enabler’ of Russia’s War in Ukraine, Says NATO”, in *The Guardian*, 11 July 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xv2fda>.

European allies rose from 235 to 380 billion euros.<sup>20</sup>

However, as previously mentioned, this growth has been uneven among member states, with significantly higher percentages in Eastern and Northern Europe. The reasons for these disparities relate to the history, geography and strategic culture of individual countries, as well as to each state's assessment – by government, parliament, public opinion and electorate – of the likelihood and severity of the Russian threat, of the strategic context and the national interests at stake.

Among these factors for national policy making is also the state of national public debt and – for EU members – the compliance with the constraints imposed by the Union's Stability and Growth Pact. Obviously, countries with higher levels of debt have less room to manoeuvre when it comes to increasing military expenditure. This is why Italy has for several years requested that defence investments shall not be counted within the 3 per cent deficit-to-GDP limit, a request reiterated several times by Minister of Defence Guido Crosetto.<sup>21</sup> In response to pressure from the Trump Administration, in the first quarter of 2025 the EU institutions radically changed their position in this regard and embraced the idea long advocated by Italy. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, announced the intention to exempt the increase in military spending from the Stability Pact limits under the "ReArm Europe" initiative (later renamed Readiness 2030). Following a request from the European Council to submit a proposal on the matter, the Commission presented a Communication<sup>22</sup> that can be summarised as follows:

- member states may activate the "safeguard clause" of the Stability Pact due to the Russian-Ukrainian war that began in 2022;
- the exemption applies for four years starting in 2025, which may be extended for a further year by the European Council;
- the exemption applies up to a maximum of 1.5 per cent of GDP for increases in military spending;
- the baseline for quantifying such an increase is the level of military expenditure in 2021, that is, the last year preceding the war which justifies the derogation from the Stability Pact;
- individual requests to activate the clause submitted by member states will be evaluated swiftly by the European Commission.

As these are national investments, there are no rigid European constraints on the use of funds for specific purposes such as the acquisition and maintenance of

<sup>20</sup> NATO, *Defence Expenditure as Percentage of GDP: NATO total and NATO Europe*, February 2024, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/2/pdf/FACTSHEET-NATO-defence-spending-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/2/pdf/FACTSHEET-NATO-defence-spending-en.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> "Crosetto: investimenti in armi e difesa per prevenire attacchi", in *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 5 November 2024, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/crosetto-piu-fondi-le-armi-perche-non-siamo-pronti-un-attacco-AGsisru>.

<sup>22</sup> European Commission, *Accommodating Increased Defence Expenditure within the Stability and Growth Pact* (C/2025/2000), 19 March 2025, [https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/a57304ce-1a98-4a2c-aed5-36485884f1a0\\_en](https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/a57304ce-1a98-4a2c-aed5-36485884f1a0_en).

equipment and/or personnel, beyond a general political aspiration for European cooperation in this area.

The Commission invited member states to submit applications by 30 April for the year 2025, while confirming that the derogation could also be activated at a later date. Fourteen states have announced activation of the clause: Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia and Slovenia.<sup>23</sup> Other two have planned to do so, not including France, Italy and Spain. Since the reference point is military spending in 2021, and some of the states activating the clause have already significantly increased their defence budgets over the past three years, it is not guaranteed that all of them will raise their military expenditure by 1.5 per cent of GDP compared to 2024. Nevertheless, it is significant that over half of the European countries that are members of both NATO and the EU – among them major players such as Germany and Poland – have activated the clause. This means that a large part of Europe is preparing to further increase defence investments to address the Russian threat and American pressure, in line with the above-mentioned expectations that the Hague summit will agree on a higher NATO target in this regard. Italy has so far not requested activation of the safeguard clause, despite having long championed it. However, speaking in Parliament on 7 May 2025, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni committed to reaching the 2 per cent of GDP threshold in defence by the end of 2025, compared to around 1.5 per cent spent in this sector in 2024.<sup>24</sup> The Supreme Defence Council, chaired by the Head of State Sergio Matterella, on 8 May reiterated that “Italy will reach 2 per cent of GDP in defence spending.”<sup>25</sup>

The Commission has also announced the proposal to establish a new financial instrument, called Security Action for Europe (SAFE).<sup>26</sup> SAFE consists of 150 billion euros that the Commission itself would raise on the markets by issuing EU debt securities, following the model used to fund the Next Generation EU programme in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and then lend to member states that request it at very favourable rates. As these are European loans backed by the EU budget, the SAFE regulation proposal imposes certain limits. Among these is the requirement that funds be spent on military equipment procurement programmes undertaken by at least two EU member states, or by at least one EU country and Ukraine. These limitations are further eased over the first 12 months of SAFE implementations, under certain conditions. On April 2025 the European Parliament has raised objections to the emergency procedure underlying the legal basis of the

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Moller-Nielsen, “EU €800 Billion Defence Push Hit with Tepid Response”, in *Euractiv*, 6 May 2025, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=2247208>.

<sup>24</sup> Riccardo Leoni, “Spese militari, l’Italia raggiungerà il 2% entro il 2025. Meloni spiega come”, in *Formiche*, 7 May 2025, <https://formiche.net/?p=1692283>.

<sup>25</sup> Italian Ministry of Defence, *Consiglio Supremo di Difesa*, 8 May 2025, <https://www.difesa.it/primopiano/consiglio-supremo-di-difesa/70470.html>.

<sup>26</sup> European Commission, *Proposal for a Council Regulation Establishing the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) through the Reinforcement of European Defence Industry Instrument* (COM/2025/122), 19 March 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52025PC0122>.

Commission's proposal,<sup>27</sup> which is therefore not yet immediately available – unlike the national derogation from the Stability Pact.<sup>28</sup>

The derogation from the Stability Pact and the creation of the SAFE instrument are part of a broader strategy outlined by the European Commission in the White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030, presented in March 2025 by the High Representative and Vice-President of the Commission Kaja Kallas and by the Commissioner for Defence and Space Andrius Kubilius.<sup>29</sup> The document sets out several long-term lines of action, partly building on European initiatives already undertaken in the past decade.<sup>30</sup> For example, it foresees an adaptation of EU regulations that impact – even indirectly – on defence, to remove obstacles to investment in this sector, and calls on the European Investment Bank to change its lending policy in order to significantly increase financing for the production of military equipment, and not only for dual-use products with civilian applications.

One of the initiatives already in the pipeline and relaunched by the White Paper is the European Defence Investment Programme (EDIP), under negotiation since 2024, which establishes a financing line within the EU budget to co-finance the joint acquisition of military equipment by member states. The EDIP represents a significant innovation because it provides co-financing from the EU budget, not loans as SAFE, and would likely impose a requirement of at least three participating states and at least 65 per cent of investments contracted with EU-based companies – thus incentivising greater cooperation and integration in this area.<sup>31</sup> However, both the regulatory framework and the financial allocation of the EDIP within the 2028-2035 Multiannual Financial Framework still need to be defined, in light of a pilot funding of only 1.5 billion euros for 2026-2027. The EDIP funds constitute a further financing with respect to the roughly 1 billion euros per year allocated by the EU for the development of military technologies and systems through the European Defence Fund (EDF), launched in 2021 and directed towards companies, research centres and universities across the EU.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel De Lemos Peixoto, Giacomo Loi and Ronny Mazzocchi, "Implementing defence Financing and Spending under the Economic Governance Framework", in *EPRS In-Depth Analysis*, May 2025, p. 2, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/ECTI\\_IDA\(2025\)764381](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/ECTI_IDA(2025)764381).

<sup>28</sup> If all EU countries were to increase their national military expenditures by 1.5 per cent, this would amount to an increase of 650 billion euros, and if at the same time all 150 billion euros of EU loans were utilised by the member states, the total potential increase would be 800 billion euros. This figure has received considerable attention in the Italian public debate but is clearly only a hypothetical estimate over a period of four years and divided among 23 countries. See in this regard, among others: Alessandro Marrone, "Debito pubblico Ue e nazionale per investire nell'Europa della difesa", in *AffarInternazionali*, 7 March 2025, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=111821>.

<sup>29</sup> European Commission, *White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030*, cit.

<sup>30</sup> Elio Calcagno, "Il White Paper per la difesa europea tra narrazione e concretezza", in *AffarInternazionali*, 21 March 2025, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=112112>.

<sup>31</sup> Alessandro Marrone, "Il Programma per l'industria europea della difesa: rilevanza, sfide e opportunità per l'Italia", in *Documenti IAI*, No. 25|02 (March 2025), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/19638>.

Taken as a whole, EU initiatives represent a qualitative leap in terms of European defence investments – from the Stability Pact exemption to the creation of the SAFE and EDIP financial instruments – but not in terms of European defence itself. There have not been significant steps forward in terms of military integration, either at the operational or strategic level, so in the short term the idea of a “European army” remains unrealistic and misleading. Proof of this is the fact that the most important political-military initiative undertaken by Europe in response to the policy shift introduced by the Trump Administration on Ukraine – namely the aforementioned planning of a European military mission on Ukrainian territory to guarantee a possible peace agreement – is taking place outside the EU framework, through an ad hoc format co-led by a non-EU country such as the United Kingdom.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, during the second Trump Administration, European defence continues in practice to rest on two institutional pillars. On the one hand, NATO for operational aspects, with an integrated military command capable of managing deterrence and forward defence on the eastern flank, the related regional plans and reinforcements based on the New NATO Force Model – as well as nuclear deterrence based on seven decades of nuclear-sharing agreements between the United States and seven European countries including Italy. Under these agreements, the ownership and authorisation for use of the nuclear bombs deployed in Europe remain American, but the host country retains control over the aircraft carrying the bomb. On the other hand, there is the EU, focused on industrial and technological policy in the defence sector, including financial instruments linked to the European budget and/or EU competences over national finances, from EDF, EDIP and SAFE to the Stability Pact derogation.

European countries are seeking to make the best possible use of these two pillars given the circumstances, complemented by ad hoc coordination formats such as the “coalition of the willing” for a European military mission in Ukraine jointly led by France and the UK. Such an approach, however, is not sufficient in the face of the Russian threat and the prospect of an increasingly limited American commitment to Europe as announced by the Trump administration. European countries should reinforce the European pillar of NATO by compensating for the reduction in American assets and personnel with their own resources, by assuming leadership at various levels, and by maintaining the effectiveness and credibility of collective deterrence and defence – something that relies on a well-proved structure, which does not exist within the EU, and on the contribution of a nuclear power such as the UK and of countries like Canada, Norway and Turkey.<sup>32</sup> Such a Europe-led NATO – still involving an American contribution, albeit a reduced one – could in turn serve as the incubator for a European General Staff focused on planning deterrence and

<sup>32</sup> Alessandro Marrone, “A Europe-led NATO to Guarantee European Security: The Time Has Come”, in *Aspenia Online*, 16 June 2024, <https://aspensiaonline.it/?p=54692>.

defence against Russia, capable of directing the use of increased European military spending in a more integrated and effective way.<sup>33</sup>

*updated 2 April 2025*

<sup>33</sup> Stefano Silvestri, "La difesa dell'Europa", in *IAI Papers*, No. 25|04 (April 2025), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/19839>.

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