

From Peace Promoter to Power Player: The EU's Strategic Turn to Militarisation

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With war on its doorstep and US protection no longer a certainty, the European Union has witnessed a growing number of voices in recent years calling for increased military spending and a stronger focus on security. For a bloc founded on the principle of peace and conflict prevention, this marks a major shift, one that stands in sharp contrast to the standards that have come to define the EU and its image.

Mario Draghi's recent report on the future of European competitiveness calls for an unprecedented additional annual investment of around 800 billion euros to meet the EU's technological innovation, decarbonisation, and security needs, and to boost economic growth. The scale of this investment would dwarf the 723 billion euros allocated under the post-Covid-19 Recovery and Resilience Facility between 2021 and 2026. Even more strikingly, at around 4.7 per cent of GDP, this would be more than double the scale of the post-World War II Marshall Plan, which helped rebuild a continent ruined by the most devastating conflict in history.

The report has received broad attention, but the political will to implement some of its proposals – such as the issuing of common European debt – is lacking. However, Draghi has stressed that his competitiveness recipes are indispensable to reaching objectives the EU has already agreed upon. When it comes to Europe's defence capabilities, for example, the report reflects a shift that has been in the making for several years; one which could significantly change the nature of the European project.

The long-awaited report advocates not just for increased military expenditure on weapons procurement but also for enhanced research and development. It also suggests providing defence industry companies with greater access to EU and private funding sources.

While some of Draghi's recommendations – such as joint procurement and sourcing arms from EU companies – could be achieved with existing resources or through negotiations between member states, the former Italian premier's vision risks contributing to the EU's transformation into a hard power like the US, accelerating its militarisation and expanding the European military-industrial complex. This trend has been evident over the past decade, with the EU's discourse and investments pointing in that direction.

In 2016, a proposal by the European Union External Action Service argued that “in this fragile world, soft power is not enough: we must enhance our credibility in security and defence.” Reflecting this idea, in 2023 the EU recorded a historic high in defence spending at 552 billion euros, marking a 16 per cent increase from 2022 and a 62 per cent uptick since 2014.

This suggests a significant ideological shift in the EU's global strategy driven by a combination of factors including Brexit, China's rise, the US's focus on national priorities, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The EU's top officials are increasingly prioritising a prominent global role, which has led to this intensified focus on military capability.

Yet the shift towards hard power may prove counterproductive. Over the past several decades, the EU's strength has lain in leveraging soft rather than hard power. By asserting itself as a global actor through increased militarisation, Brussels risks undermining the very principles that have long guided the Union: peace, multilateral cooperation, and the promotion of international law.

The EU's new priorities could also detract from global efforts to address climate change and other global issues, not only by curtailing the bloc's own investments but also by pushing other countries to prioritise their defence budgets over climate spending.

A clear example is the EU's decision earlier this year to downsize and divert the European Sovereignty Fund – initially a response to the US's Inflation Reduction Act – away from climate projects to defence. The European Investment Bank is also facing pressure to fund more arms industry projects. Such decisions prioritise militarisation over environmental action, making the EU's goal of climate neutrality by 2050 harder to achieve and distracting the bloc from the urgent climate crisis.

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The military sector and its arms supply chain alone account for an estimated 5.5 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions – excluding emissions from conflict and post-conflict reconstruction. If the world's militaries were a country, their carbon footprint would rank fourth globally, surpassing Russia. Expanding the EU's military-industrial complex would only exacerbate the problem.

Additionally, the Draghi report's heavy reliance on the US as a benchmark for military investments raises further concerns. The US's extensive military expenditure goes hand in hand with its tensions with countries like China and Iran and is sustained by a strong military-industrial complex. Is this truly a model that the EU wants to follow?

Pushing for hard power

The EU's broader strategic pivot towards hard power has translated into increasing militarisation over the past decade, as embodied in initiatives like the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the European Peace Facility (EPF), both established in 2021. With an eight-billion-euro budget, the EDF was the first EU community budget dedicated to military-related activities. Its aim is to enhance the European Union's global competitiveness, including by supporting arms exports. On the other hand, the EPF, with 17 billion euros allocated for 2021-2027, provides funding for military equipment, including ammunition and lethal weapons, for countries facing internal conflicts.

Statements from top EU leaders also clearly reflect this hard power ambition. As early as 2019, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen argued that “soft power alone won't suffice today if we Europeans want to assert ourselves in the world” and that the EU must “learn the language of power.” In 2020, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell echoed this sentiment, suggesting that the bloc must adapt to a world of raw power politics. He added, in words almost identical to von der Leyen's: “We must relearn the language of power and conceive of Europe as a top-tier geostrategic actor.”

These statements seem to ignore the fact that the EU does not have to passively adapt to the changes on the global scene, but could actively contribute to shaping them by using the soft power tools it has mastered and successfully implemented since its founding.

After all, the EU was born out of the ashes of World War II with the goal of healing the wounds of war and preventing such devastating conflicts from happening again in Europe. The founding members of the European Coal and Steel Community – which later evolved into the EU – managed to realise that aim by forging fundamental economic bonds between countries. In other words, avoiding war and promoting peace has been at the very heart of the European project since its beginning.

Clashing visions

Soft power and hard power approaches to foreign policy represent fundamentally different worldviews. A soft power approach emphasises alliances and partnerships rather than viewing other nations as threats. This vision has an element of risk aversion, focusing on promoting stability, peace, and economic and social development over military engagement.

In contrast, a hard power perspective sees the world more cynically through a lens of threats and adversaries. As countries focus on their own national security, alliances are formed based on immediate strategic benefits rather than long-term partnerships which bring common gains.

Although it has adopted soft power measures at times, including financial support initiatives such as the Marshall Plan, the US has long applied hard power through measures such as military interventions, economic sanctions, and coercive diplomacy.

As we see in both von der Leyen and Borrell's statements, the EU is increasingly seeing the world as a place of threat rather than of collaboration. Russia's invasion of Ukraine further precipitated the EU's move towards hard power, leading Brussels to supply weapons and military training to Kyiv and impose extensive sanctions on Moscow.

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The expanding influence of arms producers on EU policymaking further raises concerns about the formation of a military-industrial complex akin to the US, especially because the arms industry already exerts a strong influence in the EU. For example, in 2016, it played a key role in shaping the content of the EU's 90-million-euro military research program, Preparatory Action on Defence Research. The European Defence Fund (EDF) has also been heavily influenced by the arms industry's recommendations, reflecting a close alignment between corporate interests and EU policy.

This is not surprising given arms companies' lobbying budgets. From 2012 and 2017, the combined annual lobbying budget of the ten European arms companies doubled from EUR 2.8 million to EUR 5.6 million.

Arms companies in the EU saw significant profit increases following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with earnings rising over 10 per cent between 2022 and 2023. Companies like Italy's Leonardo also continued supplying arms to Israel, even as evidence of plausible genocide mounted.

If these companies were to gain greater access to EU funds, their influence on the bloc's military decisions would likely increase. The United States provides a clear example. In 2022, defence contractors donated 10 million dollars to members of the Congressional Defence Committee, which eventually helped them in securing a 45-billion-dollar spending increase compared to the previous year – a whopping 450,000-per cent return on investment.

What next?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and other geopolitical shifts around the world, including the currently escalating tensions between Israel and Lebanon, underscore the need for the EU to maintain a certain level of military preparedness. However, instead of merely pouring funds into defence, the EU could benefit more from streamlining its fragmented collaborative processes, such as joint weapons procurement and interoperability, as highlighted in the Draghi report. Oftentimes, effective solutions come from improved coordination and negotiation and not from more funds.

Joint procurement depends less on financing and more on diplomatic negotiations aimed at ensuring fair financial contributions from all countries and balancing national defence needs and priorities. It also promotes increased military interoperability, as it encourages the development and acquisition of standardised military equipment and systems.

Ultimately, the EU's main focus should remain on soft power strategies, such as negotiating and implementing trade agreements, advancing climate and energy initiatives, and fostering digital partnerships with countries and regions worldwide. These approaches not only bridge differences and open dialogue but also promote shared economic prosperity for both the EU and its partner countries, making conflict less appealing.

Beyond such initiatives, the EU should also focus on strengthening international cooperation. The UN is currently more contested than ever, with critics accusing it of being "outdated, weak, and often ineffective" due to its slow, bureaucratic nature and the need for consensus, which hinders its ability to address global issues like climate change and conflicts in a timely manner.

Yet, for all its flaws, the United Nations is still one of the world's main spaces for transnational cooperation, and there are numerous proposals to reform it and address its shortcomings. The EU could be a key actor in strengthening the UN by supporting some of these reforms. One of the most crucial ones would be expanding the number of both permanent and non-permanent members of the Security Council and removing the veto power – a difficult but necessary step towards democratising the UN's most powerful body.

The EU could similarly support NATO, which has faced challenges due to inconsistent US leadership – particularly under former US president Donald Trump – and a long-standing focus on Afghanistan. Recently, NATO has been shifting its priorities, especially towards strengthening the eastern flank in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The EU can aid this realignment by providing financial support and sharing expertise with the military bloc. Establishing a joint command centre with NATO could also enhance coordination, streamline decision-making, and accelerate joint procurement efforts.

Despite NATO's failings in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, the alliance has also made positive steps towards facilitating peace, such as the de-confliction efforts between Turkey and Greece. Moreover, NATO's deterrent power vis-à-vis the Kremlin should not be underestimated. Russia has repeatedly indicated that it does not intend to attack NATO countries, largely due to the formidable coalition of forces within the alliance. This collective strength makes any potential NATO response both powerful

and perilous. Strengthening the NATO – an international and intercontinental alliance – could be a better alternative to an intensified arms race between countries, and it could help ensure the EU of the protection it seeks.

However, even in positioning itself as a soft power, the EU must refine its approach by enhancing its self-reflexivity and moving away from its tendency to impose its own values on others. Historically, the bloc has adopted a civilisational stance in foreign policy, due to its “imperial attitudes to third countries” and its self-image as “a civilising actor.”

This problematic approach has especially been apparent in Euro-centric discourse on migration. It has also resulted in troubling double standards, as demonstrated by the EU’s failure to condemn Israel’s abuses in Gaza – which amount to clear violations of humanitarian and human rights law – while strongly denouncing Russia’s actions in Ukraine.

The EU must ensure consistency in its actions and focus on leading by example. For instance, China has drawn on the EU’s experience in environmental policy-making and standard-setting, including for chemical management, the carbon market, and climate investments. This has improved Beijing’s decision-making on environmental management, which is no small feat.

Additionally, Brussels’ regulatory standards on the tech sector have long acted as blueprints for other countries. The bloc has also adopted many other progressive measures that could inspire change elsewhere, including its circular economy policies and corporate responsibility practices.

If the EU chooses to invest in such initiatives both internally and globally instead of using its funds to expand its military machine and strengthen Fortress Europe, it could position itself as a valuable and inspirational partner that countries would want to engage with, not fear or fight against. After all, the EU was created to safeguard peace, so it should do its best not to let war dictate its course.



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