



Beyond the short-term emergency, the EU must think about the broader implications of defence integration

Description

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More integrated EU defence policy implies greater foreign-policy integration and a larger role for the European Parliament to provide accountability.

The current debates about bolstering the European Union's defensive capabilities focus on what the EU needs to do to compensate for the United States's volte-face in supporting Ukraine. The European Commission's 4 March ReArm Europe plan, which could mobilise up to €800 billion for defence spending, encapsulates this. ReArm Europe aims to "respond to the short-term urgency" while also addressing "the long-term need to take on much more responsibility for our own European security," according to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

Beyond this short-term emergency, however, the EU cannot afford to ignore how defence issues will impact the wider foreign policy and democratic context. To reinforce European security in the long term, European policymakers must adapt the EU's institutional machinery. The EU cannot resort continually to emergency defence spending. The current situation is also an opportunity to open up a debate on new European integration initiatives.

History offers insights on this. Western Europe faced an urgent security problem in the

1950s. Prompted by fears that North Korea's invasion of South Korea in June 1950 was a dress rehearsal for what could happen in Europe, Western European policymakers agreed to create a supranational Western European army, which would become part of a wider umbrella organisation, the European Political Community (EPC – not to be confused with the more recent incarnation that started in 2022).

Defence was therefore only one part of a comprehensive vision of the Western European future, alongside economic and financial matters and foreign policy, within a framework of democratic debate. The governments of Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany signed the Treaty on the European Defence Community (EDC) on 27 May 1952. But because of the French Parliament's rejection in August 1954, the EDC was not ratified and the EPC talks collapsed.

This experience from the 1950s offers three main insights for the current initiative to rethink EU defence.

First, exclusive reliance on ad-hoc agreements such as ReArm Europe – which requires buy-in from EU countries and may extend beyond the EU – is unlikely to offer a long-term fix for European security problems. European defence is a European public good and relying on measures taken primarily at national level could be a weakness. If it is not possible to take a step as big as the 1952 supranational EDC, EU countries should at least realise that a requirement for unanimity, as is currently the case for defence decisions, often slows down if not blocks progress, beyond occasional agreements such as the approval in principle given to ReArm Europe at the special European Council on 6 March 2025.

Second, common agreement is needed on how military action serves foreign policy. Ongoing difficulties in assembling EU countries into 'coalitions of the willing' to bypass reluctant member states testifies to the problems of EU decision-making on foreign policy, which is also subject to the unanimity rule. In the 1950s, European policymakers consciously embedded defence into a broader project for European cooperation and integration in a Cold War world. Article 38 of the EDC Treaty provided for the establishment of a wider political framework. For today's defence push to work, European foreign policy decision-making also needs to become more effective.

Third, the making of defence and foreign policy must be built into a broader democratic accountability framework as the only way to ensure a functional representative democracy that can gain the support of EU citizens. Pronouncing broad statements as if they were commonly accepted truths is not the way to do this. The Western European

efforts of the 1950s envisaged a comprehensive framework. Prompted by the EDC Treaty, a broader debate about the checks and balances in European integration took place, focusing on the roles of states in the Council of Ministers and Parliament. Today, moving to greater centralisation in the EU of defence and foreign policy decision-making would require greater involvement of the European Parliament to guarantee representation of EU citizens.

The current international context makes it essential for the EU to move forward with short-term emergency support to Ukraine. But limiting the effort to this would leave the EU's overall security system in a limbo. Like in the 1950s, the security predicament offers a precious opportunity to rethink the relationship between EU defence, foreign policy and democratic accountability. Unlike in the 1950s, EU countries must have the ambition to go further.

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