

The European Council greenlights greater EU involvement in strengthening military capabilities

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At its meeting on 23 October, the European Council addressed the *Joint Communication 'Preserving Peace – Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030'*, presented on 16 October by the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The document sets out specific criteria that member states must meet to improve the preparedness for high-intensity armed conflict. The European Council expressed particular support for the initiative to establish coalitions of member states by the end of the year (each led by a designated leader and co-leader) aimed at strengthening capabilities in key areas, most likely in line with the conclusions of the March 2025 European Council (see *'The European Council summit: approval of boosting military capabilities, stalemate on Ukraine'*). The European Council also approved a proposal for the European Defence Agency (EDA) – whose remit will be expanded – to produce an annual report on defence readiness, supported by the European Commission and the High Representative. This report will be submitted to the European Council ahead of its October meetings. Member state leaders also prioritised support for countries on the eastern flank, whose airspace has recently been violated by Russia and Belarus. However, they declined to give direct backing to the four flagship projects proposed in the communication, including the European Drone Defence Initiative and Eastern Flank Watch (see Appendix).

The European Council's conclusions on security and defence open the way for the European Commission and the European External Action Service to expand their shared competence in coordinating and overseeing member states' defence policies to include areas related to strengthening military capabilities. The European Council took only limited account of the proposals – outlined in the joint communication – to prioritise the defence needs of the eastern flank states.

Commentary

- **From the perspective of EU institutions, the primary objective of establishing coalitions to strengthen capabilities in priority areas is to increase the level of joint procurement, including within the European defence industry.** The joint communication sets minimum thresholds in this regard – 35% and 55% of all orders respectively – in line with earlier documents (see *'The imperative of cooperation: the European Commission's strategy for the defence industry'*). Neither the conclusions nor the joint communication specify a maximum number of coalitions to be established. This raises the risk of excessive fragmentation in the capability-building process, potentially repeating the mistakes of the

PESCO mechanism. Such an outcome could materialise if, in the absence of agreement over leadership within a given coalition, member states choose to base their actions on the 22 priorities outlined in the EDA's November 2023 report rather than the nine listed in the European Council's March 2025 conclusions.

- **The annual report on defence readiness is intended to more closely align the process of strengthening member states' military capabilities with the priority areas which the EU identified for joint acquisition.** In this way, the European defence industry – supported by EU assistance programmes – would be better positioned to meet the needs of armed forces pursuing NATO objectives. To gain a more comprehensive insight into capability development, the EU is involving the EU Military Staff (EUMS) – composed of the chiefs of defence of the member states – in the report's preparation. The expansion of the European Defence Agency's competences and remit, endorsed by the European Council, is intended to enhance the EU's expertise in military capability development. However, it could also lead to future disputes over competences with NATO and raise concerns about the security of information flows.
- **The exclusion of flagship projects from the European Council conclusions reflects resistance from Western and Southern European states to involving the EU in initiatives aimed at strengthening the eastern flank.** Representatives from countries including France and Germany also argued that flagship projects would hinder efforts to concentrate on capability-building coalitions. While provisions on the need to enhance air and counter-drone defence could facilitate the implementation of these projects – using mechanisms like SAFE (see '[Imperfect balance: the EU's defence loan mechanism \(SAFE\)](#)') and EDIP – they also dilute their core purpose of countering destabilising actions undertaken by Russia and Belarus. Criticism of the flagship projects was further enabled by the vague manner in which they were presented in the communication and the lack of a clear plan for securing additional funding sources.

APPENDIX

1. Priority areas for the development of military capabilities included in the European Council's March 2025 conclusions:

- air and missile defence,
- artillery systems, including long-range missiles,
- ammunition and missile systems,
- drone and drone defence systems,
- strategic enablers,
- military mobility,
- cyber
- artificial intelligence
- electronic warfare systems.

2. Flagship projects not included in the European Council conclusions (as proposed in the Joint Communication *'Preserving Peace – Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030'*):

- European Drone Defence Initiative,
- Eastern Flank Watch,
- European Air Shield,
- European Space Shield.