

## A new EU security strategy in the making: high ambitions constrained by limited means

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The deteriorating security environment in Europe following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, together with tensions between the United States and NATO's European members, has prompted EU institutions to begin work on a new strategic document – the European Security Strategy (ESS), which aims to redefine the EU's role amid intensifying great-power competition. According to initial announcements, the EU should move beyond relying on 'soft power' and regulatory authority towards developing capabilities to deter potential Russian aggression and respond to military, hybrid and economic threats. Although the document will not have legal force, it will provide a rationale for further legislative action, including measures to consolidate the defence industry, develop common military capabilities, strengthen the resilience of supply chains and address monopolistic tendencies among major digital platforms. The strategy will also serve as a communication tool in support of the draft Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028–34, presented by the European Commission in autumn 2025. The planned operationalisation of the EU's mutual assistance clause set out in Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) has featured prominently in the debate on the EU's evolving role in security policy.

### Starting point

The European Union has previously published several strategic documents in the field of security. The main points of reference for the ESS are the EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS, 2016) and the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (hereafter the Compass, 2022; see: '[The EU's security and defence policy: in search of a compass](#)'). Both documents focused on reinforcing the EU's role as an actor operating primarily through diplomatic means in support of multilateralism, chiefly by providing financial assistance and access to its market. The EUGS was a non-binding political strategy prepared under the direction of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, at the request of the European Council. It was drafted against the backdrop of growing asymmetric threats, particularly in the EU's southern neighbourhood, which generated demand for stronger common rapid-response capabilities. The EU's military ambitions were therefore limited to training missions and peacekeeping operations. In addition, Brussels supported both EU member states and security partners in strengthening resilience against hybrid threats. The Compass was likewise a non-binding strategic document, prepared under the direction of High Representative Josep Borrell, adopted by the Council of the European Union and endorsed by the European Council. It set out

objectives for developing the EU's security and defence policy and proposed instruments for implementing the tasks previously identified in the EUGS.

Published six years apart, the two documents reflected distinctly different approaches to Russia. The EUGS described it as both a 'strategic challenge' and a partner for 'selective engagement'. By contrast, the Compass – shaped by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – identified Russia as 'a long-term and direct threat to European security'. However, it did not provide adequate tools to address this challenge, as it had largely been drafted before the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion. Such tools were only introduced in the Versailles Declaration of March 2022 (see: ['The patchwork defence union'](#)).

The EU's approach to the United States and China also evolved. Unlike the EUGS, the Compass highlighted the risk of a diminished US presence in Europe. With regard to China, the EUGS focused on skilfully managing differences within the partnership, whereas the Compass defined the relationship through the 'partner–competitor–rival' triad.

### **ESS: a concise message for diverse audiences**

The new document is expected to be shorter but broader in scope. It will draw on the concept of comprehensive security, identifying diplomatic, security, energy, industrial, technological and trade policy tools that can be used to strengthen the EU's resilience against external pressures stemming from Russia's aggressive policies, economic coercion by China and the United States, and the erosion of transatlantic ties. Compared with previous strategic documents, it will place greater emphasis on pragmatism and the defence of the EU's interests. Both the title of the document and its planned brevity suggest that the ESS should be viewed as an attempt to respond to the challenges facing European security arising from the US National Security Strategy, published in autumn 2025 (see: ['The new US National Security Strategy: a manifesto for a sovereign America in a multipolar world'](#)).

The ESS is likely to be issued as a joint communication by the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Signals from member states suggest that the Commission will play a dominant role in drafting the document, while consultations with national capitals have been limited. The Commission also aims to signal to member states the need for joint investment, particularly in the areas of defence and industrial policy. Funding for such initiatives is expected to come from the proposed 2028–34 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), presented by the Commission in mid-2025. The assessment of the security environment set out in the ESS is intended to encourage reluctant capitals to support the increase in defence spending envisaged under the MFF, totalling approximately €130 billion. However, questions remain regarding the allocation of these funds. States on the eastern flank have not been among the main beneficiaries of EU support for the defence industry to date, while funding for military mobility was substantially reduced during negotiations on the previous MFF. The focus on security is also expected to help the Commission defend its proposed reform of the EU budget, which would make it more difficult to secure funding for regional development and agriculture. For countries bordering Russia and Belarus, the ability to allocate funds flexibly, particularly for dual-use infrastructure, will therefore be crucial.

The ESS is highly likely to identify Russia as the principal and most immediate threat to the territorial integrity of EU member states. It will prioritise support for Europe's defence industry and military capabilities, alongside continued assistance for Ukraine and its path towards EU membership. While the document will not question the fundamental importance of NATO as a collective defence alliance for most member states, it is likely to argue that they must prepare for a reduced US role in defending Europe. Consequently, the ESS may revive earlier proposals to develop the EU's command structures and enable them to conduct collective defence operations.

Describing the EU's relationship with the United States may prove considerably more controversial. The Greenland crisis, the reduced US role in Europe's collective defence and trade disputes have had a profound impact on both EU institutions and some member states, prompting calls to define transatlantic relations through the 'partner-competitor-rival' framework previously applied to China. However, reluctance among some countries, notably Germany and Italy, to place further strain on transatlantic relations over trade and security issues may ultimately lead the EU to avoid confrontational language in describing its approach to the United States. Instead, the ESS may emphasise the importance of relations with Canada, the United Kingdom, Norway, Japan and South Korea. In line with the concept of comprehensive security, the strategy is likely to place greater emphasis on the need to reduce the EU's dependence on the United States more rapidly in areas such as technology, raw materials and the defence industry.

There is also no consensus on the approach to China. EU institutions and a growing number of member states, including France, increasingly recognise the negative impact of China's expansive export policy on their economies. Other concerns include China's support for Russia's aggressive policies and the risk of armed conflict in the Indo-Pacific, which would further reduce the likelihood of the US maintaining an active role in Europe's defence. At the same time, some EU member states, particularly Germany and Spain, may be concerned that a more confrontational approach towards China could have a direct negative impact on their economies. In both its policy towards the United States and its approach to China, the EU risks pursuing an overly ambitious agenda that could ultimately founder on its member states inability to reach a consensus.

### **An additional security guarantee**

Alongside the debate on the ESS, discussions are also under way on the operationalisation of Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which obliges EU member states to assist another member state in the event of armed aggression against its territory, using 'all the means in their power'. To date, only France has invoked this clause, following a wave of terrorist attacks it experienced in 2015.

Discussions on Article 42(7) have been ongoing for years, dividing the EU into two camps. Some member states, including France, Spain and Italy, support the development of practical implementing mechanisms that could be used within the EU, albeit within the framework of coalitions of the willing under Article 44 TEU. Others, including Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark and several Central European countries, insist that the EU must not create a collective defence system that would compete with NATO. In their view, the debate should instead focus on developing mechanisms for an immediate non-military response,

including financial, humanitarian and logistical assistance, as well as procedures to facilitate the rapid movement of troops. However, the growing threat posed by Russia and the unpredictability of US policy are contributing to a shift in attitudes. In combination with Article 44, which allows a group of member states to conduct a military mission, Article 42(7) could provide a basis for a coalition of the willing to act on behalf of the EU.

At an informal meeting of the European Council held in Cyprus on 23–24 April, leaders agreed on the need to develop a detailed operational plan setting out who would provide assistance to a member state under attack and by what means. The EU Civil Protection Mechanism will serve as a model for this effort. The President of the European Commission has announced plans to issue a ‘handbook’ for responding under Article 42(7). The document is expected to cover three response scenarios. The first envisages a conventional attack against an EU member state that is also a NATO member, which would trigger Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty in parallel. The second concerns an attack against a non-NATO EU member state, which would trigger only the EU’s mutual assistance clause. The third relates to large-scale hybrid, cyber or space-based attacks that fall below the threshold for invoking NATO’s Article 5 but nevertheless cause serious damage in EU member states. EU ambassadors serving on the Political and Security Committee will conduct exercises based on all three scenarios.