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From Welfare to Weapons:

The real cost of Europe's militarisation

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1.Introduction

1.1 What's at stake

Europe is at a geopolitical and economic crossroads. The world order that has shaped international relations since the end of the Second World War is Unravelling. The United States remains the world's leading military power, but its monetary dominance is increasingly contested by China's leading global powerhouse and its trade alliances with other large economies (Russia, India etc.). Against this backdrop and the gradual withdrawal of US military support from Europe, the EU has embraced a new military "renaissance". Europe's role in the world is contested, and the response has been to prepare for war: redirecting billions in public and private finance towards military capabilities, and rewriting rules so that defence takes precedence over public health, social cohesion, ecological safety and democratic accountability. Yet militarisation is not only about budgets. It also reshapes institutions and social norms. In Belgium, federal and regional authorities are steering university funding and research capacity towards dual-use technologies, setting up new projects with defence firms, and revising ethical frameworks to enable military research[1]. Curricula are being adapted to include military preparedness, and career centres for the defence sector are appearing on campuses[2]. Meanwhile, France has launched a new voluntary recruitment programme aiming to reach 42,500 people by 2035[3]. These developments offer a glimpse of how militarisation is already changing European societies.

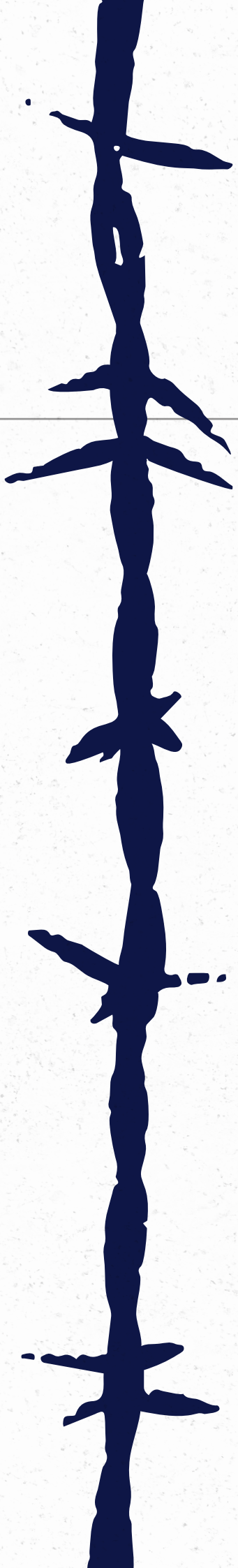
> **Wars and the threat of military intervention are deeply embedded in capitalist economies. Political and economic dominance is inseparable from military power, which is used to secure resources and sustain hegemony. But today's world is mired in overlapping social and ecological crises that call this model into question.**

Numerous evidence shows that militarisation does not provide security. In fact, we have rarely been less safe: 2025 saw the highest number of conflicts, wars and genocides since the Second World War. Building peaceful societies within a liveable planet therefore requires breaking with the logic of militarisation, and with the economic paradigm that sustains it. This is no longer an option; it is a necessity.

1.2 Our approach

This policy brief situates and critically assesses the EU's current militarisation drive through a systemic lens. It does not aim to provide a geopolitical or military assessment. Instead, it contextualises militarisation and war within the present politico-economic conjuncture, in order to identify the real drivers behind the EU's militarist turn and to outline alternatives that break with dominant systems of exploitation and capital accumulation.

We begin by mapping the EU's militarisation turn: the main policy proposals and the discourse that accompanies them. We then challenge the economic case for militarisation, alongside its ecological impacts and the imperial logics underpinning this trajectory. The analysis draws on empirical evidence and critical political economy, as well as data and expertise from organisations including the European Network Against Arms Trade (ENAAT), Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the Rethinking Security project and others. The final section outlines a different vision: an economy of peace oriented towards human and planetary wellbeing, grounded in a new security paradigm, just transitions for the military industrial complex, and strengthened diplomatic relations.



1.3 Our main recommendations

To address the drivers of militarisation, Europe needs a holistic response that safeguards peace, security, social justice and ecological stability on the continent and beyond. Drawn from the analysis, the recommendations below outline key measures for the EU and its Member States.

- Provide a comprehensive and independent review of Europe's military capabilities and needs;
- Support nuclear disarmament, place strict constraints on conventional weapons and new military technologies (including dual-use) and reduce military budgets to prioritise investments in climate, ecological & social protection measures and public services;
- Critically assess NATO's membership and governance and put forward alternatives to support Europe's collective security based on human and planetary wellbeing such as through diplomatic and cooperation mechanisms and bodies like the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe;
- Address European economic insecurity and tackle inflation by introducing progressive taxes on wealth and profit, and by supporting effective coordination across monetary and fiscal policy including via the European Central Bank and reforms of EU fiscal rules;
- Support Europe's energy independence and fossil fuel phase-out by cutting out fossil fuel imports, ending fossil fuel subsidies and redirecting investment into local renewable energy production;
- Promote a coordinated European green industrial strategy based on large-scale public investment programmes, just trade partnerships with third countries, public ownership of essential sectors and a just transition for workers in polluting and military industries;
- Adopt resource use reduction targets to reduce Europe's material consumption footprint and dependence on critical minerals.

2.Framing the context:
Europe's route to military expansion

2.1 EU policy proposals

Calls to rearm Europe and boost defence capabilities are reshaping EU politics, an agenda that predates Russia's illegal war of aggression. Although Member States have increased defence spending since 2015, EU institutions argue this has not offset decades of underinvestment, nor addressed the threats posed by Russia and a deteriorating security environment. In March 2025, the European Commission published its White Paper on Defence, setting out a Joint Strategy for European Defence Readiness 2030 (formerly ReArm Europe). It proposes a coordinated €800 billion investment plan over four years. Organised around five pillars, the programme aims to expand Europe's defence-industrial capacity, address so-called "critical capability areas", and increase military support for Ukraine.

As part of its "simplification" agenda, the Commission presented a Defence Readiness Omnibus in June 2025 to enable the €800 billion plan. The package proposes faster permitting, quicker procurement and arms transfers, exemptions from parts of environmental and chemicals legislation, and easier access to finance, including by aligning rules across EU programmes and removing defence from certain sustainability criteria. Trade unions and civil society organisations have criticised the package as a rollback of environmental and labour protections, warning it could sidestep key EU rules such as REACH (chemicals), the Water Framework Directive, the Birds and Habitat Directives and the Working Time Directives. They fear that defence-sector derogations will come at the expense of public health and safety standards and long-standing labour rights.[4]

The plan also includes a temporary emergency instrument, SAFE (see table 1), worth €150 billion, to be raised on financial markets and offered to Member States as repayable loans. The remaining €650 billion would rely on expanded national fiscal space, notably by exempting certain defence spending from deficit and debt constraints through the national escape clause under the Stability and Growth Pact. Some conservative voices question whether the €800 billion headline figure is realistic, given Member States' reluctance to raise debt ratios to finance higher military spending.[5]

Figure 1. EU defence spending from research to acquisitions 2021-2027.
Source: Adapted from analysis by ENAAT.

In addition, the plan proposes redirecting existing EU funds towards defence, including Cohesion Policy resources and remaining Recovery and Resilience Facility allocations. This raises concerns about democratic accountability and transparency, particularly for programmes managed at national level. The Commission also proposes making the full EU Horizon budget (estimated at €175 billion) available for dual-use research, technologies with both civil and military applications.

> **This blurring of civil and military purposes facilitates the redirection of public funds towards defence. A 2025 investigation, for instance, found that Israel Defence Forces had been awarded millions of euros from the EU Programme through drone technology firms.[6]**

In the Commission's proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034), spending on defence and space would increase fivefold to €131 billion, becoming the largest component of the new competitiveness fund, and would be exempted from the Do no Significant Harm Criteria (DNSH) criteria.[7] The European Investment Bank (EIB) has likewise signalled a major expansion of defence financing, removing caps and constraints with the exception of lethal weapons.[8] As a result, the €8 billion Strategic European Security Initiative (SESI) would become a permanent policy objective with no overall financing limits.

Since Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine in 2022, the EU has adopted emergency instruments to bolster defence industrial policy and joint procurement (EDIS and EDIRPA; **see table 1**). The Commission has since proposed the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP; see table 1) as a successor to ASAP and EDIRPA, both ending in 2025. Together, these measures mark a shift from primarily subsidising defence R&D through the European Defence Fund towards using public money to support procurement-related costs and capability development (see figure 1). On this basis, common EU-level defence spending (excluding national budgets) would reach around €10 billion (table 1 and figure 1), compared with €500 million in the 2017-2020 EDF budget for research and development.

Table 1. – list of key defence-related EU instruments

EDA
European Defence Agency

Established in 2004 to support procurement efforts of EU member countries

EDF
European Defence Fund

Since 2021, the European Commission's instrument to support research & development in defence. The EDF is implemented through annual work programmes along the objectives set in the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027. Its 2021-2027 budget is 8 billion euros

ASAP
Act in Support of Ammunition Production

Instrument to boost ammunition production across Europe in response to European Council call in March 2023 to deliver ammunitions and missiles, if request to Ukraine and help Member States (MS) refill their stocks. The programme runs until 2025 with a budget of 500 million euros

EDTIB
European defence technological and industrial base

Strategy approved by the European Defence Agency Steering Board in 2007 with the aim of enhancing EU's defence industrial readiness and reducing its dependence on non-European sources for key defence technologies

EDIS
European Defence Industrial Strategy

First ever European industrial strategy for defence presented in March 2023 by the Commission and High Representative in coordination with European Defence Agency. Aims to raise MS capacity target by 40%

EDIRPA
European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act

Proposed by the Commission in 2022 and adopted by the Parliament and Council in 2023. A 310 million euros instrument (ending in 2025) to boost joint procurement of defence capabilities across Members States

EPF
European Peace Facility

Off-budget funding mechanism for EU military and defence actions. The budget's initial ceiling of 5 billion euros was increased to 17 billion (2021-2027) to cover EU military missions and arms deliveries to Ukraine. The facility is not overseen by the Commission or Parliament but is managed by a committee composed of representatives from each EU Member State

EDIP
European Defence Industry Programme

Proposed by the Commission in March 2024 to expand capacity for all defence industries. EDIP will integrate two running EU instruments: ASAP and EDIPA. It also includes new regulatory measures to ensure security of supply and foster long-term armaments cooperation.

SAFE
Regulation on Security and Action for Europe

Proposed by the Commission in March 2025, adopted by the Council in May 2025. Offer to MS to borrow up to 150 billion euros to finance defence procurement on terms of EU bonds issued to raise money in capital markets

RESourceEU extends this militarisation drive into the raw materials policy.[9] The Commission presents it as an engine of industrial sovereignty and a cornerstone of economic security, featuring a European Critical Raw Materials Centre, crisis coordination and measures against "hostile interference". In practice, it seeks to secure inputs for sectors including defence and aerospace through joint purchasing, stockpiling and demand aggregation, steering scarce minerals through centrally managed supply chains. It is worth nothing that the US Pentagon is similarly planning to stockpile large quantities of critical minerals for defence, competing with their availability for decarbonisation. [10]

At the NATO summit in The Hague in late June 2025, European leaders (apart from Spain) agreed, in response to US demands, to raise the defence spending target from 2% to 5% of GDP. Of this, 3.5% would be ringfenced for "hard defence" (e.g. tanks, weapons and military equipment), while the remaining 1.5% would cover broader security priorities such as cyber threats and military mobility (see figure 2 for an order of magnitude). Many observers warn that this target is both unrealistic and unsustainable: NATO defence spending is already at an all-time high, and reaching 5% would increase emissions while squeezing public resources needed to address the climate crisis, the world's biggest security threat.[11]

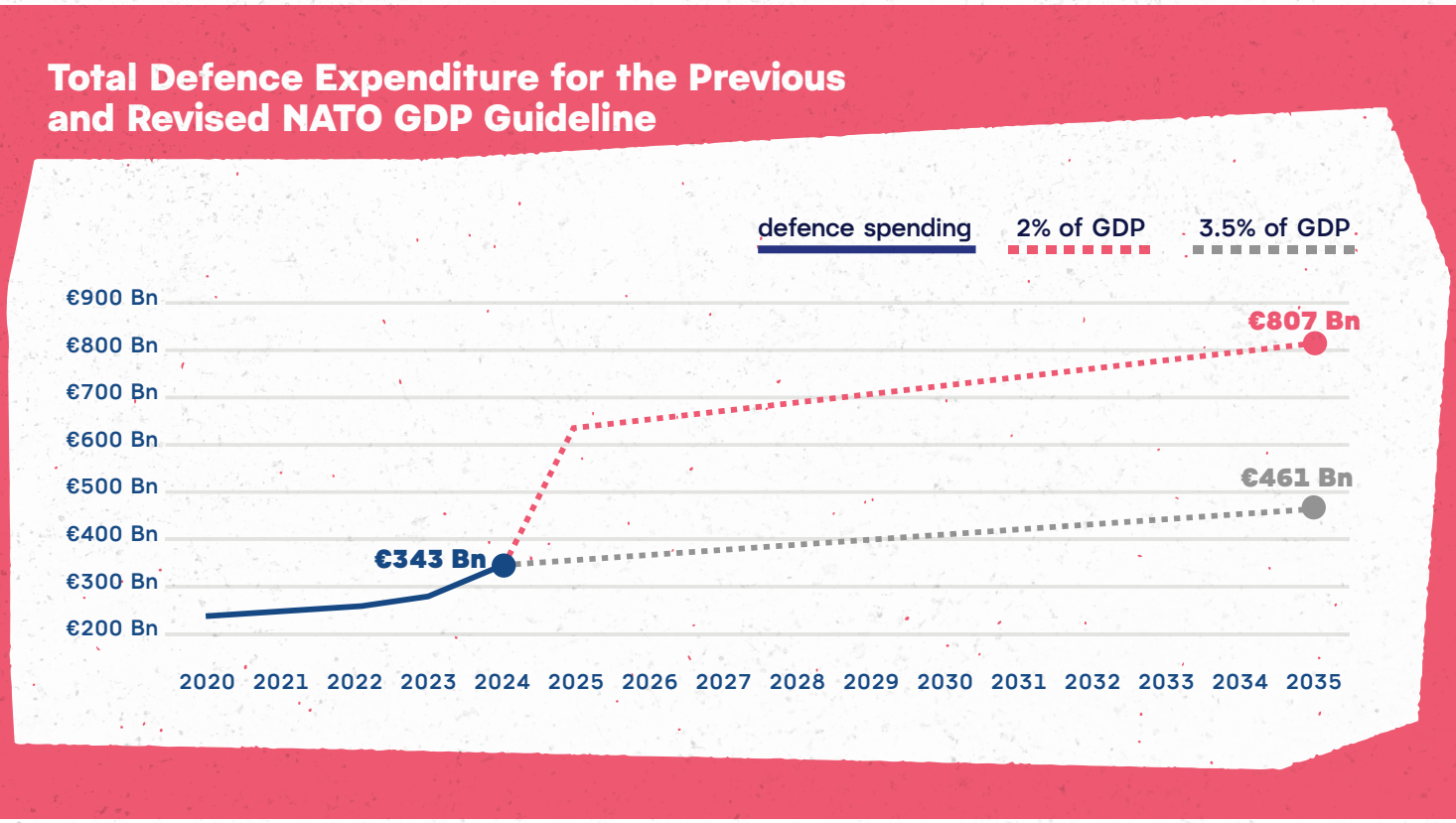


Figure 2. EU Member States defence projections including new NATO 3.5% of GDP target. Source: Adapted from **EDA**

2.2 The EU's rationale for militarisation

Europe's shift towards (re-)armament has accelerated in recent years, particularly since Russia's war in Ukraine and following President Trump's decision to reduce US support for European defence, reaffirmed in its 2025 National Security Strategy that puts American interests first and looks down on Europe as a failed continent.[12] Yet the ideological foundations of militarisation long predate these events. John Maynard Keynes argued that the post-war settlement in Europe risked sowing the seeds of future conflict through the punitive economic terms imposed on Germany. And despite the EU's foundation as a so-called 'Peace Project', the economist and former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis contends that the EU's design (economically and militarily dependent on the US, via the Bretton Woods System and NATO) has contributed to its drift towards becoming a war project.[13]

After the 2016 Brexit referendum, European arms and security industries successfully lobbied the Union to double down on its militarisation strategy by sowing fears of Europe being 'under threat' and calling for a 'stronger Europe' in the world. But effective lobbying tactics by the military date back to 2002, when a group of lobbyists from the military and policymakers gathered at a Convention on the Future of Europe, which subsequently led to the creation of the European Defence Agency (see table 1.), marking a pivotal moment in Europe's support for defence.[14]

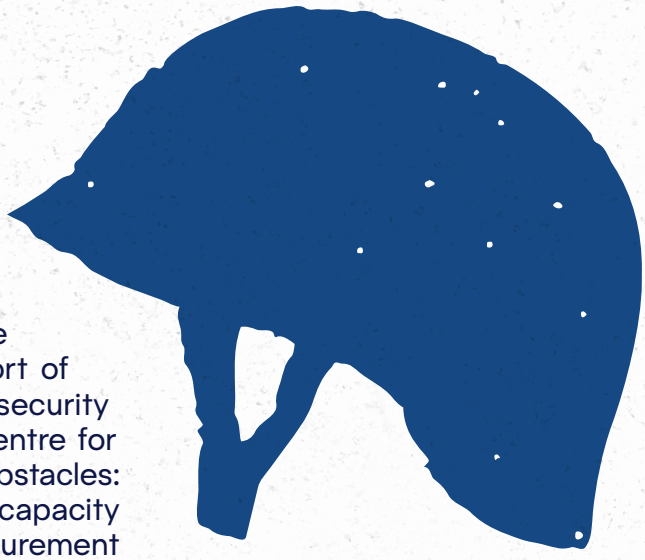
In their 2021 analysis into the EU's militarisation strategy, the European Network against Arms Trade (ENAAT) and the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, define militarisation as a process through which:[15]

both political and financial resources are reallocated to further boost military capabilities

new structures between decision-makers, the military and the arms industry are created

pressing challenges are addressed with military means at the detriment of civilian ones

actions are justified by the rhetoric of military strength and war preparedness



Most policy experts do not question the case for higher defence spending, but many argue that the EU's current proposals will still fall short of delivering the capabilities needed to address security threats. Think tanks such as Bruegel and the Centre for European Reform (CER) point to structural obstacles: Europe's defence market is fragmented, fiscal capacity varies sharply across Member States, and procurement and capability development remain poorly coordinated. These weaknesses, combined with Europe's dependence on the US defence industrial base, are also acknowledged by the Commission. Common prescriptions include deeper integration, more joint procurement, and new forms of common European borrowing (for example "defence bonds"), on the grounds that national budgets and private finance alone will not meet spending targets. While these analyses tend to accept militarisation as given, they echo broader critiques of the EU's economic architecture: fragmented productive capacity and the absence of common fiscal power also hamper an effective industrial strategy and a social-ecological transition. The widely cited Draghi report draws similar conclusions, advocating changes to procurement and investment policy (largely by leveraging private funds) to support "critical industries" including defence, green energy and dual-use technologies such as AI and quantum. Notably, "strategic autonomy" originated in the military sphere and became a stronger Commission objective after 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on global supply chains.[16] [17]

> **In a context where public services face renewed budget pressure and European's living standards are at an all-time low, emphasising the "threat of a common enemy" helps justify large new public outlays for defence. Claims about job creation and competitiveness further seek to secure public consent for the militarisation agenda.**

This framing is often described as ***"military Keynesianism":*** the idea that military spending will boost aggregate demand and revive the economy. The next chapter test this claim and situates the militarisation drive within Europe's wider economic and social-ecological crises.

3.Unpacking Europe's militarisation

3.1 Economic outlook

The post-Cold War period brought a structural crisis for the European arms industry. **But between 2015 and 2024, following Russia's annexation of Crimea, European military spending more than doubled, while global military expenditures reached a record $2.7 trillion in 2024 after year-on-year increases throughout the period.**[18] Three European countries (the UK, France and Germany) are among the world's ten largest military spenders, with Germany ranking fourth after the US, China and Russia. [19]

Europe's military spending is almost four times Russia's.[20] [21] Fiedrich Ebert Stiftung's analysis also suggests that European NATO members outpace Russia on many conventional capability indicators (ie. numbers of major assets such as main battle tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, armoured personnel carriers, attack helicopters, combat aircraft and artillery).[22] Eurpe's main vulnerability lies elsewhere: limited integration and coordination across Member States and heavy reliance on external suppliers, particularly the United States. According to EU figures for 2022-2023, 78% of Member States' military procurement was sourced from outside the EU, 63% from the US.[23] In 2024, Europe received the largest share of US arms exports.[24] This ependence, especially for combat aircraft, reflects geopolitical considerations (maintaining security ties with the US) as well as economic factors (costs and delivery times) .[25]

To met the new NATO "hard defence" target of 3.5%, analysis by the New Economics Foundation finds that members would need to increase annual defence spending by €360 billion, around 2% of EU GDP.[26] By comarison, the EU's green and social investment gap is estimated at 2.1-2.9% of GDP per year (in 2024 prices). Even with looser fiscal rules, most Member States would already struggle to channel 1.5% of GDP towards defence, without having to cut into other budgets, raising taxes, or changing fiscal rules altogether.[27] Belgium and Germany (two countries ramping up military spending) are already cutting public budgets, including on pensions, health and education, to finance defence investment.[28]

Europe is unlikely to absorb this scale of defence spending in a way that strengthens its own industrial base. EU countries are already among the world's largest arms exporters after the US,[29] and new EU instruments such as EDIP (see table 1.), do not guarantee that Member States will purchase European-made equipment, given political tensions and the lack of standardisation across defence systems (a problem Ukraine has faced).[30] RESourceEU risks reinforcing this pattern by centralising mineral procurement and stockpiling without binding rules prioritising civilian uses, potentially channelling publicly managed raw materials into foreign-owned defence supply chains.[31] Rather thansupporting EU industry, Europe's re-armament strategy may continue to finance foreign arms firms while building up stockpiles whose surplus is later exported to third countries.

EU military spending – factsheet

Table 2. – EU military spending and NATO targets

Sources: European Central Bank, ETUC, New Economics, EDA, SIPRI

The idea that militarisation will solve Europe's declining productivity is an economic fallacy. Decades of neoliberal policymaking have weakened industrial capacity, and the trend continue as industries close or offshore:

almost a million manufacturing jobs were lost between 2019-2024.[32]

In the absence of a coherent European industrial policy and a credible public investment programme with strong conditionalities,[33] [34] claims that Europe can revive its industrial base by converting plants to military production are doubtful.

Military firms are also concentrated in a handful of countries that receive most EU funds; France, for instance, absorbs around a quarter of the European Defence Fund[35]. Moreover, the EU's rhetoric of a common defence project sits uneasily with the reality of 27 national armies and limited political agreement. Without genuine integration, higher military expenditure risk deepening disparities between Member States rather than strengthening Europe's overall capacity.[36]

Analysis by Greenpeace for Germany, Italy and, Spain suggests that military spending has a lower economic multiplier than investment in sectors such as education, health or environmental protection.[37] Research by Heidi Peltier (Costs of War Project) likewise finds that comparable spending creates significantly more jobs in these sectors than in the military in the United States (around 40% more for green investment, 100% more for education and 120% more for health).[38] Similar conclusions were reached by the RAND Corporation, which found that defence spending in the US provided less GDP stimulus than civilian infrastructure.[39] This reflects the military sector's capital intensity, lower domestic content (including "leakage" overseas via bases and supply chains), and its reliance on private contractors.[40] Defence spending is therefore unlikely to deliver the job growth or "just transition" opportunities suggested in EU narratives.[41] Economists Weber and Krebs argue, for example, that defence draws skilled labour away from sectors such as

renewable energy, reinforcing fossil-fuel dependence.[42] Trade unionists also warn that militarisation often proceeds at the expense of social security through budget cuts and weakening workers' rights (for example, via increases in working time).[43]

In the absence of war, much military equipment, especially single-use items like tanks and weapons, cannot be repurposed for civilian needs. Its deployment also depends on extensive civilian infrastructure (bridges, rails and ports).

> **The sector relies on strong State backing, meaning military expenditure often functions as an upward redistribution of public resources (mainly taxpayers' money) towards private arm companies.**

In 2023, the industry's global annual return reached US$632 billion (around €540 billion), and both US and European firms' share prices rose sharply after 2023, reaching new highs in 2025 following the EU defence spending plans.[44] [45] The financialisaton of the industry (particularly pronounced in the US) is also significant in Europe, where international investment firms profit from State support. As in other sectors, the drive to maximise shareholder value has coincided with major jobs losses across the industry.[46] [47]

The defence sector has also benefited from shifts in EU finance policy. The military lobby succeeded in reshaping elements of the EU taxonomy and related frameworks, linking defence investments to sustainability narratives while fiscal constraints were loosened. A multi-outlet media investigation found that in 2025, €50 billion of European green funds supported defence-related activities.[48] The decision to exempt military spending from EU fiscal rules further signals that defence is being treated as a political priority, while social and ecological investment remains constrained by austerity logic.[49]

Overall, the rush to rearm Europe is not grounded in an evidence-based assessment of Europe's actual military needs, and the lack of democratic oversight over decisions of such public importance is deeply concerning. Moreover, the promises of military Keynesianism are unlikely to materialise given the sector's specific characteristics.

The following sections review the military's impacts on the climate and the environment, its reliance on critical minerals and the role of war and military escalation in relation to imperialist goals.

3.2 Ecological impacts

Wars and conflicts impose an immense environmental toll, from rising emissions to water and ecosystems pollution. The military is a major consumer of fossil fuels and therefore a significant greenhouse gas emitter: the sector alone is estimated to account for around 5.5% of global carbon emissions.[50]

Yet, military emissions were exempted from mandatory climate reporting under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol (after being removed following US lobbying) and are only covered by voluntary reporting under the 2015 Paris Agreement.[51] Research published by the Left group suggests that Europe's military sector (based on 2019 estimates) has a carbon footprint equivalent to the annual emissions of 14 million cars.[52] A review of 11 studies by Scientists for Global Responsibility finds that NATO's new spending targets could add 1,320 tonnes of greenhouse gases over the next decade, with every US$100 billion of military spending associated with 32 million tonnes of CO_2 equivalent.[53] This illustrates how Green Deal objectives are fundamentally at odds with the militarisation of European societies. At EU level, however, the discourse has shifted: "climate security" is framed less as preventing conflict through climate mitigation and peace-building, and more as ensuring defence forces can operate under climate impacts, in other words, making defence "climate-proof".[54]

Israel's genocidal war in Gaza is a stark example of how military action is both a human rights and environmental catastrophe. Recent research estimates that the emissions from destroying and rebuilding Gaza could reach up to 31 million tonnes of CO_2 equivalent, roughly matching the combined 2023 emissions of Costa Rica and Estonia.[55] When applying social cost of carbon measures, the total reparation costs attributed to Israel since the beginning of its occupation of Palestine in 1948 are estimated at US$103 billion (US$40 billion for the US).[56] In June 2024, the UN Environment Programme found that Israel's military actions contributed to the collapse of water and solid waste systems, leading to widespread contamination of soil, water and air with toxic substances.[57] Researchers also highlighted the scale of the intertwined environmental and public health crisis in Gaza, including the trauma caused by targeted environmental destruction, such as the uprooting of olive trees.[58]

> **Beyond the impacts of war itself, military bases and training operations cause environmental damage that often falls disproportionately on marginalised and rural communities with limited capacity to resist such projects.**

Bases can contaminate soil and water through explosives, ammunition, and heavy machinery, releasing heavy metals, chemicals, and other toxins.[59] They are frequently established with limited democratic oversight and weak environmental impact assessment, and access to information and legal remedy can be restricted under national and EU law despite the Aarhus convention.[60] As it stands, the US has over 40 military bases in Europe, most of them located in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom.[61]

Under the EU's latest "simplification" mandate, environmental safeguards, such as protection for water, environmental impacts assessment and chemical safety, are increasingly reframed as obstacles incompatible with permanent crisis and security preparedness. This framing legitimise deregulation precisely in areas where ecological degradation and social conflict are known to undermine stability.

3.3 Resources wars and imperialist goals

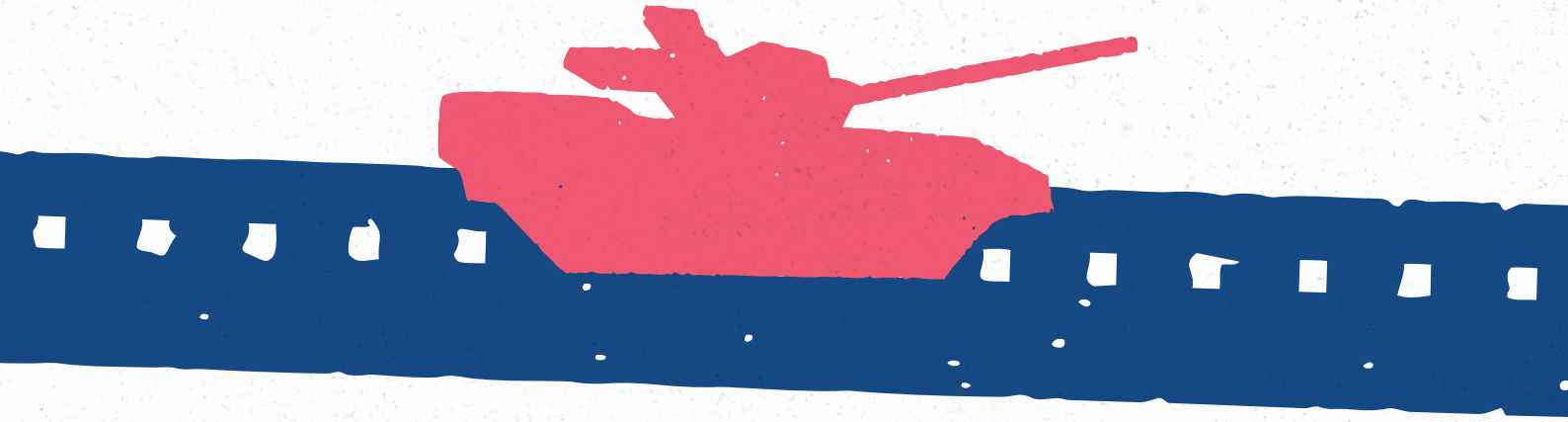
The military depends heavily on oil as well as on critical raw materials (such as lithium, cobalt, rare earths) that are also essential for the green transition. Yet, to date, there is no comprehensive study assessing the military's material consumption. Military demand nevertheless contributes to the wider race for extraction, often justified by the scale-up of renewables.[62]

> **A closer look at this extractivist push suggests that, behind the "green & digital" transition and security imperatives, lie alliances between corporations, states and military lobbies seeking control over resources along imperial lines.**

In the US, the framing of the race for critical minerals has shifted between the Biden and Trump's administrations. While Biden's Inflation Reduction Act was promoted under the banner of green transition, Trump's military objectives in securing critical raw materials are more explicit.[63] Meanwhile, some US politicians promote narratives claiming that European green policies block military readiness and the conduct of wars.[64]

The prioritisation of military interests in the EU is illustrated by the strategic raw materials listed under the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA): all of them (except beryllium) map exactly onto NATO's own list.[65] The CRMA was launched as part of the EU Green Industrial Plan in 2023. Prior to its adoption, military and space industries lobbied to include aluminium and titanium as "critical" minerals.[66] Building on this groundwork, the recently announced RESourceEU[67] and related strategic partnerships extend the approach, while sidelining questions of consent, redistribution and non-extractive alternatives such as circularity, waste revalorisation and substitution.[68]

Civil society has repeatedly raised concerns about the lack of transparency and democratic accountability, especially for local and Indigenous communities over strategic partnership projects selected under the CRMA,[69] both within and outside the EU. The Defence Omnibus adds further concern, as environmental safeguards and accountability mechanism may be bypassed for military purposes. Under the Green Deal, the EU sought to revive economic growth and global influence through the net-zero transition. Today, the goal of maintaining Europe's dominance and competitiveness remains, but the



narrative has shifted: defence is taking a more prominent place than before. [70]

The rise of the military-industrial complex to the centre of European politics is not accidental. It reflects a dismantling of power relations and political alliances in place since the Second World War.[71] After Bretton Woods, the US dollar was consolidated as the currency of international trade. Maurizio Lazzarato describes the period that followed as ”dollar imperialism”, drawing on Rosa Luxembourg’s definition of imperialism as ”the device that holds economic and political-military action together”.[72] Imperialism relied on extra-economic force to facilitate the “export of goods and capital into countries and regions not yet fully subjected to capitalist production”.[73] The US rose to global dominance through petrodollar circulation from Gulf states, wars in the Global South, and the supply of arms to allies.[74] It further consolidated its financial hegemony by liberalising markets and reducing trade barriers, taking the role of lender of last resort. Until recently, US government debt was treated as the world’s safest investment, with many governments holding US debt.[75]

Today, US hegemony is increasingly contested by the economic rise of China, as well as new trade alliances such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation which include Russia and India. The militarised response promoted by the US reflects a state unwilling to relinquish dollar dominance (President Trump even renamed the Department of Defence the “War Department”).

> **While Europe faces real security concerns following Russia’s war in Ukraine, its militarisation also mirrors a volatile geo-economic context of low growth and intensified competition for critical resources. In pursuing this path, the EU underscores its subservience to US interests, militarily[76] and commercially,[77] thereby risking further instability.**

Breaking with US imperialism and its consequences for Europe and the world requires a different approach to security, one that addresses the exploitation and the political instability inherent in capitalist relations.

4.Blueprint for an economy of peace for the 21st Century

4.1 Rethinking security

Despite EU claims that higher military spending is necessary to secure the continent, the number of armed conflicts worldwide is at its highest level since the Second World War.

The 2025 Global Peace index shows a steady deterioration over the past five years, with around 100 countries at least partly involved in external conflicts **(up from 59 in 2008).**[78]

> **This rise has coincided with growing military expenditure: 101 countries increased spending over the period.**[79] **The ongoing genocide in Gaza (enabled by arms trade partners) illustrates the devastating impacts tied to militarism.**

European states are among the largest exporters of arms to Israel after the US, with Germany supplying 33% of Israel's arms supply in 2020-2024.[80] [81] The EIB watchdog, Counter-Balance, also found that the European public bank is implicated by channelling investments towards banks such as BNP Paribas, which invests in Israeli weapons manufacturer Elbit Systems.[82] Arms transfers to parties involved in war crimes breach international humanitarian law, including the Geneva conventions. Wars also impose major economic costs: the Institute for Economics and Peace estimates that military expenditure accounted for 45% of the global economic impact of violence in 2024 (the single largest component), at around US$9 trillion.[83]

The UK group Rethinking Security has carried out extensive research into what "security" means across national constituencies. One study analyses the narratives underpinning twenty European and North American National Security strategies.[84] While these strategies commonly emphasise the protection of civilians, territorial integrity and the rule of law, they also acknowledge linkages between security and public policy domains such as health, socio-economic conditions, environment, education and transport.[85] When it comes to responses, the analysis suggests a spectrum: larger and more militarily and economically powerful states tend to prioritise short-term threats and military tools, while smaller states lean more towards cooperation and alliance-building, with many falling somewhere in between (see figure 3).[86]

In Finland, security is approached through a multifaceted framework, that underpins societal resilience.[87] The concept of "comprehensive security" recognises interconnected threats, human-made, technological and natural, and gives individuals agency to uphold security through skills and knowledge. Mutual trust is treated as a core pillar of this approach.[88]

Figure 3. Hypothesised spectrum of strategic analysis and response frameworks from Rethinking Security analysis of 20 national security strategies. Source: Contrasting Narratives - RETHINKING SECURITY

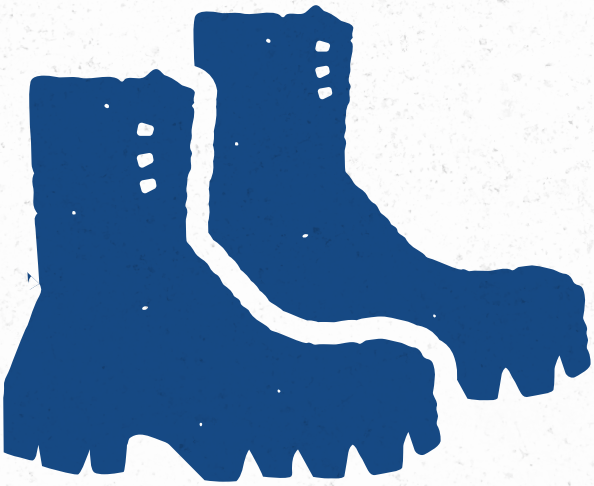
The idea of addressing climate threats through a security lens gained prominence in the early 2000's, building on the UN's 1994 concept of 'human security', which broadened security beyond territorial defence to include human, health and environmental-risks.[89] A dedicated UN mechanism on climate security was created in 2018, and the concept has since been actively shaped by military bodies such as NATO.[90] [91]

This "securitisation" framing can oversimplify the climate crisis and encourage militarised or techno-fix responses that deflect attention from cutting emissions and addressing the root causes. It can also divert resources from civilian infrastructure and peace-building, while shielding the military sector from scrutiny over its own environmental impacts and locking societies deeper into fossil-fuel dependence.

At EU-level, work on the climate-security nexus is led by the Foreign Policy Instrument (FPI), together with the peace division of the European External Action Service, in collaboration with other Commission services. In recent years, military actors (including NATO and the Global Military Advisory Council on Climate Change)[92] have increasingly influenced debates, presenting themselves as indispensable stakeholders. The latest EU joint communication on climate and security reflects this shift: the focus is less on preventing conflict through climate mitigation and more on making defence "climate-proof".[93] Some European Green parties take an uncritical stance towards the military and promote strategies for "greening" the sector.[94] Other groups denounce these efforts as greenwashing and argue that portraying the military as compatible with climate objectives has been used to justify exemptions from Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) criteria.[95] [96]

Critical security studies suggest that dominant security discourse enables militarised approaches because institutions often act in the interests of capital and the state.[97] Dr. Michael Albert argues that even broader, ecological visions of security can remain limited when they omit political-economic dynamics of racial capitalism that link militarism with policing, incarceration and border controls.[98] His framework of ecological security draws on the abolitionist traditions, which view global capitalism as structured along racial lines[99] and understand "security" as inseparable from collective wellbeing. A relevant EU example is Frontex: border security increasingly relies on militarised practices such as aerial surveillance, armed patrols, and rapid response units. Across Europe, surveillance technology and the policing and detention of migrants often go hand in hand. This vision of security is incompatible with a political-economic system geared towards capital accumulation, which depends on resource plunder and labour exploitation to secure profit for the few. An abolitionist ecological security approach therefore points towards building institutions that promote collective wellbeing. The international initiative Common Security 2022 similarly proposes guiding principles for a new security paradigm,[100] including nuclear disarmament, reductions in military expenditures, and stronger constraints on conventional weapons and new military technologies.

An essential component of demilitarisation is the reconversion of military industries towards socially and ecologically useful production, alongside a just transition for workers in the sector.



4.2 Just Transition

As discussed above, militarisation is incompatible with limiting greenhouse gases and ecological degradation. A broader social-ecological transformation also requires breaking with the growth-driven economic model that relies on militarism and resource plunder. In Germany, speculation around potential Volkswagen plant closures has been used by weapon manufacturers Rheinmetall to propose converting facilities to produce tanks and defence components.[101] [102] Meanwhile, Hensoldt, which develops radar systems used in Ukraine, has signalled interest in hiring workers from Bosch and Continental, key suppliers of automotive parts.[103] In this context, the military sector is profiting from the absence of an effective European green industrial strategy while offering no credible pathway for the socially and ecologically necessary labour transition.

The UK Lucas Plan remains one of the most cited examples of what a worker-led just transition could look like in defence industries. Proposed in 1976 by the Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Stewards Committee in response to restructuring and job losses, it set out an alternative industrial strategy with around 150 products to repurpose production towards socially useful and low carbon needs, including heat pumps, solar technology, wind turbines and medical equipment such as dialysis machines.[104] Public ownership was central to enabling such conversion. Although the plan was never implemented, its legacy continue to inspire contemporary reconversion efforts, including proposals from an antimilitarist group in the Basque Country.[105] In the UK, the think tank Common Wealth has outlined a strategy to convert military sites towards green industrial production through a publicly owned company, coordinated procurement and regional industrial clusters supporting renewables and public transport.[106] Interviews with defence workers and trade unionists suggest that skills and productive capacity could be redirected towards tackling the climate crisis. Similar research in the fossil fuel sector points to comparable willingness and expertise among workers to shift towards renewable energy generation.[107]

> **If the future of industrial policy is to serve socially useful production, Europe's foreign policy paradigm must also shift towards a security model grounded in peace and social-ecological wellbeing rather than global dominance.**

4.3 Foreign policy and diplomacy

Over recent years, diplomacy has increasingly taken a backseat to military responses. In the US, evidence suggests that between 2020 and 2024, major defence contractors received almost twice as much in Pentagon contracts (US$771 billion) as the combined budget allocated to diplomacy, development and humanitarian aid (US$356 billion).[108] The Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) notes that funding for non-military and peace-building initiatives has declined since 2019, a trend compounded by President Trump's dismantling of USAID and the sector's reliance on a small group of European and North American donors.[109] Using OECD data for 2018-2023, GPPi also reports a 12% decline in donor investment in peacebuilding and prevention and a 17% decline in conflict assistance.[110]

At EU level, these trends are likely to persist under the proposed new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), where funding for "hard security" is prioritised over disarmament and peace-building efforts aimed at addressing the root causes of conflict. This shift sits uneasily with the EU's origins as a peace project. After the Second World War, European integration was built on cooperation, shared rules and collaboration, under US hegemony, as an alternative to military rivalry.

In the same spirit, during the Cold War détente of the late 1960s to late 1970s, both the Helsinki Accords (1975) and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) (1968) represented positive examples of multilateral frameworks in support of peace through the establishment of common rules for cooperation at the expense of military escalation. The Accords led to peaceful dialogue between the East and the West of Eurasia, while the NPT played a central role in biding countries to disarm and decrease military investments. Now, more than ever, foreign policy must be re-adapted to respond to the social-ecological and geopolitical challenges of our times.

> **There are many ways that states can engage in support of diplomacy and peace over military build-up, such as through the creation of diplomatic corridors, multilateral agreements, the promotion of sustainability practices** (e.g., restoring Europe's drained bogs could serve both a climate mitigation and defence purpose)[111] **and cultural exchange programmes.**

The Hague Group[112] – a bloc of Global South nations in support of Palestine - is a positive example of multilateralism, that represents a world standing for human rights and diplomacy rather than military-imposed international crimes.[113] Diplomacy and multilateralism, when handled well, are powerful tools that can reduce the likelihood of conflicts and ensure cooperation, through strong international alliances, in the face of natural disasters catalysed by the climate crisis, or purely man-made conflicts.

5.Recommendations

In light of the arguments presented in this brief, it is clear that **addressing the drivers behind Europe's militarisation requires transformative policy change. This means adopting a different approach to European economic governance, trade, security and foreign policy, strengthening social and environmental standards, and shifting resources away from the logic of militarisation towards the conditions for lasting peace and environmental safety.**

We therefore call on the EU and its Member States to:

- **Provide a comprehensive and independent review of Europe's military capabilities and needs;**
- **Support nuclear disarmament, place strict constraints on conventional weapons and new military technologies (including dual-use) and reduce military budgets to prioritise investments in climate, ecological & social protection measures and public services;**
- **Critically assess NATO's membership and governance and put forward alternatives to support Europe's collective security based on human and planetary wellbeing such as through diplomatic and cooperation mechanisms and bodies like the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe;**
- **Address European economic insecurity and tackle inflation by introducing progressive taxes on wealth and profit, and by supporting effective coordination across monetary and fiscal policy including via the European Central Bank and reforms of EU fiscal rules;**
- **Support Europe's energy independence and fossil fuel phase-out by cutting out fossil fuel imports, ending fossil fuel subsidies and redirecting investment into local renewable energy production;**
- **Promote a coordinated European green industrial strategy based on large-scale public investment programmes, just trade partnerships with third countries, public ownership of essential sectors and a just transition for workers in polluting and military industries;**
- **Adopt resource use reduction targets to reduce Europe's material consumption footprint and dependence on critical minerals.**

6.Conclusion

This policy brief set out to critically assess Europe's militarisation turn from a systemic lens. Through this attempt, we aimed to open a necessary conversation about adopting a fundamentally different approach to defence and security. We first reviewed key EU policy proposals and the dominant narratives used to justify this "military renaissance". We then examined the economic case for militarisation, its ecological impacts, and its role in resource extraction and imperialist pursuits. Finally, we sketched the paradigm shifts required to move beyond militarisation, including rethinking security, supporting just transition for workers, and strengthening diplomacy and foreign policy tools.

Europe is facing multiple, compounding crises driven by the logic of capital accumulation and exploitation. This analysis suggests that militarisation will not resolve these crises; it will deepen them by increasing emissions and ecological harm, diverting resources from public services and the green transition, and making conflicts more likely.

Rather than addressing the roots of insecurity, ecosystem collapse, inequality, and geopolitical rivalry, Europe's military ramp-up risks serving hegemonic goals and boosting value for arms manufacturers, many of which headquartered outside Europe.

Europe's path to security lies in a radically different approach to economic governance, trade and foreign policy, centred on collective wellbeing within planetary limits. The reforms outlined above can help guide Europe towards a safer and more prosperous future, one that does not require a military renaissance, but the political will to break with dominant paradigms and economic structures.

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