

Europe Needs a Security Council of Its Own

Ionela Ciolan

One year into the second Trump administration, the transatlantic partnership is under the most serious strain since its inception. The mutual trust, shared threat perception, and coordinated action that once formed the basis of this partnership are now being replaced by uncertainty and desperate hedging by the Europeans. Experts are openly discussing the risk of rupture. Meanwhile, policymakers quietly ask more radical questions: 'Can Europeans still rely on the United States as the ultimate security guarantor?' and 'Can Europe defend itself alone if needed?' Recent U.S. strategic documents reinforce these concerns. The latest [National Security](#) and [National Defence](#) strategies signal a reduced prioritisation of European security and a shift of American strategic focus to the Western Hemisphere and the Indo-Pacific. Regardless of whether this shift proves to be structural or cyclical, Europeans can no longer afford to treat it as temporary political turbulence.

At the same time, the security environment around Europe is deteriorating. Russian aggression remains persistent, hybrid threats are intensifying, and global instability is spreading from the Middle East to the Arctic region and from Eastern Europe to the Asia-Pacific region, directly impacting European interests. NATO should remain the cornerstone of transatlantic defence, and the Europeans should do all they can to preserve the alliance. Nevertheless, a European initiative to address European security challenges is needed.

In recent years, the European Union has made significant strides towards developing a more integrated European defence policy. Institutional reforms, including the [appointment](#) of a

Commissioner for Defence and Space, the upgrading of the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Security and Defence to a full committee, the publication of the [White Paper on Defence](#) and the Defence [Readiness Roadmap 2030](#), demonstrate a growing consensus that the EU must evolve into a credible security actor, complementing NATO and building its [European Defence Union](#).

However, the European Union still lacks a common strategic culture and a rapid political decision-making mechanism on security and defence. The impact of the EU Defence Ministers' meetings within the Foreign Affairs Council remains limited. Too often, these meetings reflect the lowest common denominator among 27 member states rather than a timely, unified and targeted response to Europe's rapidly evolving security environment. As Commissioner Kūbiľius recently [argued](#), "material defence readiness" is no longer sufficient. Europeans must also build institutional and political defence readiness. On this point, this author agrees with Commissioner Kūbiľius that the EU should establish a European Security Council (ESC).

The idea of a European Security Council is not new, nor is the Martens Centre a stranger to it. Between 2017 and 2019, both President Macron and former Chancellor Merkel expressed their support for the idea, and in 2019 the Martens Centre published the then-most-comprehensive study on ['A Blueprint for a European Security Council'](#). More recently, in autumn 2025, the Martens Centre updated its definition of a European Security Council as part of its ['Strategic Policy Recommendations for the European People's Party'](#).

This current proposal complements the existing European institutional framework on security and defence. A European Security Council should therefore be an intergovernmental body within the European Council/Council of the EU, offering a platform for high-level political discussions and decisions on security and defence at the level of heads of state and government, and — when the focus is on technical coordination and implementation — at the level of ministers of defence. The President of the European Council would chair the body to ensure political authority and institutional continuity.

The purpose of the ESC is straightforward: to provide the European Union with a structured, permanent forum for deliberations and decision-making on strategic security and defence. Currently, Europe relies on a patchwork of contact groups, ad hoc coalitions, and slow-moving institutional mechanisms. These arrangements often lead to fragmentation, result in overlapping efforts and fail to project the 'language of power' that [European citizens](#) are increasingly expecting. The ESC would streamline these disparate formats, reduce duplication and foster more coherent coordination among member states.

The Council's primary function would be to facilitate dialogue on shared interests, thereby promoting the coordination and alignment of positions on defence capabilities, defence readiness, the common defence market, European support for Ukraine, and European responses to various crises. Chaired by the President of the European Council, this body would systematically assess international developments and formulate collective strategies. It would also coordinate relevant policies across the Union and lead Europe-wide responses to global and regional security challenges. The European Security Council could more quickly bridge divergent national interests and build qualified majorities that could move the needle faster in the European Council's deliberations.

Such a body would fill an obvious institutional gap, enabling the EU to speak with one voice, act more rapidly, and integrate its security and defence policies more effectively. But it would also address a political gap, offering a framework for member states

willing to move further and faster in defence cooperation under the principle of enhanced cooperation. Article 20 TEU provides the [legal basis](#) for such differentiated integration, while Articles 42(2) and 42(6) TEU establish the foundations for "the progressive framing of a common Union defence policy" and for Permanent Structured Cooperation among states with higher military commitments. A European Security Council would therefore reinforce the European Commission's work on "material defence readiness" with institutional and political might.

Membership of the European Security Council would be open to all 27 EU member states, and become operational once at least 15 states had ratified its format. The author's proposed format differs from other proposals on the market, including the Martens Centre's 2019 proposal, in that it allows all member states to join the Council or opt out based on their national interests. The idea behind the European Security Council is to limit fragmentation and internal competition between member states by avoiding the division into tier 1 and tier 2 countries. Given the current insurmountable pressure facing the EU from both internal and external forces, greater internal European integration and equal footing for all member states are the answer to building greater intra-European trust.

In addition, the President of the European Commission (or the Commissioner for Defence), the President of the European Parliament and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs would hold non-voting seats on the European Security Council. This would facilitate better institutional coordination and reduce "silo" working. If the European Security Council were to meet at the level of ministers of defence, the chair of the Security and Defence Committee in the European Parliament, the Chief Executive of the European Defence Agency (EDA), the chair of the Political and Security Committee (PSC), and the heads of the EU Military Committee and the EU Military Staff would be invited to join as members without a voting seat.

On top of that, strategic partners such as the United Kingdom, Norway and Ukraine would be invited to participate as permanent associate members. Other like-minded countries, whether European or non-

European, with whom the EU has concluded a Security and Defence Partnership, might be invited to ESC sessions to coordinate responses to security threats of common interest. These partner countries may choose to support and/or implement parts of the European Security Council's decisions in accordance with the stipulations of their agreements with the EU, as well as their own national political ambitions and legislation. Thus, the ESC would offer a high-level forum for discussions and debates on threat perception on the European continent outside NATO, for topics that cannot be addressed within the North Atlantic Alliance. This inclusive design would provide the EU with a coordinated platform from which to develop its security and defence agenda, enabling it to respond more swiftly to growing threats on the continent.

To be effective, a European Security Council must meet several key criteria. It must be representative and capable of forging a unified vision, as well as of implementing decisions effectively. It must also be determined to make sustained efforts until the desired outcome is achieved. Decisions in the European Security Council would be made by qualified majority voting when consensus is difficult to achieve, allowing members who wish to advance a particular issue to do so without the delays imposed by countries that want to opt out. By avoiding the unanimity rule that normally governs EU decision-making, the ESC could ensure timely action.

In times of emergency, the ESC would provide a forum for European leaders to coordinate and formulate rapid responses to crises. While NATO and the EU often experience delays in decision-making due to their size and consensus requirements, the ESC could swiftly address emerging threats, such as cyberattacks and hybrid warfare, as well as security crises affecting both the EU and its neighbourhood.

Crucially, the ESC would act as a steering body, enabling Europe to develop greater strategic autonomy in defence. This structure would allow European states to respond more quickly and effectively to regional crises. The ESC would also encourage European nations to play a more active role in shaping their defence strategies. Additionally, enhanced coordination through the ESC could strengthen NATO's European pillar, particularly if

member states hold each other accountable for meeting their defence spending commitments of 5 % of GDP and for implementing the Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called for building a ["new form of European independence"](#), stressing that as the world changes, Europe must change with it. For eight decades, Europeans have relied on American protection in times of danger. Today, Europe must demonstrate that it can rely on itself. In an era of shifting alliances and unpredictability in Washington, Europeans must act together with unity and common purpose. Establishing a European Security Council would be a decisive step toward greater independence, deeper integration, and true responsibility for Europe's own security.

Summary Table

Institutional Nature & Role	Intergovernmental body within the European Council/Council of the EU, serving as a platform for high-level political discussion and decision-making on security and defence. Operates at heads of state and government level, and at defence ministers level for technical coordination.
Leadership	Chaired by the President of the European Council to ensure political authority and continuity.
Purpose	Permanent, structured forum for strategic deliberation on security and defence; coordination on defence capabilities, readiness, defence market, support to Ukraine, and crisis responses. Streamlines existing contact groups and ad hoc coalitions and accelerates political decision-making, potentially enabling faster formation of qualified majorities.
Legal & Political Foundation	Based on Article 20 TEU (enhanced cooperation) and Articles 42(2) and 42(6) TEU (progressive framing of common defence policy and PESCO). Reinforces the Commission's concept of material defence readiness through institutional and political mechanisms.

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