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Strategic culture(s) in Europe

Taking advantage of diversity in security and defence

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Summary

- Europe's growing investments in defence capabilities do not automatically translate into the ability to act jointly. Strategic culture remains a central enabling condition for European security cooperation; it refers, for example, to how political communities understand threats and assess the legitimacy of military force.

- Since 2022, European strategic cultures have shifted significantly. Russia is now more widely recognised as a long-term threat, deterrence and territorial defence have returned to the centre of security debates, and uncertainty about US security guarantees has intensified discussions on European strategic autonomy.

- Threat perceptions, approaches to the use of force, and alliance preferences continue to differ across Europe, shaped by geography, historical experience, and political discourse.

- Europe can take advantage of the pluralism of its strategic cultures. In particular, the EU will increasingly need to provide frameworks that facilitate strategic-cultural interaction.

- Greater mutual understanding of different national strategic assumptions could reduce friction, improve coordination, and help identify areas where common action is possible.

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Introduction

Europe is undergoing a profound reassessment of its security and defence posture. Russia's war against Ukraine, uncertainty over the future of the transatlantic relationship, and the growing use of coercion in global politics have compelled European governments to drastically increase defence spending and to reconsider long-held assumptions about their security. Yet recent crises, such as the US-Israeli attack on Iran and the war in Ukraine, have shown that Europeans continue to struggle to formulate timely and coherent responses.

This points to a persistent bottleneck in Europe's collective and autonomous ability to act in security and defence. While material capacity is growing, proactive measures are held back by insufficient political coordination and divergent expectations about what Europe should do in diverse crisis situations and under which institutional or ad hoc frameworks. With NATO increasingly affected by US-induced political paralysis, the EU is becoming more important as a framework for security cooperation among European governments.

In early 2026, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen announced a new European Security Strategy, to be presented later this year. At the same time, the EU has started to pay renewed attention to Article 42.7 TEU, the Union's mutual assistance clause, which commits member states to provide aid and assistance by all means in their power if another member state is the victim of armed aggression on its territory. These developments underline that Europe needs not only military means to compensate for a less reliable US role, but also the political routines and shared understandings that allow those means to be used effectively.

This is where strategic culture becomes central. Strategic culture refers to the beliefs, values, norms, and practices that shape how political communities understand threats, assess the legitimacy of the use of military force, and choose partners for joint action. In Europe, these assumptions differ considerably across countries.

This Briefing Paper argues that the problem is not the absence of a single European strategic culture, nor should such a culture be considered a necessary aim. Rather, the central challenge is how Europe manages the plurality of its strategic cultures. This plurality can become an asset if Europeans better understand their own and each other's strategic assumptions, recognise areas of overlap, and use them as a basis for cooperation. The task is not to forge one cohesive European strategic culture but to make strategic-cultural pluralism more manageable and productive. This task increasingly falls to the EU, in cooperation with close partners.

The Briefing Paper first explains why strategic culture matters for Europe. It then examines three dimensions of European strategic culture – threat perception, the use of military force, and alliance preferences – before analysing how the EU can facilitate strategic-cultural interaction.

Strategic culture as a missing link in Europe

European security and defence cooperation has changed profoundly since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and especially since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. European governments have increased defence spending, strengthened military readiness, and expanded defence-industrial cooperation. The EU itself has moved beyond its

traditional role as a primarily civilian and economic actor, as exemplified by the use of the European Peace Facility to finance defence materiel support to Ukraine and beyond, as well as by new joint defence procurement initiatives. Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO in 2023 and 2024, respectively, also changed the setting for European security cooperation. Smaller, flexible formats, such as the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8), the Coalition of the Willing in support of Ukraine, and the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), show that Europe can adapt its structures to focus on specific defence policy solutions.

Still, beyond the material and institutional prerequisites for action, Europe has always had to address the mindset required for security cooperation.[1] European leaders have time and again argued that the EU needs to develop a more coherent strategic culture. In the context of a Europe divided over the US-led war in Iraq, the 2003 European Security Strategy explicitly called for "a strategic culture that fosters early, rapid, and when necessary, robust intervention".

Following the Brexit vote in the UK and Donald Trump's first election to the US presidency in 2016, French President Emmanuel Macron framed strategic culture as a prerequisite for genuine European strategic autonomy in his landmark 2017 Sorbonne speech. The 2022 Strategic Compass for Security and Defence explicitly recognised the absence of a common strategic culture as a major limitation to Europe's defence ambitions. The EU's High Representative Josep Borrell, speaking during the presentation of the Compass, stated unambiguously: "We need to adopt this Strategic Compass, forge a European strategic culture, and develop a common language on security and defence. We don't have it. Without it, it is utopian to have a common security and defence policy".[2]

The underlying assumption in this political discourse is that Europe's ability to act requires a more unified European strategic culture that would gradually emerge and supersede national perspectives, while strategic-cultural diversity is perceived and portrayed primarily as an obstacle to cooperation. In practice, developments in recent years suggest that the expectation of gradual convergence is only partially borne out. Despite growing military integration and closer institutional cooperation, national strategic perspectives persist. Threat perceptions remain shaped by geography, historical experience, and political culture. It is unlikely that Poland and Spain will fully align in how they prioritise security threats, just as France and Germany continue to differ in their understanding of the role and legitimacy of military force.

At the same time, strategic cultures are not static or immutable. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Finland and Sweden fundamentally revised their long-standing traditions of military non-alignment. Germany's Zeitenwende also marked a major shift in the country's approach to defence spending and military readiness: in 2025, European NATO members spent a combined USD 559 billion on their militaries, strongly driven by Germany, whose military expenditure rose by 24% year-on-year to USD 114 billion.[3] Across Europe, deterrence, territorial defence, societal resilience, and military preparedness have returned to the centre of political debate. Strategic cultures can therefore adapt under pressure. However, adaptation does not necessarily lead to uniformity. Instead, Europe continues to be characterised by interacting strategic cultures that combine areas of overlap with persistent differences.

The challenge for Europe – and the EU in particular – is to manage strategic-cultural pluralism under more demanding security conditions. This requires a clearer understanding of where national approaches differ, where they overlap, and how these differences affect cooperation. This matters in practice: in policy planning, military education and multinational operations, such awareness can facilitate cooperation and reduce friction. Strategic culture is not a peripheral or purely academic concern. As the EU takes on a more explicit role in security and defence, strategic culture and its key

1 Helwig, Niklas (2023) "Culture shock: The EU's foreign and security policy and the challenges of the European Zeitenwende". *Z Politikwiss* 33, 487–497. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41358-023-00352-8.

2 Borrell, Josep (2022) "Presentation of the Strategic Compass". Speech delivered 21 March 2022. European External Action Service, Brussels.

3 Tian, Nan et al. (2026) *Trends in World Military Expenditure*, 2025. SIPRI Fact Sheet, April. Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2026-04/2604_milex_2025.pdf.

dimensions – discussed below – become increasingly important in enabling Europe to act.

Shifts, overlaps and differences in European strategic culture

Threat perception

Threat perception is one of the most visible elements of strategic culture. It is shaped by geography, historical experience, relations with neighbours, domestic politics and public debate. In the European context, divergent threat perceptions have often complicated closer security and defence cooperation.

Since 2022, European threat perceptions have increasingly overlapped, particularly regarding Russia. Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia was perceived as the most significant threat mainly by states in northern, eastern and central Europe. Southern and western states tended to prioritise other concerns, including terrorism, instability in the Mediterranean and migration. Russia is now more widely recognised as a long-term security threat across Europe.

However, differences in threat perception remain. Shifting political relations with the US are a case in point. The unpredictability of the US and uncertainty about the future of American security guarantees have made dependence on Washington a more salient concern in parts of Europe. Correspondingly, public opinion of the US varies (see Figure 1).

In addition, eastern and northern European governments still tend to see the US as indispensable for deterrence against Russia. Based on this logic,

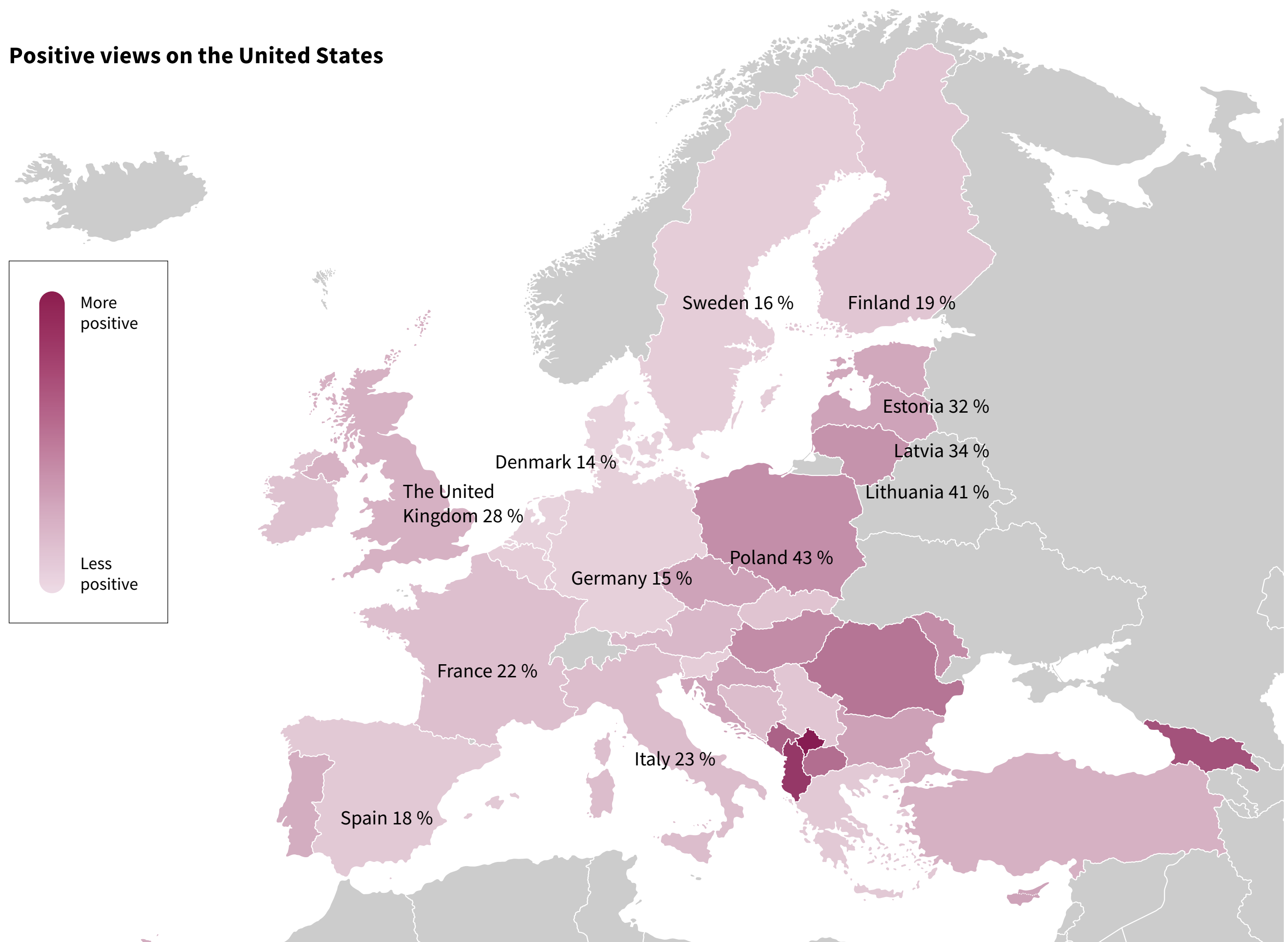

Figure 1. Share of respondents expressing positive views of the United States in selected European countries.
Source: Author Maria Rossi's compilation based on the Standard Eurobarometer survey from spring 2026: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3613 (QB14.1.).

excessive distancing from Washington may be seen as a greater risk than continued dependence. For others, the same dependence strengthens the need for a more strategically autonomous Europe. These views partly overlap with calls for managed burden shifting that combines reduced military dependence on the US with an attempt to convince the US to retain at least some role in European security and defence.

"The increased acceptance of military power does not amount to a shared stance among European countries on the use of military force."

Differences in threat perception can complicate solidarity and the allocation of resources, especially when security priorities are framed as competing claims. This can lead to competition over attention and funding unless threat perceptions are mutually recognised and understood as interconnected.

NATO and the EU have long tried to manage threat diversity through strategic processes. What has changed is the pressure under which this management now takes place. Mutual recognition of threats needs to become more continuous and practical, rather than limited to occasional strategy-making sessions. It has to be incorporated into the everyday routines of European security cooperation, at political, diplomatic, military and administrative levels.

This is also where the plurality of threat perceptions can become an asset rather than a mere constraint. While the sources of insecurity differ across Europe, the overall level of concern about security and safety is broadly shared (see Figure 2). Strategic-cultural pluralism does not eliminate differences in threat perception, but it can help Europe identify areas of overlap on which more active and united policies can be built.

Use of military force

For much of the post-Cold War period, many European countries treated military power as a limited instrument primarily associated with crisis management, peacekeeping, stabilisation, or alliance commitments outside the EU's territory. However, deterrence, war-fighting capacity and military readiness have recently returned to mainstream security debates. In the nuclear domain, too, Russia's threats and the uncertainty surrounding the future of US security guarantees have reignited debates about deterrence, extended nuclear protection, and Europe's own strategic responsibilities. Public support for maintaining and even potentially using nuclear weapons has increased, while calls for their withdrawal from Europe have declined.[4]

The increased acceptance of military power does not amount to a shared stance among European countries on the use of military force. Citizens and governments still differ significantly in how they assess escalation risks, authorise military action, and balance military instruments against diplomatic, economic or civilian tools. The most visible divide concerns expeditionary military action. France and the UK – the only European nuclear powers – remain the clearest examples of European strategic cultures with both the capability and the political willingness to conduct military operations beyond their immediate territory. By contrast, many other European countries have explicitly recommitted themselves to deterrence and territorial defence but remain cautious about force projection or military action outside clearly defined alliance or legal frameworks.

Germany illustrates this distinction. Its 2023 National Security Strategy shows that the era of purely civilian power in Europe is over.[5] Although Germany has increased its defence spending and reassessed its military readiness, its shift is primarily oriented towards deterrence, territorial defence and its role in NATO, particularly in north-eastern Europe. Poland's rapid military build-up stems from an existential threat perception and a survival-oriented focus on territorial defence rather than a new willingness to project force globally. Southern European states such as Italy and Spain, while committed to allied defence, continue to attach particular importance to legal authorisation and emphasise defensive or authorised peacekeeping missions.

These differences have direct consequences for Europe. They shape how quickly states provide military assistance, how far they are willing to go in

4 Onderco, Michal et al. (2023) "Hawks in the making? European public views on nuclear weapons post-Ukraine". *Global Policy*, vol. 14 (2), pp. 305–317.

5 Seppo, Antti (2025) "Security Policy Professionals as Strategic Cultural Agents: The Drafting of the German National Security Strategy". *German Politics* (online first).

Perceived threats accross EU countries

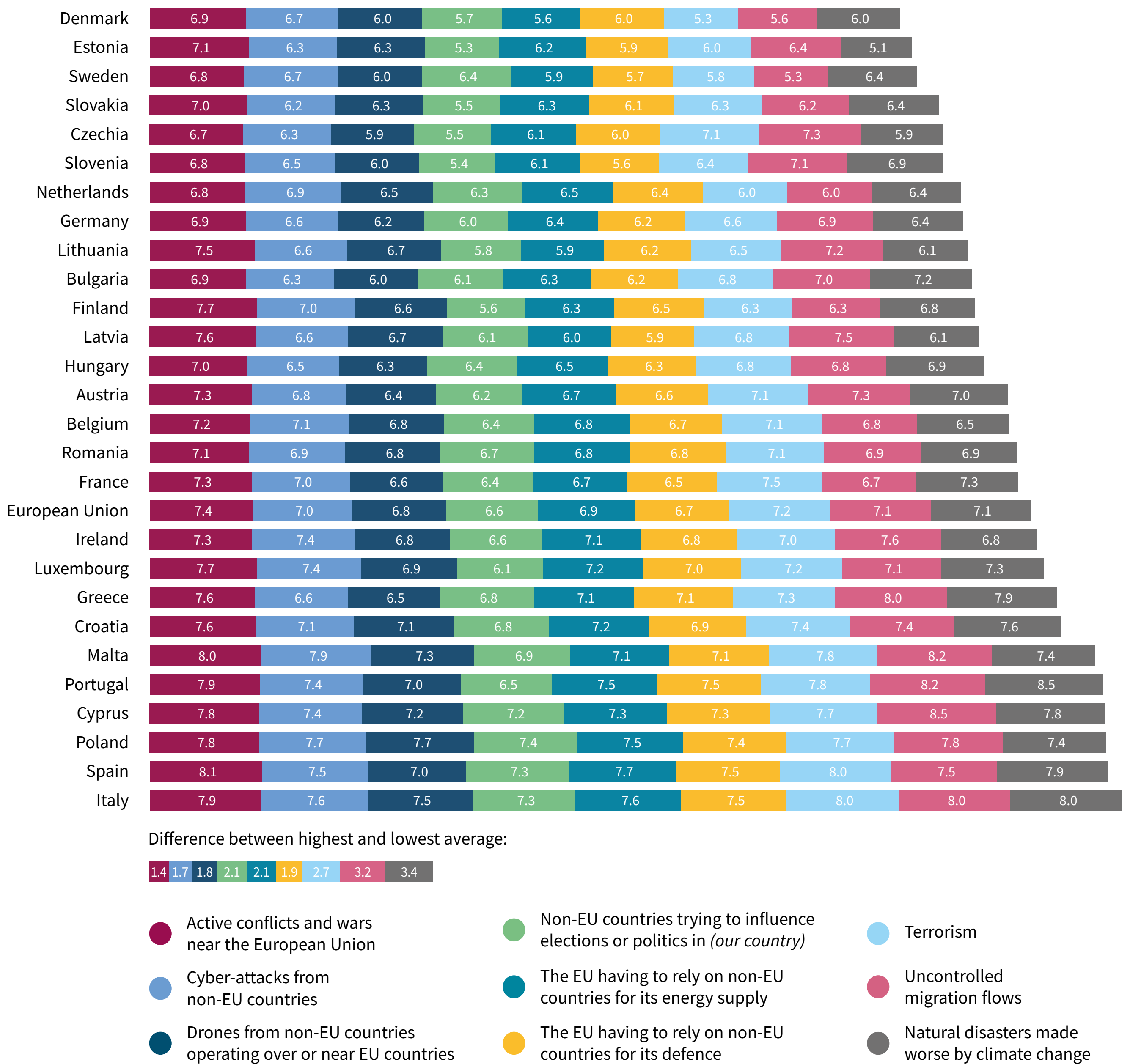

Figure 2. Perceived severity of selected threats among respondents in EU countries, by category (scale: 1–10).
Source: Author Maria Rossi's compilation based on the Special Eurobarometer survey from autumn 2025: https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/s3632_104_2_eb049ep_eng?locale=en.

confronting Russia, whether they accept escalation risks, and the conditions under which they are prepared to deploy forces. They also help explain why European action often proceeds through flexible coalitions rather than unified EU-level decisions. Initiatives such as the JEF or the European Intervention Initiative (EII) can improve readiness and coordination among willing states, but they also reflect the fact that not all countries share the same assumptions about the legitimate and effective use of military force.

This results in overlap without convergence, with new points of intersection emerging among strategic cultures that remain historically distinct. There is an increasing consensus among Europeans that military power is necessary, that territorial defence matters, and that Ukraine's defence is central to European security. However, they do not fully agree on how and when military force should be used. This matters because military capabilities

only become politically meaningful when states can align on their use.

Alliance preferences

Alliance preferences are an important part of strategic culture and are traditionally considered a relatively permanent feature. At the same time, military alliances have generally been short-lived and instrumental in character. As a collective and multilateral framework for over 75 years, NATO has been the notable exception.

The old divide between allied and non-aligned EU member states has narrowed considerably since Finland and Sweden joined NATO, leaving only a small number of EU member states outside the Alliance. Yet this formal convergence has not led to a shared understanding of alliances. On the contrary, uncertainty about the future role of the US has made alliance preferences more politically salient. Spain, France, Finland, Poland and Germany may all support stronger European defence, but they do not necessarily mean the same thing by it. For some, European defence autonomy means the ability to act independently when the US is unwilling or unreliable. For others, it means strengthening NATO by making Europeans more capable allies.

The meaning of "military alliance" is changing: NATO is in flux, while the EU is becoming more relevant as a framework for defence cooperation, adopting elements of a military alliance. The 2025 White Paper for European Defence set out what this would require in practice, identifying capability gaps in areas such as air and missile defence, artillery, drones, military mobility, cyber and electronic warfare, and strategic enablers.[6] At the same time, Europeans increasingly rely on informal alliance-like arrangements in the form of various types of coalitions, as well as bilateral defence cooperation agreements.

The effect on Europe's ability to take military action depends on whether Europeans can build on the respective strengths of these different instruments of cooperation. NATO has an integrated command structure and defence planning. The EU has funding instruments, legislative competence, and the means to create durable and potentially more binding cooperation due to its partly supranational character. Flexible coalitions and bilateral arrangements can move faster and allow more targeted cooperation among willing states.

This pluralism of frameworks also presents a challenge. European governments still lack a shared understanding of how European defence should be organised in the face of weakening US commitment and a more unstable security environment. Some see the answer in strengthening the European pillar within NATO. Others emphasise flexible coalitions or bilateral defence arrangements between European states. Still others see the EU as the framework that should gradually assume a more explicit defence role.

This uncertainty is not only institutional, but also strategic-cultural. Unlike threat perceptions, which can often be managed through mutual recognition, alliance preferences require a clearer basic understanding of the kind of security commitments that Europeans expect from one another. The main question is therefore not only which framework European governments choose, but what they expect these frameworks to achieve. Without greater clarity on this point, Europe risks accumulating more defence arrangements without a clearer idea of how to take action.

The role of the EU in strategic culture

The shifts in national threat perceptions, attitudes towards the use of military force, and alliance preferences discussed above directly affect how the EU's security and defence agency evolves. They shape what member states expect from the EU, what they are willing to support, and where they draw the line on common action. However, the EU level cannot be reduced to a mere sum of national strategic cultures; the Union is also a political and institutional space in which national assumptions interact, new practices emerge, and strategic-cultural differences can be translated into common policy.

While the EU's role in security and defence has expanded markedly in recent years, member states do not yet fully agree on the final purpose of its instruments in this area. The EU's security and defence policy is better understood as shaped by competing strategic subcultures: loose groupings

6 European Commission (2025) White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030. 19 March. https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dc0-3867b4373019_en?filename=White%20paper%20for%20European%20defence%20%E2%80%93%20Readiness%202030.pdf.

of member states and institutional actors that share broadly similar views of what the Union should do. Some, with France as the clearest representative, have pushed for a stronger and more autonomous role for the EU in security and defence. Others have traditionally emphasised the EU's civilian, regulatory and normative strengths, or have been cautious about giving the Union a more prominent defence role.

These subcultures are not fixed blocs. Their influence on dominant EU strategic-cultural norms and practices may vary across issues and change as the strategic environment evolves. Russia's war against Ukraine has strengthened the case for a stronger EU role in security and defence among actors that were previously cautious about this idea. Poland is a case in point: while it has traditionally viewed NATO and the US as the central frameworks for deterrence against Russia, the EU's support for Ukraine and the shift in its security agenda towards Europe's eastern neighbourhood have made the EU's contribution to security and defence issues more relevant to Polish security concerns.

EU institutions also matter. Strategic-cultural change at the EU level is not driven solely by member states. The High Representative, the European External Action Service, the Commission, Council bodies and transnational networks of officials all influence how crises are interpreted and which instruments are proposed. They do this by setting agendas, developing policy language, creating new procedures and offering practical solutions in response to political demands. The European Peace Facility is a good example. As an instrument outside the EU budget initially designed to strengthen the EU's credibility as a security partner in comparison to its competitors, it became the main framework for financing military assistance to Ukraine, thanks in large part to the initiative of the EU's institutional heads.[7] In doing so, it has helped to normalise a more robust role for the EU in supporting partners militarily.

Understanding the EU's strategic culture in this way has important implications. Rather than attempting to forge one cohesive strategic culture from above, the policy focus should be on identifying where national and institutional preferences overlap sufficiently for action, and where differences need to be managed rather than eliminated. Mapping these areas can help policymakers anticipate where the EU's security and defence policy is likely to advance, where coalitions may form, and where resistance is likely to emerge. Ultimately, the EU's strategic culture is inherently plural, uneven and non-linear. This does not render it ineffective by definition. On the contrary, the EU's ability to act often depends on its capacity to work with this plurality.

Conclusions: Working with Europe's strategic cultures

Europe's ability to act in security and defence will not be determined by its defence capabilities alone. Europeans also need sufficient mutual understanding of which threats matter, when military force is legitimate, and which frameworks should carry political responsibility.

This Briefing Paper has argued that strategic culture is central to this challenge. Since 2022, European strategic cultures have shifted and increasingly overlapped. Russia is more widely recognised as a long-term threat, military power has regained legitimacy as an instrument of deterrence and defence, and uncertainty about the future of US support has strengthened calls for both a more capable European role and a stronger EU role in security and defence. These changes have not yet produced one cohesive European strategic culture – nor should this be the goal.

The challenge for Europe is not to eliminate strategic-cultural diversity, but to work with it more effectively. Strategic-cultural differences can slow decision-making and complicate multinational cooperation, but they can also become a resource if they are better understood. A Europe that recognises why states prioritise different threats, accept different risks, and have different expectations of NATO, the EU, and flexible coalitions is better placed to identify workable compromises and areas of overlap.

The EU has an important role to play in this process. While it cannot create a single European strategic culture from above, it can provide the routines and venues through which strategic-cultural interaction takes place. Joint exercises, policy planning and military education can facilitate smoother cooperation and reduce avoidable friction. Europe does not need one strategic culture. What it needs is a better ability to work across its diverse strategic cultures. ⬢

7 Mustasilta, Katariina & Karjalainen, Tyyne (2025) "European strategic cultures in flux? Case study on the European peace facility". *European Journal of International Security*. Published online 2025:1–23. doi:10.1017/eis.2025.100.

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