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The blog analysis focuses on EU defence cooperation, based on insights from the GEO-POWER EU deliverable [“EU defence cooperation under geopolitical stress: roles, hurdles and opportunities.”](#)

“Europe is in a fight” were the words of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in her State of the Union-address in September. EU citizens are increasingly becoming aware that they cannot rely on others to win this fight.

Faced with Russia’s war of aggression, an unpredictable United States, and a rapidly changing global order, the European Union finds itself in a moment of historic urgency. The Commission has begun to respond — with new funding for defence industries, common procurement frameworks, and joint initiatives on resilience and technology. Yet a deeper paradox runs through this transformation: while **European citizens overwhelmingly want the EU to play a stronger role in defence and security**, the **member states remain unwilling to let it do so**.

This reluctance by member states has become the most significant obstacle to Europe's ability to act as a true security actor.

A Union of Citizens Who Want More

Public opinion across Europe paints a remarkably clear picture. According to recent [Eurobarometer data](#), 90% say that EU Member States should be more united to tackle them. [81% of EU citizens](#) support a common defence and security policy — the highest level of support recorded since 2004. Nearly four in five Europeans say they are concerned about the EU’s security in the next five years, and security and defence now top the list of citizens’ medium-term priorities, ahead of the economy, migration, and climate change.



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When asked what the EU's main benefit is, 35% point to *peace and enhanced security*, while another 34% cite *stronger cooperation among member states*. In other words, for a large majority of Europeans, the EU's promise is increasingly linked to its ability to keep them safe.

The sentiment is reinforced by the ongoing sense of vulnerability. A European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) [survey](#) shows that most Europeans now see Moscow as a direct threat. In Poland and Estonia, over half of respondents worry about a Russian attack; even in Spain and Portugal, geographically distant from the eastern flank, roughly half share this concern.

Meanwhile, [74% of EU citizens](#) agree that Europe can no longer rely on the United States and must develop its own defence capabilities. The Trump administration's scepticism and even disdain for Europe has only deepened that conviction.

Europe's people, in short, are ready for a stronger European Union in defence. The real stumbling blocks are found in their own capitals.

Member States: Sovereignty Before Strategy

Despite the shift in public attitudes, **member states continue to guard their national control over defence as one of the last bastions of sovereignty**. Interviews with senior officials and diplomats, conducted for the [GEO-POWER-EU project](#), reveal a consistent pattern: while governments accept that Europe must take greater responsibility for its own security, few are prepared to empower EU institutions to actually make this possible.

As one ambassador put it bluntly, "The EU is not a defence organisation and should not strive to become one." Many capitals prefer "coalitions of the willing" outside EU structures rather than collective action through Brussels.

This reluctance is not new. The EU treaties leave defence largely in national hands, and the EU budget still cannot finance military operations. But what is new is how starkly this mismatch between public expectations and elite behaviour now shows. Europeans are asking for more EU-level security; their governments are still playing by 20th-century sovereignty rules.

The result is institutional fragmentation. Initiatives like SAFE and the European Peace Facility are significant, but they remain bound by intergovernmental control and cautious mandates. Coordination between the Council and the Commission is uneven. And because unanimity remains the rule for most key decisions, **a single government's veto — as recent Hungarian obstruction has demonstrated — can paralyse the entire system**.

In a moment when European security depends on speed, credibility and unity, this is a dangerous design flaw.

A Strong EU Is a Core National Interest

The very governments that insist on keeping control over defence are also the ones that most need the EU to be strong. For small and medium-sized states — and even for larger ones facing fiscal, demographic, and industrial limits — the idea of purely national defence



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sovereignty is increasingly an illusion.

In today's fracturing world, a "sovereign" Europe can only be built through shared sovereignty: the pooling of resources, intelligence, and industrial capacity that no single member state can sustain alone. The question is therefore not whether the EU should act in defence, but how it can do so effectively within the four complimentary defence roles we propose in our recently published report "[EU defence cooperation under geopolitical stress: roles, hurdles and opportunities](#)".

As a *Defender*, the Union can strengthen deterrence by using its mutual defence clause (Article 42.7 TEU) more creatively — through joint operational planning, readiness exercises, and a standing coordination cell that complements NATO structures. Preparing for scenarios such as Ukraine's future accession would give substance to this clause and prevent Europe from being caught unprepared.

As a *Protector*, the EU already holds many of the right tools. Initiatives like the Preparedness Union, cybersecurity hubs, and total defence planning should be scaled up to safeguard citizens from hybrid and cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and threats to critical infrastructure such as undersea cables and energy networks. Building on this "Europe that protects" would also deepen public trust in European solidarity.

As an *Actor*, the EU must reconnect its external missions to a clear strategic purpose. Its Rapid Deployment Capacity could serve as the backbone for targeted CSDP operations that stabilise Europe's wider neighbourhood — from North Africa, the Balkans to the Black Sea — and link security assistance to enlargement and reform. Acting abroad should again become a means of securing peace at home.

Finally, as an *Arsenal*, the EU should anchor its security in industrial strength — expanding investment through the European Defence Fund, coordinating innovation under EUDIS and HEDI, and developing a genuinely European defence market that reduces dependencies while including reliable partners such as the UK and Norway. In this domain, much is already underway. But more can be done.

A strong EU is therefore not a threat to national interests — it is a way of protecting them. For eastern members, the Union's ability to deter and defend is tied to survival; for southern ones, its capacity to secure sea routes and stabilise its neighbourhood is equally vital. Solidarity must be a strong impulse, but also the stark realisation that geographically distant threats eventually will spill over on the union as a whole.

In an era of geopolitical stress, keeping defence control in national capitals may feel safe — but it is, increasingly, the greatest risk of all.



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Bridging the Gap: What Should Be Done

The *GEO-POWER-EU* defence report outlines several pragmatic steps that could begin to close the gap between citizens' expectations and governments' caution:

1. **Don't let "defence dreams" prevent real progress.**

Rather than chasing grand projects like a European army, the EU should focus on areas where cooperation clearly adds value — industrial coordination, joint procurement, and protection against hybrid and cyber threats.

2. **Establish a dedicated Defence Ministers' Council.**

Defence is too important to be treated as a side topic in the Foreign Affairs Council. A formal configuration for defence ministers would strengthen political ownership and continuity.

3. **Link defence cooperation to economic security.**

Supply chains, critical raw materials and technological sovereignty are part of the same strategic puzzle. Integrating these agendas would make the EU's security policies more coherent and less vulnerable to external pressure.

4. **Boost intelligence cooperation and communicate with citizens.**

Europeans cannot be expected to support higher spending or deeper cooperation if they do not share an understanding of the threats facing the union. Strengthened EU intelligence analysis and transparent communication would help bridge the democratic gap. This shared threat perception might prove vital when the inevitable "bread vs. butter" debates appear in the wake of rising defence expenditures.

5. **Reconnect EU defence cooperation to a long-term strategic vision.**

Europe must define what it ultimately wants to achieve — not just how to respond to the next crisis. Without a shared sense of purpose, even the best instruments will remain underused.

The Moment of Choice

Europe stands at a crossroads between its citizens' demand for security and its governments' instinct for control. The choice is not between national and European defence; it is between a fragmented Europe that remains dependent on others, and a coherent one that can act in its own interest.

The history of European integration shows that progress often begins when pragmatic necessity overtakes political hesitation. The window to act is still open, but it might be closing sooner than we think.

If the Union's leaders can accept that **sharing power within the EU is now the only way to preserve power in the world**, then public trust and strategic relevance may finally align.

Otherwise, the paradox will persist — a Europe whose people are ready for more, but whose governments still guard the keys.



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