

“European Army”: A Thought Experiment

By Lutz Unterseher, Berlin, February 2025

The sketchy study below updates earlier work in reaction to Europe’s security situation as it has evolved over the past decade.

Over twenty years ago, an article was published in the *Wiener Zeitung* – the official gazette of the Republic of Austria – calling for deeper integration among EU states (E. Matzner/L. Unterseher 2003: “Für ein europäisches Gesellschaftsmodell,” Nr. 159, p. 3).

Within that framework, the creation of **joint armed forces**, in lieu of almost all national defense efforts, was deemed essential to make the EU a unified actor on the global stage.

The authors recognized that armed forces primarily also express **national identity**, or even newly resurgent nationalism, and thus would likely be the **last** element to truly “internationalize” (which is why any common military contingents were always considered only in addition to national forces – or partially “detached” from them).

Yet it still seemed necessary to introduce and flesh out the more **radical solution** – to provide a concrete vision that could fuel long-term political action. The advantages of such a perspective are substantial, not only in security-policy terms but also in terms of saving limited resources.

This idea has been revived by efforts of U.S. President Trump, who seeks to undermine NATO unity via bilateral relationships and coerce European allies to spend **5%** of their GDP on defense.

It should be obvious that such an unproductive use of resources would severely disadvantage Europe in its economic competition with the United States.

As early as 1985, the Scottish economist Malcolm Chalmers (in *Paying for Defence: Military Spending and British Decline*, London: Pluto) laid out and theorized these problems of misallocation.

Basic Orientation

The European Union does not seek to be a **hegemonic power**, extending its sphere of influence by military means, whether direct or indirect. Such a politico-strategic stance could never gain the backing of a “qualified majority” of the member states.

Rather, the EU aims to exercise global influence – also for the sake of international security – by fostering and deepening economic, cultural, and political-diplomatic ties. The military element in this approach serves to

protect EU territory (and that of neighbors on the periphery) and – when authorized by the international community – to contribute to stabilizing crisis zones further afield, **without undertaking punitive operations** beyond enforcing embargos.

In this conceptual design, the EU strives to remain **neutral** in global security, which does not, however, preclude it from actively supporting the political-cultural advancement of democratic societies.

Nuclear Deterrence

In this context, the EU armed forces are conceived as a conventional capability able to **credibly deter** on that same level. No nuclear force is needed to offset any conventional shortfall.

But if there is a **nuclear** threat, the question arises how best to address it. Thus far, the standard answer has been “extended deterrence” provided by the United States – a guarantee that, under President Trump’s posture, has become thoroughly dubious: security is offered only if one heeds humiliating U.S. criteria.

Already before the end of the Cold War, doubts had risen about Washington’s pledge. For instance, while some in continental Europe viewed tactical nukes as cementing a deterrent tie to the U.S. strategic arsenal, more and more voices in Washington associated those very weapons with the disturbing possibility of limiting a nuclear conflict to Europe alone (**finis Germaniae**).

That leaves only **France**. Its nuclear arsenal is a **stability-oriented “minimum deterrent”** – sea-based, in principle suitable as a final safeguard against an adversary’s first use of nuclear weapons, but not geared for battle-field nuclear warfighting.

Efforts to incorporate France’s deterrent into Europe’s defense therefore appear advisable.

Institutional Framework

The European Commission gains a **Commissioner for Defense**, whose office acts as a “European Defense Ministry.” Under this entity are a **strategic planning unit** (General Staff) – also responsible for unifying military doctrine – and a **central military command** structure.

To authorize the use of military contingents, a **three-quarters majority** of EU member states plus the European Parliament is required, ensuring broad legitimacy. At the same time, decision by unanimity is avoided, thus closing the door on sabotage of a common EU policy.

Task Fulfillment and Mode of Operations

Defense of European territory, relying on conventional means, must be

conducted in a **markedly defensive** manner – that is, with no strategic offensive forces, nor provocation of a potential opponent before or during a conflict, thus fostering stability. Yet for flexibility, there must be operational-tactical counterattack elements, though acceptable only if tied – logistically and informationally – to the area to be defended.

In line with cost-effectiveness and resource conservation, **defense** is deemed systematically superior to **attack** (Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 4th ed., Berlin: Ullstein, p. 384). Thus, an opponent's forces need not be matched slavishly in quantity to achieve robust deterrence.

For flexibly bolstering of the defense on the EU periphery, the principle of separating operational from tactical movement applies (IASFOR 1984: *On Reactive Defense Options*, Munich: University of the German Federal Armed Forces, Dept. of Computer Science).

Speedy operational maneuver serves primarily to optimally allocate adequate forces to the right place at the right time for a **defensive** stance, not to set up massive tactical offensives. The same approach holds for **out-of-area** crisis management missions.

Some member states may find themselves in particularly **exposed geo-strategic** positions and require extra security measures. In such cases, it is possible at the national level to maintain a militia-type **homeland-defense** structure.

Size and Personnel

The EU armed forces total **one million** uniformed personnel on active duty (including 25,000 training slots). National quotas apply, with mutually agreed deviations possible. This is about the same as the Russian Army's strength prior to the invasion of Ukraine and about **25% less** than that of all current EU armies combined.

These forces can call on **1.5 million reservists**, each of whose last period of active training was no more than three years prior.

Recruitment is **voluntary** across the board. A single army requires a single recruitment process; however, the aforementioned local militias can still be raised under a compulsory principle at the national level.

The personnel structure is as follows:

- **7%** career (professional) officers
- **10%** officers under a fixed-term contract
- **15%** professional NCOs
- **28%** NCOs under a fixed-term contract
- **40%** enlisted ranks (2-year active term)

Another **100,000** serve as civilian employees of the forces.

Organization and Armament

A **central command** leads the Defense Base and the Operational Organization. The **Defense Base** includes 225,000 uniformed personnel plus 60,000 civilians. Its main responsibilities:

- Recruiting (selection)/career management
- Basic training of recruits/organizing reserve exercises
- Advanced training, professional development
- Managing major training ranges
- Electronic intelligence
- Cyber warfare and defense
- Satellite-based surveillance, communications
- Airspace surveillance with ground-based sensors (radar)
- Stationary logistics
- Stationary medical services
- Facility protection via security infantry
- Discipline within the force (military police)
- Equipment testing and evaluation

The **Operational Organization** has 775,000 uniformed personnel plus 40,000 civilians.

It is divided into five **military districts**, within which ground, air-defense, and naval forces closely cooperate (jointness). The exact “mix ratio” of service branches can vary widely by district.

Ground Forces

They number 550,000n – comparable to the Russian Army before its war on Ukraine (which, however, included large segments that in this EU model would go under the Defense Base).

This 550,000 is **71%** of all operational forces, making clear that Europe’s defense prioritizes **territorial protection**. By comparison, the means for large-scale power projection (navy, air force) have a smaller slice than in most current EU states. The ground forces comprise 40 combat brigades and 40 support brigades.

The **combat brigades**:

1. **5 x Special Forces**, suited for airmobile spearhead operations (counter-attacks, evacuations, etc.).
2. **5 x Armored Reconnaissance** with a uniform suite of light, protected wheeled vehicles; battlefield radar, mobile robotics, tactical drones; armed with light autocannons, AT missiles, automatic mortars; roles: information gathering, area control, “cavalry screen.”

3. **20 x Mechanized Infantry** using the same light wheeled platform as recon, plus medium wheeled platforms for fire support, for fast operational movement to assume a tactical defensive posture.
4. **10 x Heavy** units, uniformly equipped with tracked vehicles, MBTs and IFVs in a 1:1 ratio, plus self-propelled howitzers – cooperating with lighter formations and enabling limited counterattacks.

All these brigades have integrated anti-air components.

No helicopter gunship regiments exist, due to the lack of plausible scenarios and poor cost-effectiveness (C. Conetta, *Rotocraft for War, Part II: Helicopters in U.S. Wars since 9/11*, in L. Unterseher 2009, *Military Intervention and Common Sense*, Cambridge, MA: The Commonwealth Institute).

The **40 support brigades** include:

- 5 Signals,
- 10 Logistics,
- 5 Engineers,
- 5 Transport Helicopters,
- 10 mechanized artillery (tube/rocket),
- 5 NBC defense.

Overall, this structure is **relatively light**. Only around **1,000 main battle tanks** exist (compared to the more than 2,000 currently fielded by EU armies). The emphasis is instead on cost-effective, defensive-oriented, operationally mobile light forces.

A particular strength lies in **indirect fire**: the 10 artillery brigades in the support pool plus artillery battalions in the infantry and armored brigades together yield over 2,000 mechanized fire units. By comparison, prior to invading Ukraine, the Russian Army had fewer such active systems – and with poorer quality than Western equivalents.

The operational organization is flexible. Each military district holds several command (sub-)structures, able to draw from a *matrix* of 40 combat and 40 support brigades to assemble mission packages according to the situation. The concept of corps and divisions is thus dropped.

(This command arrangement is linked to ideas of German Major General Johannes Gerber.)

Naturally, the military districts that border a possible “source of threat” get more ground-force elements than do others. And the principle of “neighbors helping neighbors” applies: less-threatened areas can lend quick, substantial support to those in crisis, as the overall **light** structure is designed for long-distance movements within Europe.

Air Defense

Air Defense has 130,000 personnel – about **17%** of all operational forces. It divides into **ground-based** air defense and **air units**.

Ground-based Air Defense features a robust sensor/radar network and command centers integrated at the military-district level, with 360 firing units in 10 regiments:

- 36 units specialized in ballistic-missile interception,
- the rest handle a broad array of airborne threats (manned/unmanned).

At an average missile range of 75 km, the coverage amounts to **1.5 times** the entire EU land area, and even more if deployed more densely in key regions.

AirUnits comprise 5 squadrons for operational-strategic reconnaissance (airspace detection over land and sea), plus 30 wings and 10 independent squadrons for operational-tactical tasks. Each wing holds about 30 aircraft in three squadrons:

1. **5 squadrons reconnaissance** (some also for SEAD) with manned and unmanned systems,
2. **25 wings for defensive air-to-air missions** (interception, air superiority over EU airspace or in crisis zones),
3. **5 wings of light fighter-bombers** for close air support: a flexible “fire brigade” for the ground forces,
4. **5 squadrons heavy fighter-bombers** for interdiction and strike (including anti-ship operations).

Hence around **1,000** tactical combat aircraft (fighters, light/heavy fighter-bombers, recon craft). This compares to some 1,500 in current EU service (though that number is declining) and exceeds what Russia, after losses in Ukraine, could still deploys vis-à-vis Europe.

Additionally, a **missile/drone strike** wing might exist, which doesn't negate the overall defensive emphasis, however. That orientation is well-founded:

Already in the Cold War, NATO studies found that **defensive air operations** over one's own territory are more cost-effective than attempts to destroy the enemy's strike forces at their home bases (C.E. Myers, Jr. 1985: *The Military Utility of Tacair*, Working Paper, Arlington, VA, January; *The Economist*, 30 August 1986, p. 19).

For **air transport**, a mix of aircraft of varying range and payload ensures:

- 2 squadrons with heavy intercontinental transports,
- 5 for continental-level,
- 10 for operational-tactical lift.

Key is that Europe's airlift capacity meets intra-European needs and can also support humanitarian or crisis deployments globally. It is insufficient for

large-scale punitive expeditions, however – a constraint paralleling limited capacity for **air-to-air refueling**.

Navy

The Navy totals 95,000 uniformed personnel – about **12%** of the operational forces – divided into **coastal defense** and the **blue-water fleet**.

Coastal Defense has 13,000 personnel, mostly operating shore-based land-mobile anti-ship missiles along with sensors, and light air defense, plus security infantry.

Blue-Water Fleet: 82,000. Its largest assets are three carriers (aircraft/helicopters) used alternately in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic for sea-control tasks, supporting lighter forces.

There are **no amphibious assault ships**, as the mission does not include large-scale forced entry. Platforms can, however, be adapted for **disaster relief** in remote areas.

Major combatants:

- **35 destroyers and large frigates** for controlling and defending maritime approaches to Europe, also back-up of lighter forces stationed forward.
- **75 corvettes and light frigates** for persistent presence in marginal seas and coastal areas of concern, plus possible distant deployments (piracy, embargo enforcement).
- **35 submarines** (both oceanic and littoral designs, some nuclear, some air-independent) for low-visibility forward patrol and interception in vital European waters.
- **90 mine-warfare/mine-clearance** vessels and patrol boats for littoral tasks.

The navy also has 5 large supply ships (tenders). The plan does not anticipate extended, large-scale naval operations abroad.

Comparatively fewer “heavy” surface ships exist than in the current combined EU navies (yet more than Russia has vis-à-vis Europe), but a significantly larger complement of corvettes and small frigates. The overall composition confirms a **defensive** bent – primarily controlling and protecting Europe’s seas, forcibly repelling intruders if needed.

Integration

Finally, how should international mixing within each service be realized? A brief answer: Based on experience, for **air** and **naval** forces, integration above the unit level is advisable, while in the **army**, integration above brigade level may be more viable.

Fiscal Framework

The European Defense Budget (in billions of Euros)

Personnel

Military pay	47
Civilian employees	7
Pensions/severance/insurance	23
Homeland defense (subsidy)	3
Total personnel	80

Modernization

R&D	9
Procurement	37
Homeland defense (subsidy)	2
Total modernization	48
Operations & maintenance	42

Grand total **170**

Notes:

- Figures refer to the year 2023. The EU's GDP at that time was about €17 trillion, and total defense spending stood near **€310 billion**, or ~1.8% of GDP.
- Under the proposed model, only **1%** of GDP is required for the EU's defense. (Even if some states choose not to contribute personnel, all must pay into the common defense fund in proportion to their GDP.)
- Personnel costs are based on data from a central-European country (per capita), consistent with the previously stated personnel structure. They account for ~47% of total defense outlays. Thus ~53 % remain to equip and operate EU forces at levels impressive by global standards.

The “model” cost of **€170 billion** (1% of the EU's GDP) can be compared with Russia's (2023) ~€100 billion, ~6% of Russia's GDP (de.statista.com).

Autonomous Procurement

Transitioning to this model should bring a surge in modernization by retiring older main weapon systems (e.g., MBTs, tactical aircraft, large destroyers) and **acquiring lighter platforms** in greater numbers.

Further ongoing modernization would depart from established patterns. Until now, giant European defense industry conglomerates have formed, and for “European unity” reasons, countries usually had no choice but to buy from

them. Sometimes these conglomerates arose precisely because multiple states pooled demand.

The result has been an **industrial supply monopoly** with adverse impacts on cost, schedule, and performance (examples: Eurofighter, the Franco-German Tiger attack helicopter, the NH90, and the A400M).

It is still beneficial for European forces to rely on European defense-industrial capacity – though not necessarily in multinational corporations. This capacity might continue to be located in individual member states (one can think of submarine-building in Germany or naval artillery from Italy).

Yet to ensure good value for the large consolidated European defense demand under this model, open **competition** on the global arms market must be exploited. Not only the usual U.S. or UK suppliers should be considered: a broader array of countries must be taken seriously, e.g., Brazil, Israel, South Africa, South Korea, Taiwan, Turkey.

Integral Stability Policy

Compared to the existing NATO goal for Europe – 2% of GDP on defense – if the proposed model had been in place by 2023, **€170 billion** would have been freed up. Relative to Trump’s 5% demand, the difference is **€680 billion**.

Even the lower figure would grant EU states and the Commission enormous leeway to support international institutions in a spirit of “a wider understanding of security,” contributing more to bridging the gap between the First and the Third World. It could also help modernize Europe’s infrastructure and reinforce its social safety nets, thereby strengthening democracy and competitiveness globally.

Concluding Remark

It is hardly accidental that the **European Union** was chosen as the political framework for this force model. Above all, that is because, given Trump-era U.S. policy, NATO in its Atlantic-partnership sense no longer exists.

Whether a self-confident “Euro-NATO” can emerge under American pressure and attempts to sow division remains highly questionable. It does, however, seem wise to “carry over” NATO’s infrastructure and communication networks into the **authentically European** armed forces wherever possible.