

# EUROMIL Wednesday Q&A series

## 3 Questions on European Defence



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**Developing European defence has never been more urgent or higher on the political agenda. President von der Leyen has made the pursuit of a European Defence Union a priority for her second term. What, in your view, are the main barriers slowing down deeper defence cooperation?**

- It may come as a surprise, but Europe already has a vast amount of defence cooperation in place today. A recent count revealed more than 1,000 (one thousand!) different forms of cooperation. The challenge, therefore, lies in making these collaborations more effective. Joint training and operational activities are usually not a problem. The difficulty arises when it comes to launching joint procurement programmes based on a single shared doctrine and a unified configuration of equipment. In practice, this often runs up against national economic reflexes. With due modesty, I can say that Belgium sets a benchmark here, with its strategic partnerships: with the Netherlands for the Navy and with France for the Army.
- Aside from these national 'economic' reflexes, I also observe a significant diversity among the (EU)ropean population when it comes to the awareness of the need to strengthen the overall resilience of our societies. Western Europe in particular lags behind in this regard. In my view, this is the greatest political challenge. Changing the intangible—culture and mentality—is far more difficult than changing the tangible, such as acquiring equipment.

### **How to collectively tackle such challenges?**

In my view, embarking on a quest for a unified European defence with a single type of tank, a single type of frigate, and so forth, would be counterproductive. During the Cold War, deterrence—despite the existence of many different types of tanks and frigates—proved more than sufficient to prevent a military conflict on the European continent. Such a quest would never succeed because it fails to take into account legitimate national concerns, particularly when vast sums of taxpayer money are being spent. In my opinion, today's industrial defence landscape is the legacy of an industry that enabled us to win the Cold War. We must therefore revitalise this existing landscape, but with due regard for the interests of each individual country.



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This reconstruction must not lead to the concentration of the defence industry in the larger European nations. That would place a heavy strain on the much-needed solidarity across the continent. The way forward lies in building regional clusters—which may differ depending on the domain—in which the interests of each participating country are reflected in the division of labour among the partners.

- The real step forward in terms of interoperability must be taken in the field of communications. The major challenge is to break through the national communication stovepipes. Creating a coalition network that is no longer built hierarchically, but in which every (weapon) system or sensor constitutes a node in the network, is the key lesson we must draw from the war in Ukraine. In doing so, all countries—particularly in land operations—must be willing to move beyond their national cryptosystems and evolve towards ‘coalition cryptosystems’. We must understand that such systems represent the final bastions of national sovereignty and are therefore particularly sensitive.

**In March 2025, the European Commission published its White Paper on Defence Readiness 2030, and in May 2025, HRVP Kaja Kallas announced that the EU’s Rapid Deployment Capacity - a key deliverable of the Strategic Compass - is now fully operational. In your view, do these developments significantly enhance the EU’s defence readiness?**

- Short answer: No. It’s too small - just 5,000 troops - and there’s no guaranteed funding when it’s actually deployed. We don’t really need initiatives like this. In defence, policymakers are constantly coming up with new abbreviations (RDC, JEF, and so on). It might sound good politically, but at the end of the day, it’s always the same soldiers doing the work.
- In times of collective defence, one must be able to deploy all available assets simultaneously and on a relatively short notice.