European Strategic Autonomy and the Prospect of a "Real European Army": Structural Constraints and Future Scenarios



Adeeb Ziadeh

Department of International Relations / College of Arts and Sciences / Qatar University, Qatar

abader@qu.edu.qa

Kheir Diabat

Department of International Relations / College of Arts and Sciences / Qatar University, Qatar

Kheir@qu.edu.qa

Received date: 04/05/2026 Accepted date: 07/06/2026 Publication date: 01/07/2026

Abstract:

This article examines the feasibility of establishing a European army within the broader debate on European strategic autonomy. Rather than approaching the issue as a normative aspiration or a purely technical military challenge, the study conceptualizes it as a structural and political problem rooted in European integration dynamics. Employing a qualitative historical-analytical approach and an integrated theoretical framework combining neofunctionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, and realism, the article analyzes the evolution of European defense cooperation, internal EU constraints, and external systemic pressures. It argues that despite renewed political momentum following recent geopolitical developments, the creation of a fully autonomous European army remains unlikely due to enduring sovereignty concerns, institutional fragmentation, divergent strategic cultures, and continued dependence on NATO. The study concludes that the most plausible trajectory for European defense lies in enhanced functional cooperation within existing alliance structures rather than full military unification.

Keywords*: European Strategic Autonomy; European Army; EU Defense Integration; NATO; European Security; Alliance Politics.*

*** Corresponding author: Adeeb Ziadeh, e-mail**: abader@qu.edu.qa

Introduction:

The question of whether Europe can establish its own army represents one of the most persistent and unresolved challenges in European integration history. Unlike economic or monetary cooperation, defense has consistently remained the most sensitive sphere of national sovereignty, intimately connected to statehood, identity, and national survival. The debate's renewed prominence following French President Emmanuel Macron's 2018 call for a "Real European Army" marked not a conceptual break but the resurgence of a historically rooted tension: European states have long acknowledged collective defense's strategic importance yet remained unwilling to surrender ultimate control over military force (Meershoek, 2023, p. 13). Early initiatives such as the 1950s European Defence Community (EDC) collapsed under domestic opposition and sovereignty anxieties, establishing an enduring pattern that successive institutional reforms have failed to overcome.

The post-Cold War period failed to fundamentally transform this trajectory. Soviet dissolution created new pressures to manage crises beyond Europe's borders, prompting incremental institutional adjustments, the CFSP and subsequently the CSDP, yet these frameworks deliberately eschewed supranational military command, maintaining intergovernmental decision-making and voluntary participation (Smith, 2017, pp. 63–65). NATO's enduring centrality further complicated autonomous European army prospects, with European defense initiatives evolving as supplementary burden-sharing frameworks rather than substitutes for the alliance (Howorth, 2014, pp. 55–56). Macron's 2018 proposal should not be confused with operational viability. Calls for a European army frequently conflate three analytically separate issues: military capacity, institutional command authority, and strategic identity. Europe's considerable military resources remain dispersed across incompatible doctrines and national chains of command, while authority over force deployment stays embedded in national governments and a cohesive strategic culture remains absent (Giegerich, 2006, pp. 3–4).

This article contends that contemporary debates are best interpreted not as technical challenges but as manifestations of deeper structural constraints inherent in European integration. The guiding research question is: to what degree is a European army's creation feasible considering historical legacies, internal EU dynamics, and external systemic pressures? Through a qualitative historical-analytical approach combining integration theory and realism as a security perspective, the study challenges narratives equating deeper defense cooperation

with inevitable military unification, offering a more nuanced understanding of what European defense integration can realistically accomplish.

1. Literature Review

Academic debates on a European army are situated within broader scholarly discussions on strategic autonomy, defense integration, and EU sovereignty. At the conceptual core lies strategic autonomy, broadly defined as the EU's capacity to act independently in security and defense while maintaining cooperative allied relationships (EEAS, 2016). Fiott emphasizes its operational and industrial dimensions (Fiott, 2018), while Howorth conceptualizes it as relational autonomy embedded within alliances rather than separate from them (Howorth, 2017), a perspective further developed by Molnár & Harnos (2024). As Biscop argues, if the EU does not take the lead in stabilizing its own periphery and securing its interests, no other power will do that for it (Biscop, 2022, para. 2). This article builds on this relational understanding, positioning the European army debate within the persistent tension between aspiration and institutional constraint.

On the question of integration's reach into defense, early neofunctionalist spillover predictions have been consistently challenged by empirical developments (Forster et al., 1997). Moravcsik's liberal intergovernmentalism provides the dominant counterpoint: states retain sovereign control and cooperate only when aligned with national preferences (Moravcsik, 1997), a view supported by CSDP evidence showing decision-making firmly with member states and engagement remaining voluntary (Menon, 2011). Within the transatlantic framework, Permanent Structured Cooperation PESCO and the European Defence Fund EDF are interpreted as corrective burden-sharing mechanisms rather than NATO substitutes (Biscop, 2020; James, 2008), while strategic culture, encompassing divergent threat assessments, military doctrines, and norms on force employment (Khalil, 2025), constitutes a deeper structural obstacle. Meyer acknowledges converging strategic norms yet finds persistent divergence in willingness to use force (Meyer, 2005), while Gotkowska observes that Western European political discourse remains disconnected from actual military capabilities (Gotkowska, 2018).

Taken together, this scholarship reveals significant analytical gaps. Few existing studies systematically integrate historical legacies, internal EU dynamics, and external systemic pressures within a coherent analytical framework. This article addresses these gaps by synthesizing historical analysis, integration theory, and realist perspectives, shifting the central question from whether Europe should

possess an army to what cooperative arrangements are structurally viable under prevailing conditions.

2. Theoretical Framework: Explaining the Limits of a European Army

Analyzing the institutional feasibility of a European army necessitates a multi-theoretical approach. The debate emerges at the convergence of competing expectations: integration scholarship anticipating deepening institutionalization, and realist analysis emphasizing sovereignty concerns, power distributions, and alliance dependencies. This section synthesizes neofunctionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, and realist theory, supplemented by strategic culture as a mediating variable.

Neofunctionalism's core mechanism centers on spillover: integration in one sector creates pressures propelling integration into adjacent domains (Rosamond, 2005). Early scholars posited that economic integration would require eventual military coordination (Niemann & Ioannou, 2015), and the CSDP, EDA, and joint operations could be read as supporting evidence. Yet spillover has demonstrably stalled in defense: even during the Balkans conflicts, institutional responses remained intergovernmental, and cultivated spillover attempts are constrained by EU institutions' lack of formal authority to override member state preferences (Haroche, 2020). Where neofunctionalism falters, liberal intergovernmentalism offers stronger explanatory purchase, conceptualizing integration as strategic bargaining among states shaped by domestic politics, with particular traction in high-politics domains where sovereignty constraints are strongest (Cini, 2019, pp. 69–82). Member states have systematically supported arrangements preserving sovereign control, voluntary CSDP opt-ins and intergovernmental PESCO design (Sweeney & Winn, 2017), while blocking centralized command. The absence of a European army thus reflects rational sovereignty preservation rather than integration failure (Menon, 2017): leaders invoke the concept symbolically while preserving ultimate national authority (Moravcsik, 2020).

Realism contextualizes these choices within the broader international system, foregrounding power distributions, threat calculations, and anarchy as primary determinants of state behavior (Rynning, 2011). NATO's endurance reflects continued U.S. military relevance and extended deterrence (Sireci & Coletta, 2009), with Eastern European states regarding it as indispensable against Russia (Bugajski, 2016); replicating NATO's core capabilities, nuclear deterrence, strategic airlift, intelligence, remains prohibitively costly. Realism also illuminates divergent threat

perceptions: France prioritizes strategic autonomy and expeditionary capabilities, while Eastern members focus on territorial defense and U.S. guarantees (Yost, 2003). Underlying all three frameworks is strategic culture as an essential mediating variable: collectively held beliefs on the legitimate use of force condition how states interpret threats and respond to external shocks (Glenn, 2009). EU member states exhibit fundamentally divergent military traditions, legal frameworks, and public attitudes toward force (Vennesson et al., 2010), while domestic constraints restrict commitment of forces under supranational command, explaining why Russian aggression generates divergent rather than convergent policy responses (Kolmašová, 2025). Together, these frameworks redirect attention toward the analytically precise question: what forms of military integration are institutionally viable under prevailing conditions?

3. Historical Evolution of the European Army Idea

Proposals for a unified European military emerged immediately after World War II, making the European army idea coeval with the integration project itself. The first serious attempt, the European Defence Community (EDC), proposed through the Pleven Plan in 1950, sought to integrate national forces under supranational command, driven by Cold War pressures and the imperative to rearm West Germany within a controlled European structure (Griffiths, 2020). Despite its strategic logic, the EDC collapsed in 1954 when the French National Assembly rejected the treaty, exposing the core tension that would define all subsequent efforts: governments acknowledged collective security's importance while refusing to relinquish sovereign military control. Scholars regard this failure as the moment that created a lasting "defense exception" within the European project, cementing intergovernmentalism as the norm for military affairs (Bátora, 2009).

NATO filled the resulting void, providing collective defense guarantees and nuclear protection under U.S. leadership, removing pressure for European military autonomy while embedding structural reliance on American strength. Operating as a political institution as much as a military alliance, NATO fundamentally shaped European strategic culture (Wallander, 2002), consigning coordination efforts such as the Western European Union to largely symbolic status. The Soviet collapse appeared to open a second window, yet the Yugoslav wars exposed Europe's incapacity for independent crisis management: despite geographic proximity, European states proved unable to halt the conflict without U.S. intervention. The CFSP established by the 1992 Maastricht Treaty institutionalized the ambition of

"speaking with one voice" while deliberately avoiding mechanisms compelling unified military action (Klein & Wessels, 2013). The CSDP's creation in 1999 represented the most significant institutional development since the EDC debates, yet its explicitly intergovernmental design entrenched rather than overcame the prevailing logic (Reynolds, 2008). The Treaty of Lisbon (2009) introduced PESCO while reaffirming ultimate member state authority, consistent with every preceding reform cycle.

The historical trajectory thus reveals striking structural continuity: each proposal, from the 1950s through Macron's 2018 appeal for a "Real European Army", emerged in response to external shocks yet encountered the same impediments: sovereignty concerns, divergent strategic cultures, and NATO dependence. History serves not as a catalog of missed opportunities but as a diagnostic tool revealing the enduring limits of defense integration that any realistic assessment of future scenarios must account for.

4. Internal Drivers of the European Army Debate

While external pressures frequently dominate political discourse, the most enduring constraints on European army formation remain internal to the EU. Political, institutional, economic, and societal factors simultaneously generate demand for deeper defense integration and impose structural limitations that preclude its full realization. This section contends that internal EU dynamics produce a dual effect: they create conditions that make enhanced military coordination desirable while systematically foreclosing the emergence of a fully unified European army.

a. Political Fragmentation and Divergent National Preferences

At the core of the debate lies political fragmentation. France champions defense autonomy, with a strategic culture emphasizing military sovereignty, expeditionary capabilities, and global power projection. Germany approaches integration far more cautiously, constrained by constitutional limitations, robust parliamentary oversight, and a deeply institutionalized culture of military restraint. Eastern European member states, particularly Poland and the Baltic nations, prioritize territorial defense imperatives and regard NATO, rather than EU-led frameworks, as the primary guarantor of their security vis-à-vis Russia (Gulmez & Gulmez, 2020). These divergences produce a lowest-common-denominator dynamic: initiatives advance only when they accommodate the most cautious

members, generating flexible, non-binding arrangements rather than centralized command authority—the opposite of what a European army presupposes.

b. Institutional Architecture and the Limits of Intergovernmentalism

Defense policy remains firmly anchored in intergovernmental decision-making, with unanimity requirements governing critical security decisions and no supranational enforcement mechanisms capable of compelling compliance or ensuring operational coordination (Balodis, 2020). The EEAS, EDA, and EU Military Staff offer coordination capabilities but lack independent command authority, while the Lisbon Treaty's mutual assistance provision (Article 42.7) establishes no collective defense commitment equivalent to NATO's Article 5. PESCO, frequently cited as meaningful integration progress, exemplifies these limits: participation is optional, obligations are varied, and compliance mechanisms remain weak, embodying "cooperation without centralization" (Blockmans, 2021). This arrangement reflects calculated political preferences rather than institutional inadequacy.

c. Economic Disparities and Defense Industrial Fragmentation

Defense budgets vary considerably across member states in absolute terms and as a proportion of GDP, with NATO's 2 percent benchmark unevenly observed. States with lower expenditure resist committing resources to joint structures perceived as primarily benefiting larger members, while states with established defense industries resist integration that could diminish national control over procurement and technological development (Becker et al., 2022). The European Defence Fund seeks to incentivize collaborative research and development, yet its budget remains modest relative to national spending. As Rosato argues, economic integration alone cannot overcome the political obstacles to military unification (Rosato, 2011): economic considerations simultaneously fuel calls for cooperation and reinforce the fragmentation they ostensibly seek to address.

d. Democratic Legitimacy, Brexit, and the Boundaries of Integration

Public support for a fully unified European army varies significantly across member states, and national parliaments retain decisive authority over troop deployments. Legitimacy deficits undermine integration sustainability when political elites advance faster than public opinion (Tonra, 2018), explaining why European initiatives consistently emphasize civilian missions and crisis management over combat operations. Brexit introduced a further layer of complexity: while it removed a persistent opponent of EU military cooperation,

creating political space for PESCO and the EDF, it simultaneously stripped the EU of significant military capability and intensified sovereignty concerns among remaining members. Post-Brexit defense initiatives consequently reflect integration by stealth through incremental cooperation and resilience-building, without explicit supranational ambition (Ferreira-Pereira, 2020).

e. Internal Drivers as Enablers and Constraints

Collectively, these internal factors produce a contradictory dynamic. Political fragmentation, institutional design, economic disparities, and legitimacy challenges simultaneously generate demand for stronger coordination and define the ceiling beyond which integration cannot advance. The European army debate thus arises not from unified collective intent but from the structural friction between perceived security needs and institutional constraints, explaining why European defense cooperation continues to expand through new missions, capabilities, and institutions, without converging toward a single unified military force.

5. External Drivers of the European Army Debate

In addition to internal EU dynamics, external factors rooted in international system structures profoundly shape the European army debate. Shifts in American strategic commitments, Russian assertiveness, the broader erosion of the liberal international order, and instability in Europe's periphery have sharpened continental anxieties about strategic exposure and defense adequacy. This section argues that while these pressures have revitalized European strategic autonomy aspirations, they simultaneously reveal the structural constraints that render a truly autonomous European army difficult to achieve, functioning not as straightforward drivers of military unification but as catalysts for pragmatic adjustment within existing frameworks.

a. Alliance Uncertainty and the United States

For decades, European security rested on the expectation of enduring U.S. commitment to NATO. Changes in American foreign policy, particularly during the Trump administrations, generated exceptional levels of alliance uncertainty, with rhetoric emphasizing burden-sharing and strategic reorientation toward Asia casting doubts on the dependability of American security guarantees. As Cladi argues, European security cooperation is driven by uncertainty about U.S. involvement, aligning with hedging strategies rather than outright abandonment (Cladi, 2022), and Macron's 2018 call for a "Real European Army" is best understood in this context of perceived American unpredictability (Tekir, 2023). Yet

alliance uncertainty produces contradictory effects: while driving capability-building efforts, it simultaneously reinforces dependence on NATO as insurance against systemic risk, so long as the United States remains indispensable for nuclear deterrence, intelligence, and strategic airlift, European states retain compelling reasons to maintain alliance cohesion.

b. Russia, Ukraine, and the Primacy of NATO

Russia's actions since 2014, culminating in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, constitute the most significant external security shock to Europe since the Cold War, transforming threat perceptions and exposing longstanding deficiencies in European military preparedness. While Russian aggression strengthens arguments for a European army, the empirical record points in the opposite direction: NATO's rapid force deployments, increased American troop presence in Eastern Europe, and the centrality of U.S. military assistance to Ukraine have underscored the alliance's enduring primacy (Furgacz, 2020). Territorial defense crises consistently push European states closer to NATO rather than toward EU military frameworks, making Russian assertiveness simultaneously a catalyst for European defense discussions and a structural constraint on genuine military autonomy.

c. Systemic Instability, Global Competition, and Neighborhood Crises

The weakening of the liberal international order, characterized by great-power competition, declining multilateral institutions, and heightened geopolitical instability, has amplified European concerns about strategic relevance. China's emergence contributes to a more competitive landscape in which American attention increasingly gravitates toward the Indo-Pacific, leaving European policymakers anxious about being sidelined. The EU consequently faces a paradox: expectations that it should assume greater security responsibility have grown precisely as its autonomous capacity remains constrained (Krastev, 2011). Instability in the southern and eastern periphery, from the Middle East and North Africa to the Sahel, adds further pressure, yet EU responses have predominantly relied on civilian missions and limited military engagement, reflecting the EU's distinctive comprehensive security approach (Shepherd, 2015).

d. External Drivers as Catalysts and Constraints

Collectively, external factors generate contradictory dynamics. Alliance uncertainty, Russian aggression, and systemic instability amplify demands for European strategic autonomy while simultaneously deepening structural reliance

on NATO and underscoring the risks of departing from established security frameworks. Rather than driving Europe toward military unification, external pressures have prompted pragmatic adjustments: strengthening cooperation within existing structures, developing capabilities, and reaffirming alliance commitments.

6. Positions of Major Powers

The viability of a European army cannot be assessed through internal EU dynamics and systemic pressures alone; it must also account for the strategic reactions of major international actors. The positions of the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and the Franco-German partnership both shape and limit the space within which European defense integration can develop. This section demonstrates that while certain external actors rhetorically support enhanced European defense capacity, none actively favor the creation of a fully autonomous European army independent of existing alliance frameworks, a convergence of constraints that significantly narrows the feasible range of outcomes.

a. The United States: Conditional Support without Strategic Disengagement

The United States demonstrates consistent ambivalence toward European defense integration, supporting burden-sharing initiatives while fearing that they may weaken NATO cohesion and diminish American influence over strategic decision-making (Watanabe, 2005). American support remains conditional: U.S. policymakers have repeatedly stressed that European defense initiatives must complement rather than replicate NATO structures, with concerns about institutional duplication and resource diversion featuring prominently in Washington's calculus. The American preference is not European autonomy as such, but a more capable Europe firmly anchored within the transatlantic framework, with European initiatives reinforcing rather than challenging the alliance (Schreer, 2019). Reactions to Macron's 2018 proposal exemplified this posture: while U.S. officials avoided direct opposition, they conveyed clear skepticism about the necessity and viability of a European army operating independently of NATO. A fully autonomous European army would risk diminishing U.S. influence over European security policy without meaningfully reducing American security commitments, creating asymmetrical costs that Washington is unwilling to absorb.

b. Russia: Strategic Suspicion and Indirect Constraint

Moscow evaluates European army discussions primarily through the lens of strategic rivalry with the West. Russian strategic discourse frames EU defense initiatives as an extension of NATO's eastward expansion trajectory, viewing any European army not as an independent actor but as an additional mechanism of Western containment. Russian officials and analysts have consistently expressed skepticism about assertions of European strategic independence, arguing that EU defense initiatives remain fundamentally aligned with NATO's geopolitical objectives (Utkin, 2022). Paradoxically, Russia's own conduct has indirectly constrained European army prospects. By intensifying threat perceptions among Eastern European states, the 2022 Ukraine invasion deepened reliance on NATO and U.S. security guarantees, substantially narrowing the political space for EU-led military structures. While the invasion elevated European commitment to collective defense, EU military initiatives remained secondary, reflecting sustained dependence on Atlantic alliance frameworks (Mader, 2024). Russia's position thus undermines European army prospects on two levels: rhetorically by dismissing EU defense autonomy as illusory, and structurally by reinforcing the NATO dependence of frontline states.

c. China, the United Kingdom, and the Franco-German Partnership

China's position remains considerably less explicit, reflecting its limited direct security footprint in Europe. Beijing occasionally frames European strategic autonomy as a potential counterweight to American dominance, yet this rhetorical posture does not translate into substantive support for a European army. China's strategic priorities in Europe are centered on economic engagement, and European defense developments are perceived as having limited bearing on China's broader strategic environment (Haroche & Quencez, 2022; Ye, 2025). The United Kingdom, formerly a consistent internal obstacle to EU defense integration, has since Brexit reoriented its strategy toward NATO and bilateral arrangements. While Brexit removed a key political veto, it simultaneously stripped the EU of one of Europe's most capable armed forces, a paradox illustrating how eliminating political barriers does not automatically enhance practical feasibility (Shea, 2020). Within the EU itself, France and Germany have not achieved the strategic convergence their leadership role demands. France's persistent championing of autonomy and readiness to employ military force contrasts fundamentally with Germany's constitutional constraints, robust parliamentary oversight, and institutionalized culture of military restraint, an asymmetry that restricts the scope of bilateral leadership (Huntley, 2022).

d. Converging Constraints

Across these cases, a consistent pattern emerges. Washington seeks greater burden-sharing without relinquishing strategic influence; Moscow's conduct reinforces European alliance dependence; Beijing remains strategically detached from European military affairs; London prioritizes the Atlantic framework over EU-led structures; and Franco-German leadership remains incomplete and asymmetrical. None of these positions creates a strategic environment favorable to a fully autonomous European army. Collectively, they constrain the space available for military unification and reinforce the conclusion that incremental cooperation within existing alliance frameworks constitutes the most viable path forward.

7. Future Scenarios and Strategic Assessment

Evaluating European army prospects requires moving beyond political rhetoric toward a structured analysis of plausible pathways. Rather than treating military unification as either an inevitable outcome or a purely normative goal, this section employs a scenario-based framework connecting political feasibility, institutional capacity, and systemic constraints to delineate a bounded range of realistic futures. Three principal scenarios emerge: functional integration within NATO structures, a fully autonomous European army, and fragmentation and renationalization of defense policy.

a. Functional Integration within NATO

The first and most probable scenario involves progressive deepening of European defense cooperation embedded within the NATO framework, with the EU enhancing military capacity through collaborative procurement, capability development, and joint missions while relying on NATO for territorial defense and strategic deterrence. The EU's Strategic Compass, adopted in March 2022, establishes a common strategic vision structured around four pillars—act, secure, invest, and partner, and explicitly frames stronger EU defense capabilities as complementary to NATO rather than substituting for it (Council of the European Union, 2022). Mechanisms such as PESCO, the European Defence Fund, and the planned Rapid Deployment Capacity of up to 5,000 troops illustrate the EU's ambition to act decisively in crises without displacing alliance structures (EEAS, 2022). This model embodies Europe's preference for "capability without autonomy," reconciling strategic ambition with structural limitations (Allen et al., 2021). Its principal constraint remains resource dependency: implementation will ultimately depend on whether member states mobilize the additional defense

spending required, a perennial challenge given divergent national fiscal priorities (Blockmans et al., 2022). Nevertheless, given existing political preferences and systemic constraints, this pathway represents the trajectory of least resistance and greatest strategic coherence.

b. A Fully Autonomous European Army

The second scenario envisions a European army functioning independently of NATO, requiring centralized command structures, legally binding commitments, unified strategic doctrines, and substantial sovereignty transfers to EU institutions. While theoretically representing the most ambitious interpretation of strategic autonomy, its preconditions remain largely unfulfilled. The Strategic Compass itself effectively closes off this pathway at the doctrinal level by explicitly positioning EU defense capabilities as complementary to NATO (Council of the European Union, 2022). Politically, such an outcome would demand unprecedented consensus among states with fundamentally divergent strategic cultures and threat assessments. Institutionally, it would require treaty amendments, democratic legitimization, and new enforcement mechanisms. Strategically, Europe would need to replicate or supplant NATO's deterrence infrastructure, including nuclear capabilities, an undertaking both prohibitively expensive and politically divisive. Even Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine deepened reliance on NATO and American leadership rather than catalyzing movement toward European military autonomy. The European army remains theoretically appealing but practically problematic (Jurčák & Ivančík, 2023), and its probability in the foreseeable future remains minimal.

c. Fragmentation and Renationalization

The third scenario involves a reversal of integration trends, with political crises, economic pressures, or strategic disagreements prompting member states to prioritize national defense over collective arrangements. Rising nationalism, democratic backsliding, and divergent responses to external shocks could erode cooperative mechanisms and exacerbate existing cleavages (Sloan, 2020). Strategically, fragmentation would weaken Europe's collective crisis response capacity, reduce its influence within NATO, and represent the worst of both worlds: autonomy without capacity and cooperation without cohesion (Raine, 2019). Though currently the least likely trajectory, its potential consequences make it an essential reference point in any rigorous strategic assessment.

d. Comparative Evaluation

The assessment below summarizes the three scenarios across key analytical dimensions. The central conclusion is clear: the most realistic future of European defense lies between ambition and constraint, characterized by incremental integration rather than radical transformation.

Scenario	Political Feasibility	Strategic Autonomy	Alliance Cohesion	Overall Likelihood
Functional integration within NATO	High	Moderate	High	High
Fully autonomous European army	Low	High	Low	Low
Fragmentation and renationalization	Low–Moderate	Low	Low	Low

Conclusion:

This article examined the feasibility of establishing a European army within the broader strategic autonomy debate. Rather than treating the issue as a normative question or a technical matter of military capacity, the analysis reframed it as a structural and political challenge rooted in European integration's historical trajectory, internal EU dynamics, and international systemic constraints. The central finding is that while the European army concept retains symbolic and political resonance, its actual realization remains highly improbable under current conditions, with European defense integration instead evolving toward enhanced functional cooperation within existing alliance frameworks, particularly NATO.

The historical analysis established a consistent pattern from the EDC's collapse through the CSDP's institutionalization: ambitions constrained by sovereignty concerns, divergent strategic cultures, and dependence on external security providers, following a cyclical dynamic of heightened threat perception, renewed integration calls, political resistance, and institutional compromise. The theoretical framework clarified the structural roots of this pattern: neofunctionalist spillover logic proves limited where sovereignty costs remain uniquely high; liberal intergovernmentalism more accurately explains how national preferences delineate cooperation's constraints; realism embeds European choices within an alliance-dependent system sustaining NATO dependence; and strategic culture explains why equivalent external pressures yield divergent rather than convergent responses.

The analysis of drivers revealed a central paradox: political fragmentation, institutional architecture, and legitimacy challenges simultaneously create demand for coordination while reinforcing opposition to unification. Externally, alliance

uncertainty, Russian aggression, and systemic instability have revitalized strategic autonomy discussions yet reinforced NATO's centrality rather than hastening military integration. The comparative analysis of major powers further narrowed the space: the United States endorses enhanced capabilities while cautioning against institutional duplication; Russian conduct deepens NATO dependence; and even the Franco-German partnership lacks sufficient convergence to sustain military unification. Functional integration within NATO accordingly emerged as the most probable and strategically viable trajectory. In policy terms, efforts to enhance European security should prioritize capability development, interoperability, and institutional coherence within current frameworks. The European army remains a compelling concept but a structurally limited undertaking, Europe's security future will be shaped not by military unification but by adaptive cooperation balancing autonomy with alliance commitments, and ambition with persistent national diversity.

Footnotes:

Explanatory footnotes should be inserted as endnotes.

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