



Oxford International Journal

of Research and Publishing

**International Peer-Reviewed
Academic Journal**

Vol. 1 - No. 2

May - 2025

ISSN (Online): 3050-7618

www.oijrp.com



International Journal of
Research and Publishing

Oxford International Journal of Research and Publishing
International Peer-Reviewed Academic Journal

Volume 1 | Issue 2 | Compilation 1.0

Research 2

The European Union in the Post-US Withdrawal Era: Between Military Cooperation and Defense Independence

Dr. Ahmed Hassan Soliman

Member of the Egyptian Publishers Association

Abstract :

Following the US withdrawal from traditional Defense commitments in Europe, the European Union faced significant challenges in strengthening its own Defense capabilities and reducing its dependence on the United States. This shift prompted European countries to reevaluate their Defense strategies and work toward achieving strategic independence.

In this context, EU and NATO Defense and foreign ministers met separately to discuss ways to enhance European Defense capabilities and reduce dependence on US military support, especially considering growing tensions with Russia. The focus was on identifying gaps in military capabilities, such as air defense and missile systems, to guide future investments.

In addition, the European Defense sector faces significant challenges due to its historical dependence on US technology and capabilities. These challenges include areas such as air surveillance, electronic warfare, and missile defense, where European technologies are either non-existent or underdeveloped compared to US standards. To overcome these gaps, efforts are being made to enhance domestic capabilities, with significant increases in defense investments expected. As part of these efforts, the European Commission has proposed increasing military spending and pooling resources for joint defense projects under the ReArm Europe plan. This could limit the opportunities for non-European companies, including American ones, to participate in military tenders. This trend has raised concerns among US officials, who have expressed their objection to EU attempts to restrict the participation of US companies in arms deals, believing this could negatively impact defense relations between the two sides.

Despite these challenges, European countries are seeking to strengthen defense cooperation and reduce dependence on US support, with a focus on developing domestic capabilities and local manufacturing of military equipment. However, challenges remain regarding the coordination of defense policies among member states and striking a balance between defense autonomy and maintaining strategic relations with the United States.

Keywords:

European Union, defense autonomy, military cooperation, US withdrawal, defense capabilities, NATO, defense industries, ReArm Europe plan, US-EU relations.

Introduction:

In light of the developments witnessed by the international system, Especially with regard to the reordering of the balance of power and the decline of the role of the United States in its defense commitments to its traditional allies, There is an urgent need to study the legal and constitutional framework governing the European Union's approach to building an independent defence system. The withdrawal of the United States, whether directly or by reducing its security commitments, raises fundamental issues related to the legitimacy of The independence of collective defence action within the European Union, in accordance with its founding treaties, In particular, the Lisbon Treaty, which established the provisions for advanced defence cooperation between member states.

The right to legitimate defense, as stipulated in Article (51) of the United Nations Charter, It authorizes states, individually or collectively, to take the necessary measures to maintain their security and sovereignty. Provided that these measures are consistent with the rules of public international law and compatible with its treaty obligations. In this context, The European Union's move towards developing a common security and defence policy requires consideration of the legal dimensions that regulate this policy. Especially with regard to the principle of national sovereignty, the distribution of powers between the Union and member states, and the limits of cooperation with external parties, most notably the United States of America.

Engaging in independent defense cooperation also raises legal questions regarding the nature of the relationship between the European Union and NATO, as The overwhelming majority of EU member states are also parties to the Washington Treaty establishing NATO, which imposes reciprocal contractual obligations that cannot be ignored or breached. Hence, any attempt to establish a European defence system must take place within a framework of legal consistency and institutional harmony with the commitments of those countries in the alliance. Without this leading to a conflict in international obligations. Moreover, expanding the scope of defense industries within the European Union, and restricting the access of American companies to European markets in the field of armaments, It may raise the legal responsibility of the EU countries, both from the perspective of competition rules and transparency in public contracts, Or from the perspective of WTO obligations, which requires a precise legal approach to govern this approach in a manner consistent with international standards.

Research questions:

Main question:

- To what extent is the European Union able to achieve effective defense independence in the post-US withdrawal phase, while maintaining a balance of military cooperation with the United States?

Sub-questions:

- How compatible is the EU's development of an independent defence policy with its legal obligations within NATO?
- What legal frameworks govern the participation of non-EU countries in European defence initiatives, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)?
- How can the EU ensure that its independent defence policies are consistent with the principles of international law, particularly with regard to the use of force and human rights?
- How can the EU reconcile its legal sovereignty and executive powers in the field of defence while respecting the sovereignty and constitutional rights of member states?

Research objectives:

Analyzing the legal and political impacts of the US withdrawal from defense commitments on the European Union in terms of studying changes in US commitments Towards its European allies and its impact on regional security, and an analysis of the challenges and opportunities facing EU countries in the face of new security threats.

- Exploring EU strategies for enhancing military cooperation among Member States by analyzing joint initiatives such as "European rearmament" to enhance defense capabilities, and assess the effectiveness of cooperation mechanisms such as the "Permanent Military Cooperation" in promoting military integration.
- Evaluating the EU's efforts towards achieving defence independence and reducing dependence on external powers by studying strategies Strengthening European defense industries, strengthening the local manufacturing base, and analyzing policies aimed at reducing dependence on military suppliers outside the EU.

The importance of research:

This research is of particular importance in light of current geopolitical transformations, as the European Union seeks to enhance its defense independence and reduce its dependence on American protection. The research aims to analyze the repercussions of the United States' withdrawal from defense commitments on European security. To explore military cooperation strategies among member states, and to evaluate efforts to achieve effective defence independence, It also contributes to understanding the legal and political challenges associated with developing an independent defence policy, and provides practical recommendations for enhancing military cooperation and defence independence for the European Union.

Research methodology:

This research aims to study the impact of the United States' withdrawal from its defense commitments on the European Union, Analyzing ways to enhance military cooperation and defense independence among EU countries. To achieve this, a multifaceted research methodology will be followed:

- Descriptive-analytical approach: Data and information related to the defense policies of the European Union and the United States will be collected and analyzed.
- Focusing on the changes that occurred after the latter withdrew from some of its commitments.
- Comparative approach: The defense strategies and security policies of EU countries will be compared, and the impact of the US withdrawal on these policies will be assessed.
- Legal approach: The legal frameworks governing military cooperation and defence autonomy within the European Union will be studied, And analyze its compatibility with the obligations of NATO member states.
- Historical approach: The historical developments of defence relations between the European Union and the United States will be reviewed, To understand the current context and future challenges.

Terminology:

The European Union: is an economic and political bloc comprising 27 member states in Europe, It aims to achieve economic and political integration among its members and enhance cooperation in various fields, Including security and defense, the European Union was established by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, It seeks to enhance internal stability and joint foreign relations, including security and defense policy.

Military cooperation: is joint work between countries in military fields through the exchange of information, Joint training, development of military systems, and implementation of joint military operations, Within the European Union, military cooperation is part of the Common Security and Defence Policy, It aims to improve military capabilities and coordinate efforts to confront common threats.

Defensive independence:

The term defensive independence refers to the ability of a state or group of states to protect their regional security and internationally, without complete reliance on external allies or superpowers, In the context of the European Union, this means strengthening the self-defense capacity of members By building strong defense industries and implementing independent security and military policies.

American withdrawal:

It refers to changes in US foreign policy, particularly with regard to reducing defence commitments to its European allies, In some cases, the US withdrawal began after a period of close cooperation between the EU and the US in NATO, Recent years have seen a decline in some US military commitments, prompting the European Union to consider strengthening its defense independence.

Theoretical framework

First: The reasons for the European move to build a new system and to move in search of a new international system

The global order that has been stable since the end of World War II in 1945 is suffering, From ongoing attempts at dismantling by emerging countries such as Russia and China, Which seek to achieve economic, political and geopolitical ambitions, in contrast, This system began to shake due to the decline of the leading countries, especially the United States of America, whose new president, Trump, has embarked on a new strategy that leans more towards isolationism rather than openness, Defending its allies and sharing visions and plans, Germany is, Along with other countries such as Italy, and somewhat France, One of the most prominent European powers seeking to find a new framework for the international system, They also want to ensure that they remain within the new system that is taking shape, So that they do not find themselves outside the equation, as happened with Türkiye in World War I and Japan in World War II, There are a number of reasons that have prompted some European countries to search for a new international system: (Hussein Talal Muqalled, 2011).

• American decline

Since coming to power, Donald Trump has raised the slogan "America First." Some thought it was just an election slogan and would not turn into an isolation strategy which the United States followed for long periods until its involvement in World War II alongside the Allied powers, but Trump has begun to follow many of the mechanisms of this policy. As for the security and military aspect, He called on NATO countries to rely on themselves and bear part of the military spending, most of which is borne by the United States.

Many NATO member states, especially European countries, see this as a threat to their security, Even if the US demand to increase the military budget of each NATO country to 7% of its gross national income is met, American protection is no longer guaranteed, even in pre-Trump times Washington has not intervened sufficiently to stop Russia's military intervention in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, which poses a clear threat to European security.

The Trump administration not only threatened to reduce military support, but also used economic and environmental strategies that affect its allies, One of these strategies was withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement, In addition to imposing additional taxes on iron imports of 25% and aluminum imports of 10%, These measures will particularly affect EU countries, Trump also warned the European Union against imposing a heavy tax on its products due to poor trade relations with the United States.

The Trump administration has also contributed to undermining the shared European-American vision for dealing with international and regional crises, Like the nuclear agreement with Iran, which he withdrew from this month, after major powers helped to reach it, Not content with this, he is imposing further sanctions on Tehran, targeting European companies, causing them huge losses, and threatening them with sanctions if they do not halt their dealings with Iran. (Muhammad Omar, 2018).

- **Growing Russian influence**

Russia has been able to clearly and tangibly increase its military, political and security involvement in Europe, This was most evident in its military intervention in Ukraine in 2014 and its support for the secession of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions, Where each of them declared its independence in preparation for joining Russia, and Russia also annexed the Crimean Peninsula, and in this context, Igor Plotnytsky, leader of the so-called Lugansk People's Republic, confirmed that Lugansk will not return to Ukraine, but will join Russia, similar to the status of Crimea. The matter did not stop there, but Moscow interfered in the crucial elections held in Europe, Such as the accusations against her of interfering to influence the choices of the British people in the referendum to leave the European Union in June 2016, In addition to her media interventions in support of far-right trends, she has been accused of supporting Marine Le Pen, the far-right candidate in the last French elections, which Macron won in 2017, Russian activities in Europe did not stop at this point, Britain and its allies were accused of trying to kill Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter in London using a chemical substance in March 2018, Most EU countries, along with Washington and other countries, responded by expelling Russian diplomats, prompting Moscow to respond in kind, and tensions remain high. (Philip Gordon, 2008).

- **Britain's exit from the European Union**

Just as Britain's departure from the European Union was a huge shock to Europeans, London is considered an important military, economic and nuclear power that the Union relies on, alongside the United States, to protect its security and confront challenges from Russia, Now, after Britain's exit, the European Union has only one nuclear power left: France, which will not be able to face any future conflict with Russia alone, in addition, The Kingdom's exit from the European Union represents a severe blow to the European unity project, This could herald the withdrawal of other countries from the EU and the beginning of its disintegration, making European countries more vulnerable to Russia in light of declining US support and doubts about the intentions of the current administration.

Second: European action mechanisms:

Europe should be aware that it cannot completely rely on the United States and Britain now, Especially after the election of Donald Trump and the British exit from the European Union, according to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Europe must pursue its destiny, and I have expressed my vision of how Europe's future strategy should be shaped in order to adapt and succeed in a new, evolving order, They should be active and shapers of the features of this system, rather than being subservient to what is agreed upon by other competing powers, Therefore, the European Union has begun to take steps in the areas of politics, security, defense, and the economy to confront this change:

- **Building a unified military force**

In November 2017, twenty-three European Union countries signed a defence cooperation agreement aimed at strengthening military integration in Europe, In preparation for the creation of a unified army, the member states are small and have limited military capabilities, Which calls for their cooperation together, especially with the lack of security from the United States and Britain, during the signing of the agreement, Federica Mogherini, the EU's foreign policy chief, explained that this is a historic moment for European defense, This new tool will enhance our military capabilities and increase our strategic independence, a matter that has particularly worried the United States, Because it effectively means ending the role of NATO, since most of its members are Europeans, If they formed an independent military force, NATO would not have the importance it had, which would mean a decline in American influence in Europe, It was relying on its security and military aspects that it offers to the continent, but due to the Trump administration in the White House and Britain's exit from the European Union, Europe has no options due to the escalation of Russian interventions in the continent's countries. (Ahmed Ajaj, 2009).

Strengthening economic relations between EU countries

Economic policies and motivations were among the factors that led to Britain's decision to leave the European Union, In this context, influential countries on the continent, especially France and Germany, are seeking to establish new agreements, both among themselves and with other countries, In order to address the problems resulting from Brexit, the trade balance between Britain and the EU is tilted in favour of the EU, With a trade surplus of up to £56 billion, EU growth is likely to be negatively impacted after Britain leaves, For this reason, alternative economic agreements are currently being negotiated to avoid any major disruptions to the economies of member states, Moreover, the EU member states are focusing on concluding new agreements among themselves, As with the military agreement, on May 25, EU finance ministers reached an agreement on reforming bank capital rules, This is to enhance the financial stability of the European Union to face any financial crises such as the one that occurred in 2008.

- **Pursuing policies independent of the United States**

EU member states have not agreed to follow the new policies that Trump has begun to implement, including the US withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, I refrained from following his position or amending the agreement, as the environmental challenges that threaten the security of the continent led to reaching this agreement due to global warming caused by the increase in Carbon dioxide levels from some heavy and polluting industries such as coal, which America uses heavily, in addition, European countries have taken a different path from Trump's approach on refugees and many issues in the Middle East, Including the nuclear agreement with Iran, where Trump's steps were rejected and countries declared their commitment to the agreement.

So, Europe has resorted to means to protect its trade with Iran from US sanctions, for example, On May 18, the European Commission began formal steps to implement the "blocking statute" to limit the impact of US sanctions on European companies wishing to invest in Iran, This legislation, passed in 1996, allows European companies and courts to avoid compliance with sanctions laws imposed by other countries, The law also prohibits the enforcement of any foreign court rulings based on these sanctions within the European Union. This is the first time Europe has used this law against the United States.

Third: The legal and political framework for enhancing military cooperation and defense independence in the European Union:

The legal and political framework for enhancing military cooperation and defence autonomy in the European Union reflects the challenges facing the Union in developing its defence capabilities following geopolitical changes, Especially the withdrawal of the United States from some of its defense commitments, in this context, The European Union needs to strengthen cooperation among member states and achieve defensive autonomy to ensure collective security in the face of growing threats.

- **Legal framework**

The European Union, as an international legal entity, relies on a set of treaties and agreements that define how member states cooperate in military and defence affairs, The most prominent of these treaties is the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which includes provisions for a common security and defence policy, It is a policy aimed at strengthening the Union's defence capabilities while respecting the sovereignty of member states, This policy includes a number of legal mechanisms that help develop and coordinate defense activities, such as: (Ahmed Jalal Mahmoud Abdo, 2022).

Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO): It is a legal mechanism established under the Lisbon Treaty, which allows European Union countries to commit to joint defense projects, PESCO, It aims to improve defence cooperation among member states through joint projects, including improving military capabilities and standardising defence equipment.

European Peace Facility (EPF): It is a mechanism established to finance defence activities that include measures such as military aid and peacekeeping, Through this mechanism, the European Union aims to enhance military independence and reduce dependence on external military forces.

European Union White Paper 2025: As part of the European Union's quest to achieve defensive independence, This book was prepared with the aim of identifying strategies to strengthen the defence industry and enhance European military capabilities by coordinating efforts among member states and providing logistical and technical support.

Political framework: Politically, coordination among EU countries is essential to ensure defence independence and enhance joint military cooperation, This coordination is represented by several political initiatives aimed at raising the level of cooperation between member states, such as:

The European Common Security and Defence Strategy is the cornerstone of military cooperation between member states, Where security policies are determined and responses to common threats are addressed, It is based on the principles of close cooperation in the field of defense and military policies through mechanisms such as the European Council for Security and Defense Policy (Abdulwahab bin Khalifa, 2023). Cooperation with NATO, despite the European Union's pursuit of defensive independence, The EU still relies on NATO in many areas, so EU-NATO cooperation remains a key tool in strengthening defence capabilities, EU member states seek to improve military integration with NATO through coordination in the areas of joint training and military operations.

European institutions and bodies: The European Union includes a group of institutions that work to promote defence policies, Like the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, These institutions contribute to the development of unified defense strategies by adopting projects that enhance military cooperation among member states and ensure effective coordination of defense policies.

Fourth: European Union strategies for building independent defense capabilities and enhancing joint military cooperation:

In light of geopolitical shifts and increasing security threats, The European Union seeks to develop strategies aimed at building independent defence capabilities and enhancing military cooperation among member states, These strategies are embodied in several legal and scientific aspects that affect the Union's ability to confront future security challenges.

The European Union, through its treaties and institutions, seeks to achieve a balance between defence independence and joint cooperation in the areas of military defence, A key focus of these strategies is developing the ability to make independent military decisions, In line with European security requirements and the challenges of the modern era, the Union aims to become more capable of independently responding to military and terrorist crises, Without total dependence on traditional allies such as the United States or NATO.

The European Union's strategies in this area are based on creating a multidimensional defence structure that enhances integration among member states, This can be seen through the development of legal mechanisms that enable member states to cooperate militarily more effectively, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), Which allows member states to commit to joint defense projects that raise the level of military readiness, This initiative aims to better coordinate military activities and integrate defence capabilities.

An important dimension of these strategies is to enhance cooperation between member states regarding the development of the defense industry. The European Union is working to finance joint projects in the field of military technology and the development of military equipment, This contributes to reducing dependence on non-EU member states such as the United States. Thus, EU countries can position themselves in a position of strength, through their independent defense production capacity.

But this trend does not mean isolation from international alliances. In fact, cooperation with allies such as NATO remains necessary to enhance defensive capabilities, Therefore, the EU's strategies for building independent defence capabilities are part of an integrated defence policy based on cooperation with allies, Simultaneously with the development of military autonomy, within this framework, the European Union is strengthening its role as a political and military actor in the international system, In addition, the European Union seeks to coordinate defence policies among member states to reduce defence gaps between countries with varying military capabilities.

This also includes achieving integration between the defence policies of the European Union and NATO member states, Ensuring a rapid and effective response to regional and international security challenges. (Malcolm Chalmers, 2017).

Search results:

- Strengthening military cooperation between member states, as 23 EU countries signed the "Permanent Military Cooperation" document, Aiming to unify military financial and logistical resources, this cooperation enables member states to carry out military operations and training missions in the European neighborhood, thus enhancing military integration among states.
- Developing independent defense strategies: Facing the possibility of the United States withdrawing from NATO, EU countries have begun developing their own defense capabilities, This includes establishing an independent intelligence system and strengthening nuclear deterrence, with the aim of planning for an independent security future that reduces dependence on external powers.
- Affirming European sovereignty in the field of defense: The European Union, led by countries such as France, seeks to strengthen its defense independence by supporting domestic defense industries, And reducing dependence on external suppliers, especially in light of escalating geopolitical tensions.

Recommendations:

To further strengthen military cooperation and defence independence, the EU recommends the following steps:

- Deepening military integration, increasing joint investments in military research and development, and unifying military standards and training among member states, to enhance joint readiness and coordination.
- Strengthening independent intelligence capabilities: Developing a unified European intelligence system that ensures effective information exchange among member states, enhancing the ability to confront common security threats.
- Strengthening cooperation with traditional allies: As we strive for defense independence, we must maintain strong relationships with allies like the United States and NATO to ensure comprehensive deterrence and effective crisis response.



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ISSN-3050-7618