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“**D**efence matters”. That was the slogan European political leaders used during the 2013 European Council on defence, the first meeting of its kind. Since then, EU security and defence has become a politically relevant issue for EU member states and concrete steps have been taken to ensure that the union delivers on defence. Since 2016, during a period marked by Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, the EU has created new tools such as the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the European Peace Facility (EPF). The EU has also published its first-ever security and defence strategy in the form of a “[Strategic Compass](#)” and a first [European Defence Industrial Strategy](#). These initiatives have emerged largely because of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, where the EU has also moved into gear, producing ammunition as well as supporting the Ukrainian economy with financial provisions. Yet, there is also great apprehension in Europe about the future course of American politics, with a risk that Europeans will be left alone to see to their own defence.

In one important sense, therefore, the geopolitical environment has fundamentally changed, and this is naturally felt by EU citizens, especially in an election period. In fact, the 2024 European elections will take place under the shadow of the Russian threat, questions about the transatlantic relationship and the rise of China. This election occurs in a rhetorically different environment too, with political leaders openly calling for a “war economy” or even the potential of having European troops deployed in Ukraine, as well as the constant Russian sabre-rattling with nuclear weapons. Indeed, in one of the last Eurobarometer polls on defence policy 80% called for more defence cooperation in the EU, and two-thirds of those polled agreed that the EU should increase defence spending and reinforce its defence production capacities.

Yet with increasing EU public investments in security and defence EU citizens will also want a greater say over how the union and its member states invest financial resources. Since 2021, when the EU began its last budgetary cycle, the union has invested approximately €30bn directly in defence for research and technology, capability development, armaments production, military mobility, train and equip programmes and more. EU citizens have been exposed to these investments via the media with

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renewed intensity since Russia's war on Ukraine. Heading into the Europeans elections, there will be a far greater focus on EU security and defence, even if past elections have also focused on this issue. For example, when he ran for European Commission president under the then *Spitzenkandidat* process, Jean-Claude Juncker made defence a key plank of his manifesto.

### **The European political groups and how they see defence**

Accordingly, the geopolitical risks facing Europe today will ensure that defence is a key policy issue. Interestingly, the political groupings and parties are already including security and defence in their campaigns and manifestos. The European elections are already marked by ideas such as the apparent need for an "EU defence commissioner" and "defence bonds", or the urgency of ensuring that €100bn is secured for EU defence production efforts. Most of Europe's major political groups and families are becoming increasingly vocal on the need to boost EU security and defence efforts.

The European People's Party (EPP) has already started to call for a European defence pillar that can ensure the continent's security in case of a breakdown of transatlantic relations. The EPP's campaign team have also stressed the importance of investing in defence capabilities such as cyber defence, drones and (they dared to say it) European nuclear deterrence. The EPP group have also recently settled on the incumbent commission president Von der Leyen to lead the charge into the next elections, which is important given President Von der Leyen's role in developing EU defence these past few years. There is also a clear emphasis on defence in the [EPP manifesto](#) for the 2024 European elections, with ideas such as more joint defence procurement, investment in advanced defence technologies and creating a single market for European defence, as well as the need for a defence council of ministers and the creation of an "EU defence budget". In this manifesto, "defence" is mentioned 26 times.

The Socialists and Democrats (S&D) have also adopted a 2024 election [manifesto](#), where "defence" is mentioned only five times. Nevertheless, the S&D group do acknowledge that an increasingly insecure world means that the EU "must take greater responsibility for its own security and defence". More specifically, the manifesto points to the critical need to develop the European defence industry through better spending and greater joint procurement. Interestingly, the S&D manifesto also highlights the crucial importance of cooperation in the fields of intelligence and the protection of critical infrastructure.

As for the liberals, Renew Europe has, for example, [called](#) for the establishment of a European military academy and a new European sovereignty fund to enhance Europe's defence industry. As with the EPP and S&D groupings, the liberals also stress the importance of strengthening the European defence industrial base, and they call for €100bn for defence investment at the EU level. In the [2024 manifesto](#), there is a clear attention to developing defence capabilities and the liberals call for a European Defence Union – like the EPP – focused on the establishment of a European commissioner for defence, the introduction of qualified

majority voting in foreign, defence and security policy and an EU seat at the UN Security Council.

The European Greens have also produced a 2024 manifesto that specifies that while the EU is a “peace project” it must strive for “greater security in geopolitical and economic terms”. Underlining the need to support Ukraine, the Greens’ [manifesto](#) prefers to refer to “security” rather than “defence” (there is only one specific mention of the word in the whole manifesto). The Greens group argues that climate and peace investments should increase in line with any military spending. They also support nuclear and conventional arms disarmament, as well as a ban on autonomous lethal weapons. Nevertheless, the Greens are the only political group that have stressed the importance of solidarity and mutual assistance (Article 42.7 Treaty on European Union) backed up by “cooperation on military capabilities” and through the promotion of “interoperability and coordinating procurement maintenance and supply systems”.

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The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) have also produced an [electoral manifesto](#), which builds on recent statements by senior figures within the group on defence. However, bold ideas that were called for by the senior leadership of ECR a few months ago, including [calls](#) for the creation of a European army, have disappeared in the manifesto. Defence features prominently in the ECR manifesto, and it stresses the importance of developing the European defence industry. The manifesto also makes clear that the ECR are ‘highly sceptical about the creation of a defence union at the EU level’, which represents the group’s opposition to the creation of new posts in Brussels or the centralisation of powers on defence policy at the EU level.

Finally, the radical right and radical left groups have also stated their case on European defence. The European Left’s [manifesto](#) for 2024 rejects the idea of a more federated EU defence and instead stresses the necessity of maintaining national characteristics regarding defence (citing the so-called “Irish Clause”). The Left want a reduction in defence spending in Europe and full implementation of nuclear non-proliferation treaties. They largely characterise the military build-up in Europe as a negative development that follows “NATO’s instructions and resolutions”. While we await the Identity and Democracy Group’s official manifesto, the main line towards defence has always been that sovereignty must not be shared but should remain national, although there is the aim of securing Europe’s borders within this group.

## EU defence policy in the wake of the European elections

These are all, of course, manifestos designed to secure seats in the European Parliament. How these somewhat diverse and bold ideas for EU security and defence will materialise, if at all, after the elections remains to be seen. The feasibility of many of the ideas will ultimately depend on the composition of the European Parliament. Whichever political groups win the day at the elections will have an opportunity to insist on manifesto pledges in the work programme of the next European Commission. Notwithstanding that EU member states will enable or temper any proposed defence policies based on collective national prerogatives, the parliament can influence the political direction of the next commission on defence.

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Indeed, if the core of the new parliament is pro-European and in favour of more EU defence integration, then this will weigh heavily in the priorities of the next commission. It is already clear that there is political consensus across the major European parties on the need to strengthen Europe's defence industry. Defence is therefore likely to be a major feature of the negotiations for the individual (re)crowned commission president. Should President Von der Leyen be reconfirmed in her role, it is likely that she will seek to implement the bulk of the EPP's manifesto promises and the consensus position on the European defence industry. Of course, the policy pledges implemented by the next commission will also reflect the bargain struck between member states and the parliament on key portfolios such as the high representative of the Union's foreign affairs and security policy/vice-president and the commissioner in charge of defence industry and space policy.

Should this pro-European, pro-defence core emerge, many of the manifesto ideas are likely to be reinforced or remoulded in light of the forthcoming presidential election in the United States at the end of 2024. In this context, should the second election of Donald Trump occur, many of the EU defence initiatives that have already been raised by the political groups may find renewed interest at the political level in the Commission and European Council. This is particularly the case with regard to the defence industry in Europe, where there is a consensus for more support for the industry among the major parties. In any case, the ongoing war in Ukraine is likely to lend continued weight to the need to develop Europe's defence industry and military capabilities. In this context, we should expect the ideas of the major political groups to influence EU defence policy after the elections, particularly where those ideas can be implemented by the European Commission.

### **Difficult choices ahead for EU defence**

However, it is interesting to note that none of the political parties or groups are really calling for policies or initiatives that entail massive new outlays of resources from the EU budget. Perhaps with the exception of the liberals' call for a European sovereignty fund, the bulk of the manifesto pledges largely entail institutional re-engineering. This is to be expected, as many of the resource-intensive initiatives in defence have already been proposed by the European Commission. For example, the proposal for the European Defence Investment Programme (EDIP), which will see the EU extend its investments beyond defence research into joint capability development, was released in early March 2024 – directly in advance of the European elections. This proposal certainly meets many of the major political parties' aspirations for a stronger European defence industry, yet the political groups did not specifically propose this new initiative.

In any case initiatives such as the EDIP, while perhaps too complex to be made part of any formal political campaign (would citizens understand the term "EDIP"?), will be part of the post-electoral process. After the elections, the EU will need to negotiate the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2028-2034. As defence has been listed as a priority for the union, and as new initiatives such as the EDIP have emerged, it will be interesting to see how the European political parties position themselves in the budgetary negotiations. Remember that

negotiating the MFF is about deciding how policies should be financed at the EU level from the union budget. In this respect, the parties will have to decide what their ultimate political priorities are (i.e. what is the balance between investment in agriculture vs defence). In these negotiations, the new legislature will have a vital say on how much of the EU's budget should be allocated to European defence in the coming years, especially through the EDF and EDIP, among other defence-related priorities. This is when we shall see how committed to defence the major political parties are in practice.

