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“Pax Europaea” as driver for future armament cooperation in Europe?

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Abstract

“Pax Europaea” is an interesting new term, used by Commission President Dr. Ursula von der Leyen in May 2025 in her acceptance speech after being awarded with the Charlemagne peace price in Aachen, meaning “if we want peace in Europe (Pax Europaea) we need to be ready to be independent.” In fact, we have to be realistic about European defence and about the risks under which “Pax Europaea” is constantly challenged. Therefore, it is important to see the conditions and limits of European armament cooperation which are highlighted in the last chapter of this contribution.

Keywords: Pax Europaea; European Defence; Armament cooperation.

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Introduction

As there is less likelihood than a couple of years ago to achieve a true European Defence Union, the new buzzword recently used for the first time by the President of the EU-Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, could be “Pax Europaea”¹. Of course, this term is meant to trigger associations with “Pax Romana” and “Pax Americana”. EU Defence Commissioner Kubilius recently explained in a speech what this expression means from the Commission’s point of view (quote Kubilius)²: “The Commission President stated: ‘We cannot allow ourselves to be thrown off course by the seismic changes that we are facing’”, by slow evaporation of “Pax Americana” from Europe. Nevertheless, it remains a key question whether this observation can and will be sufficiently translated into common action among European governments in terms of more and more efficient armament cooperation, and whether something like a European Defence can sooner or later be expected?

“Pax Europaea” vs. European Defence and NATO?

First of all, the term “European Defence” obviously requires some more differentiation. Are we talking about NATO’s European members, are we discussing the role of the EU as a potential defence enabler, or are we simply referring to any of the European countries (except Russia, Belarus etc.)? As we can assume that the potential addressee of European defence, from today’s point of view, would only be Russia and its allies, “European Defence” will hereinafter be understood as the defence to be organized by the European NATO members.

NATO has developed clear rules on how its defence is to be organized. It analyses the threat perception based on certain scenarios, determines the means required to address these scenarios, and finally decides which member country need to provide which kind of military capabilities. Although NATO itself provides certain tools for aggregating armament needs, such as the agreement among NATO’s National Armament Directors, it mainly leaves it to the discretion of the member states how to meet the respective capability requirements. Several options are available: to do so nationally on its own, together with other NATO members, under an EU cooperation scheme, or under an OCCAR or EDA framework. Finally, each country remains free to purchase armament from outside the EU.

The Commission President’s message

Ursula von der Leyen’s message was very clear. In the words of Commissioner Andrius Kubilius³: “If we want Peace in Europe (Pax Europaea) we need to be ready to be independent.

¹ Acceptance Speech of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen for the International Charlemagne Prize 2025, retrievable under: <https://www.aachen.de/europa-internationales/karlspreis/reden-pdf/karlspreis-2025-rede-von-der-leyen.pdf?cid=qto>

² Speech by Commissioner Kubilius at the Tocqueville Conversations: “The Future of Europe: From Pax Americana to PaxEuropaea” on June 28, 2025, retrievable under: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_25_1661

³ See footnote 2

Pax Europaea (Peace in Europe) is our strategic responsibility. Our responsibility, not an American responsibility. In order to achieve that, we need to be ready to be independent. First of all, in order to become independent we must urgently ensure material preparedness for defence – according to NATO defence plans and NATO capability targets. Material preparedness means a radical increase in producing and procurement of new weapons on the European continent. For that we need to ramp-up European financial resources. We are doing a lot of things with our material Defence Readiness. Speed and scale of decisions are impressive. Nobody was expecting Europe to be able to do that. ... Another issue of material readiness – replacement of US capabilities: main message, - instead of complaining that the Americans are going to betray us, we need to immediately start preparations for replacing American defence resources on the European continent. Politically the only way to keep good relations with our transatlantic partners, - is to present to them a clear, rational plan of ‘European defence readiness’; and discuss with our partners how long it will take us to implement it and which steps we need to take. Experts are saying that it will cost us around 1 trillion euros during next 25 years. Strategic enablers - is the first, most important priority. European Defence Readiness cost a lot, but non-readiness will cost much more. Also, we need to understand that implementation of the Pax Europaea strategy demands from us not only material defence independence, but also development of independence of our political thinking and it demands from us political preparedness to take responsibility for the geopolitical future of Europe, which now is decided in Ukraine. Such an independence of our political thinking is an important part of the concepts Independence of Europe and Pax Europaea.“

“European Defence Union” vs. realistic European defence

In this context, the frequently discussed idea of a “European Defence Union” — a vision of EU member states pooling and integrating land, sea, air, space and cyber defence capabilities under a common EU framework (while still retaining national sovereignty) — illustrates how differing national approaches can complicate deeper European defence cooperation. In fact, with this kind of interpretation, “Pax Europaea” also insinuates a world order in which – under the assumption that certain areas of geopolitical interest are agreed between the US, Russia, China and Europe – the European Union will be able to maintain peace and security for the entire region, including Ukraine. This seems to be quite a demanding task to be performed by a European Union, which internally is not aligned on several security policy issues and which remains dependant on US nuclear protection under the NATO umbrella! Therefore, the appeal must be to remain realistic about Europe’s defence:

First of all, NATO must, for the time being, remain our solid basis of deterrence against Russian and other threats to Europe’s territorial or political integrity. As we live in an international order that still depends on overall stability through nuclear deterrence, a NATO reduced to a purely European alliance, without the US and Canada, is not realistic. Such a reduced alliance would, for the foreseeable future, not be able to provide a sufficient nuclear deterrence on an equal footing with Russia and China.

Second, Europe’s own means for supporting Ukraine militarily are limited, especially with regard to space-based capabilities, which are indispensable for modern electronic warfare. Another issue is the financial means that need to be mobilized among EU member states, first

and foremost Germany, in order to provide sufficient means, and this without triggering the risk of being perceived as a party to the war.

Third, President Trump is attempting to put Europe's political actors in a position where they must decide whether to impose tariffs on imported goods from China, while using Europe's reluctance to adopt such measures as an excuse for the US to scale back its own involvement, most prominently in Ukraine⁴. This is a development which Europe needs to avoid.

Fourth, the European Union's "Green Deal", which may be simplified but not overhauled, has left Europe with the self-imposed burden of accepting more than its genuine own share of responsibility for global climate neutrality. The economic consequences are currently visible across the European Union. In the long run, this effect may limit the ability of European countries to pay the huge bills arising from their own deterrence and defence requirements. The already imposed "Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism" (CBAM) as such will not limit this kind of exposure, as cost will increase even further.

All this poses severe risks for the claim put forward under the term "Pax Europaea". Consequently, when talking about Europe's Defence, we should be pragmatic and realistic. We are speaking of nothing more and nothing less than the armament tasks assigned by NATO to its European members. Whether these tasks will be fulfilled by the respective members through their own national means or in cooperation with others, remains an opportunistic decision for the governments involved.

The conditions and limits of European armament cooperation

When spending their taxpayer's money, several drivers appear to be relevant:

- Spending the money in a commercially and fiscally viable manner, will be a basic prerequisite, not the least under prevailing national budget laws.
- For some European countries, if taxpayers' money cannot be spent locally for the benefit of national industries, compensation comes into focus for the procuring government. This means that the country providing the armament supply must, if possible, purchase goods of equal value from the procuring country, ideally even for the same project that triggered such compensation.
- If the procuring country has a strong defence industry of its own, it is a natural motivation that defence orders should benefit domestic jobs, foster innovation in the national defence sector and strengthen the overall competitiveness of that industry.
- Only in cases, in which these nationally driven motivations do not outweigh the benefits of supranational arms cooperation, will such cooperation prevail. Even then, it will require strong and determined political will from the respective governments in order to cope with all opposing forces.

⁴ Euronews dated Sept. 13, 2025: Trump calls on NATO allies to stop buying Russian oil and threatens 50% to 100% tariffs on China, retrievable under: <https://www.euronews.com/2025/09/13/trump-calls-on-nato-allies-to-stop-buying-russian-oil-and-threatens-50-to-100-tariffs-on-c>

- European Defence, as elaborated in the “White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030”, published by the European Commission in March 2025, can and should provide incentives and tools for making European arms cooperation easier and somewhat more attractive. A good example are the newly mentioned “Member States Capability Coalitions”, as highlighted in the “Joint Communication - Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030”⁵.

The programme “ReArm Europe” with its SAFE6 Instrument, may for example provide a good basis for EU member countries in need of preferential financing conditions to foster cooperation with other countries and their industries.

To summarize in a nutshell: The future of European defence does not rest in the dream of a “Pax Europaea”, but in pragmatic progress towards more cooperation among the European NATO member states in fulfilling their commitments to NATO more efficiently and quickly – hopefully! Clear political determination and leadership remains key for such achievements.

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⁵ „Joint Communication – Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030“, retrievable under: https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/readiness-roadmap-2030_en

⁶ EU Commission, release of July 30, 2025: “SAFE | Security Action for Europe“, retrievable under: https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/safe-security-action-europe_en