

EUROPEAN DEFENSE AND CURRENT HYBRID THREATS

Diana SOARE

Political Sciences, The National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bucharest,
Romania

Abstract: *European defense is a phrase with multiple meanings and the use of which is common in the current context, incorporating concepts, strategies and aspirations that have as core the security of the European Union. Taking into account the evolution it has had over time and the hybrid threats it is now facing, the question arises of the relationship in which the two find themselves, how they influence each other and the existence of tools to effectively combat them. In the analysis of the problem, qualitative research will be considered in order to understand both the circumstances present in which the European Union is placed and the role it plays in the modern hybrid war. Thus, the article outlines the European defense through the prism of contemporary threats, emphasizing the effects they have on European stability and noting the solutions existing in their management.*

Keywords: *defense; European Union; hybrid threats; instability; security*

1. INTRODUCTION

The current international society is characterized by a combination of features such as volatility, uncertainty and fear, while providing new definitions of defense and resilience concepts, capturing the development of a new global security culture. In this mosaic of changes, hybrid threats play a key role in cultivating the imbalance of states, reversing the meanings of the fundamental values and principles of democracy, realizing a distortion of them by making them vulnerable.

European security, a necessity that has been constantly preoccupying the European Union (EU) since its inception, is presently at a crossroads, facing events that will determine its very essence in the future. The importance of the development of the military dimension of the Union is distinguished by reference to the narrative offered by the United States of America, the context of the war in Ukraine and the special circumstances in which international society is located. Thus, the EU's security environment faces challenges both internally and externally that have the capacity to weaken the cohesion and identity of the Union.

The article aims to analyze the hybrid threats facing the Union, both theoretically and practically, focusing on the initiatives of the Member States on the military sphere aimed at combating them and strengthening the resilience of the EU. The search will also relate to latest events

that stress the obligation of States to enlarge their defense industry in order to develop capacities against the threats and risks they face and to implement vulnerability management policies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over time, hybrid threats have encompassed a wide range of notions and explanations through which a description of them was made. In a general characterization, these are destructive activities organized and carried out by state and non-state actors, the main purpose of which is to compromise stability in various areas by identifying and capitalizing on vulnerabilities. Among the best known are cyber-attacks, disinformation and threats with military force.

Hoffmann (2007/2010) defines hybrid threats as a mixture of conventional weapons, asymmetric tactics and violence to achieve the proposed result. The subject is represented by the states, but it also focuses on the analysis of non-state actors, following from a military perspective the existing interests that determine the different administration of threats in the context of conflict. At the same time, it focuses on tactical and operational actions in war, their coordination and the effects they have on the chosen objective. On the other hand, Cullen (2018) captures the concept of hybrid threats as a confusing element that makes it difficult to understand the situation and facilitates the state of

uncertainty through the diversity of ways of achieving and multiplying them, while making it difficult to identify them in the future. He embodies the idea as a puzzle game whose components combine, each of them having various seating possibilities for creating a different overview.

Giannopoulos (2020) highlights the expansion that hybrid threats have made over time by testing the European security environment, emphasizing technology as a special feature of the present with a clear role in the development of hybrid threats. At the same time, he notes the official EU documents highlighting various approaches (operational, strategic, etc.) on the subject. In addition, he captures the effects that factors such as globalization and the pace of development of artificial intelligence have facilitated the evolution of hybrid threats.

Finally, the topic approached is directly motivated by contemporary global trends, being a complex field that requires constant research and permanent reporting to technological developments.

3. HYBRID THREATS AND EUROPEAN UNION

If in mathematics there are formulas for finding the unknown “*x*” and solving the problem, in hybrid threats the calculation expressions have abstract values, multiple variables and different results. Although each state faces particular vulnerabilities, a wide range of common threats targeting European Union Member States is noted. The positioning of the hybrid threat concept within the EU does not limit the geographical area to a certain level, nor does it simplify the interpretation of the concept.

In 2016, the European Commission (EC) and the EU High Representative (HR/VP) approved a key document on hybrid threats, namely the communication Joint System for Countering Hybrid Threats: a European Union Response (EC, 2016). In the same year, the European Commission introduced initiatives to strengthen the EU's capacity to respond to threats. Thus, a general framework for them at EU level has been developed. The EU's Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS), approved in 2016, underlines the need for a relationship between the resilience of the Union and its external actions (EUGS, 2016) Following the adoption of the European Defense Action Plan by the EC, the European Council established the European Defense Fund (EDF).

In spring 2024, the Council validated the Guidance Framework for the practical establishment of EU Hybrid Rapid Response Teams in the fight against hybrid threats¹. Also at the beginning of last year, the European Commission and the High Representative adopted a Joint Communication on a new European Industrial Defense Strategy (EDIS, 2024) and the European Defense Industry Programme (EDIP, 2024). These measures accentuate the need for EU Member States to increase their defense capabilities to improve and develop the military field.

According to the European Defense Agency (EDA) Annual Report (2024), projects such as the autonomy of the Remote Pilot Aircraft System (RPAS) and collaborations for the development of unmanned autonomous vehicle (UAV) and drone technologies began in 2024, for the purpose of intensifying EU capacities. Isaac Diakite, the Project Officer Air Superiority, emphasizes that

integrated air and missile defense is a complex and multifaceted issue that is fundamental to any successful defense strategy (EDA, 2024:12).

Thus, the foundations on which the defense plan is built are highlighted, having a clear understanding of the existing resources, the probability of success of the projects and the risks existing in their implementation.

As regards defense, capacity building for EU resilience is vital to countering these threats. In this respect, it is necessary to focus the defense industry on modern technologies that determine investments in systems and prototypes. Thus, the European Union has developed the concept in its official documents over time, setting its principles, priorities and interests, while relating to the trends of the international security environment and featuring the vision, directions of action and means of achievement in the field of European defense.

4. CHANGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Currently, European Union Member States are targets of hybrid threats. The latest defense investment statistics show that defense spending in 2023 amounted to 1.3% of GDP for the EU (Eurostat, 2025), as shown in Figures 1 and 2. This demonstrates a general awareness of the need to

¹ The Strategic Compass for Security and Defense was the basis of the hybrid toolkit for the development of new means of detection and response to them.

develop the defense industry in order to maintain European security.

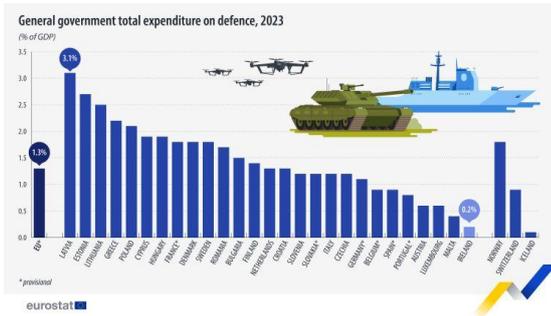


Fig. 1: General government total amount on defense, 2023 (% of GDP) [source: Eurostat]

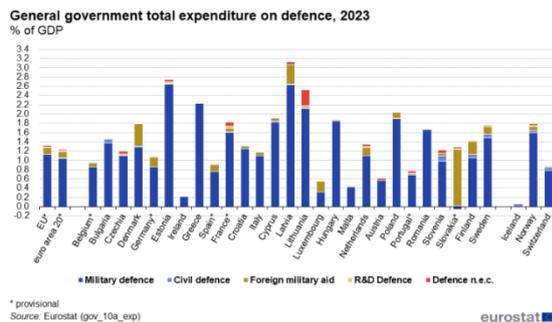


Fig. 2: General government total investment on defense, 2023 [source: Eurostat]

From this point of view, there is a development in investments in the defense industry of the Member States aiming at increasing their capacities and resilience to threats.

In order to stimulate the European defense industry, the Franco-German binomial proposes a new product under the Main Ground Combat System, namely the MGCS tank (DIE, 2025), in order to replace the Leclerc tanks of France and the Leopard 2 of Germany. The Swedish defense company SAAB is engaged in the formation of new European defense capabilities by introducing its Globaleye Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft as a replacement for the American aircraft Boeing E-3 Sentry (AWACS). Among their main objectives is the possibility of identifying the ships and aircraft that are found in the area of the Scandinavian Peninsula and the Atlantic Ocean. In addition, the Swedish government shows substantial involvement in the war in Ukraine through the new military aid package (about 1.39 billion euros) to strengthen Ukrainian air, naval and ground capabilities. Poland is considering building munitions factories to support the arms industry. Among the upgrades, there are also M1A2 ABRAMS SEPv3 tanks (Cătălin, 2025), that emphasize the technological

development that the Polish state wants in its defense industry.

The Orka Program of the Netherlands that involves the modification of submarines by modernizing them with sonar systems produced by THALES. The Danish defense ministry stressed the need for technology in the country's naval forces through the new project to acquire warships, drones, etc. to increase security in the Baltic and North Sea areas (FMN, 2025).

The world's largest sovereign fund, the Norwegian² government fund, is being considered for investment in Norway's defense industry. In addition, the Norwegian government has announced that it will contribute 4 billion crowns to the procurement of artillery ammunition used by Ukraine on the Czech initiative to support it (Government.no, 2025). Poland, Estonia and Norway are among the European countries that have chosen to buy K9-Type Korean howitzers to strengthen their defense industry. Also, in partnership with Hanwha, a factory will be built in Romania to fabricate K9 Thunder howitzers and Redback fighting machines, the final goal being to turn it into an industrial hub. Table 3 shows the above-mentioned projects by the EU member states, organized according to the area in which the weapons development is carried out.

Table 1. EU member states' projects on the development of the defense industry

EU countries	The field of defense	Defense industry development projects
Franco-German binomial	Earth space	MGCS TANK
Sweden	Airspace	AEW&C
Poland	Earth space	Modernization of land forces
The Netherlands	Maritime space	ORKA PROGRAM
Denmark	Maritime space	Modernization of naval forces
Estonia	Earth space	Modernization of land forces

In the presentation of the White Paper for European Defense – Readiness 2030 and the ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, said that

² Norway is not a member of the European Union, but is in an active partnership with the latter.

the era of the peace dividend is long gone. The security architecture that we relied on can no longer be taken for granted. Europe is ready to step up. We must invest in defense, strengthen our capabilities, and take a proactive approach to security (DIS, 2025).

The EC president stresses the need to prioritize the development of the European defense industry in relation to the dynamics of international society and the role that the European Union plays in this context. Moreover, it is noted that Member States are resonating with this orientation towards defense investments, in EU values and objectives in order to create a proper framework for its consolidation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The European Union is facing unprecedented events such as disinformation, cyberattacks and interference in the electoral process of states by hostile actors, who have the ability to change current social, political and economic trends, the complexity of these contemporary hybrid threats is determined by the novelty and uncertainty of the present.

The article theoretically analyzed the concept of hybrid threats, capturing some Union documents that led to more effective management of actions to combat risks and reduce vulnerabilities, aiming to increase EU capabilities. Also, the projects on the development of the defense industry of the Member States were emphasized, noting at a general level the attitude they approached regarding the European security, which is a priority in the present context. For the European Union to succeed, it is essential to identify threats and finance their removal capacities, harmonize policies and coordinate defense spending, at both EU and state level. Moreover, it is necessary to continuously improve the legal instruments in order to relate to the requirements of the current security environment that is under the sign of technology. In the end, the European Union's role in countering hybrid threats is fundamental, as it has the capacity and resources to counter action, and is closely linked to the defense industry of the Member States that make it up.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Cătălin, S.J. (2025, April 10). Polonia avansează pe drumul către modernizarea forțelor sale terestre (Video): Militarii polonezi au trecut la testarea tancurilor M1A2 Abrams SEPv3, cea mai modernă versiune a blindatului

- American. *Defense Romania* [online]. URL: https://www.defenseromania.ro/tancurile-poloneze-abrams-m1a2-sepv3_633257.html [Accessed on April, 2025].
2. Cullen, P., (2018). *Hybrid Threats as a new wicked problem for early warning*. Helsinki: Hybrid COE.
3. Defense Industry Europe (DIE). (2025, April 8). Germany approves formation of joint venture for Franco-German MGCS defense programme. *Defense Industry Europe* [online]. URL: <https://defense-industry.eu/germany-approves-formation-of-joint-venture-for-franco-german-mgcs-defense-programme/> [Accessed on April, 2025].
4. European Commission. (2016). Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. Joint Framework on countering hybrid Threats. A European Response. JOIN (2016) 18 final. Brussels: European Commission.
5. European Commission. (2024). Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. A New European Defense Industry Strategy: Achieving EU readiness through a responsive and resilient European Defense Industry. JOIN (2024) 10 final. Brussels: European Commission.
6. European Commission. (2024). Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the European Defense Industry Programme and a framework of measures to ensure the timely availability and supply of defense products COM/2024/150 final. Brussels: European Commission.
7. European Union. (2016). *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*. Bruxelles: EEAS.
8. European Union. (2025, March 12). Introducing the White Paper for European Defense and the ReArm Europe Plan - Readiness 2020. *Defense Industry and Space (DIS)* [online]. URL: https://defense-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defense-industry/introducing-white-paper-european-defense-and-rearm-europe-plan-readiness-2030_en [Accessed on April, 2025].
9. European Union. (2025, March 21). Government expenditure on defense. *Eurostat* [online]. URL: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Govern>

- ment_expenditure_on_defence [Accessed on April, 2025].
10. Forsvaresministeriet (FMN). (2025, March 30). Regeringen vil styrke Forsvarets flåde. *FMN* [online]. URL: <https://www.fmn.dk/da/nyheder/2025/regeringen-vil-styrke-forsvarets-flade/> [Accessed on April, 2025].
 11. Giannopoulos, G., Smith, H., Theocharidou, M. (2020). *The landscape of hybrid threats: A conceptual model* European Commission, ISPR. PUBSY no. 123305. Helsinki: Hybrid COE.
 12. Government.no (2025, April 7). Norway to provide NOK 5 billion for artillery ammunition for Ukraine. *Government.no* [online]. URL: <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/norway-to-provide-nok-5-billion-for-artillery-ammunition-for-ukraine/id3096006/> [Accessed on April, 2025].
 13. Hoffman, F.G., (2007). *Conflict in the 21st century: The rise of hybrid wars*. Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.