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ON HYBRID WARFARE AND "HOW MANY ANGELS CAN DANCE ON THE HEAD OF A PIN" (2/2): Moving Towards Greater Military Coherence

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In a recent doctrinal paper entitled "L'Europe peut se défendre seule" ("Europe Can Defend Itself"), Air Force General Éric Autellet, who served as Major General of the French Armed Forces – the second-highest military post in France – from 2021 to 2023, made a particularly illuminating observation that deserves to be quoted in full:

"The first problem facing European defence is not money, but coherence. Unlike a budget, coherence cannot be voted through every year. (…) If Europe wants to be capable of defending itself in 2050, it must not only devote an exceptional budget to that aim, but also align its research, equipment, human resources, doctrine and strategic resolve to create a coherent and credible whole. (…) Defence budgets may be rising across Europe, but without a coordinated political vision they will merely produce fragmented capabilities and duplicated production lines."[1]

Indeed, the ability of any political entity to defend itself depends first and foremost on the military coherence of its forces. That depends only partly on military "capabilities" in the narrow sense – equipment – and also on their performance and quantity, industry's ability to replace them after the initial shock, the training and discipline of those operating them, how they are employed, the strategy pursued by their commanders, and the ability to move them to the battlefield (assuming that the distinction between "front line" and "rear" still makes sense in the war unfolding before our eyes). Many other factors are involved, only partly captured by the acronym DORESE used by the French armed forces (Doctrine, Organisation, Human Resources, Equipment, Force Support and Training) and its NATO equivalent, DOTMLPF-I (Doctrine, Organisation, Training, Materiel, Leadership and Education, Personnel, Facilities and Interoperability).

Such military coherence is built up over time through the repeated conduct of two types of exercises.

European defence planning

Put simply, this is the process through which a state or alliance establishes the long-term direction, objectives and resources of its defence policy, and consequently designs the military instrument it believes it needs to confront threats or fulfil its ambitions. It begins with an assessment of the strategic environment (threats, risks, allies and objectives) and leads to policy choices: the missions assigned to the armed forces, force structures, the balance between deterrence, protection and power projection, posture and budgets. Capability planning is a more specialised, operational component of this broader process. It answers the

[1] Éric Autellet, "L'Europe peut se défendre seule", Le Grand Continent, 21 September 2026, https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2026/09/21/leurope-peut-se-defendre-seule/.

question: “Which military capabilities must be developed, acquired, maintained or retired to carry out the assigned missions?” In a comprehensive planning process, this exercise should culminate in the allocation of “capability targets” among allies, specifying which country is to provide which capabilities and by when.

Within NATO, this exercise is known as the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP). In the European Union (EU), a similar exercise is carried out by the EU Military Staff (EUMS) under the Headline Goal Process, but it does not result in the allocation of capability targets. Moreover, its purpose differs substantially from that of the NDPP. Rather than building a defence instrument for the collective defence of European allies – including US capabilities – it seeks to develop an operational crisis-management capability outside the EU, without support from US forces. The process is further complicated by the addition of an exclusively industrial stage entrusted to the European Defence Agency (EDA), an intergovernmental agency operating under the unanimity rule.

Ideally, therefore, European countries should establish a defence planning process of their own, either by planning within the NDPP without taking American capabilities into account, or outside the NDPP by creating a form of EU-DPP. This would require substantial reform of the EDA and the EUMS, or even a merger between the EDA and OCCAR (Organisation for Joint Armament Co-operation), which is in fact the body favoured by European states for major armament programmes. However, none of these options has so far been considered by European decision-makers.

In any case, such solutions would come too late to address a Russian escalation which, as argued above, is imminent. Furthermore, the planning cycles that provided NATO with much of its “glue” during the Cold War and, still more, since its end would not necessarily be suited to the forms of warfare now being witnessed in Ukraine and Iran, in which speed is the very essence of strategy, industry its engine and innovation its fuel.[2]

Operational readiness and planning for European forces

The second way to make European armed forces more coherent is through operational readiness, which creates the ability to execute plans (through training and force generation), alongside operational planning, the process by which a military headquarters designs, develops, coordinates and prepares the execution of an operation. Operational readiness and

[2]Pierre Vandier, “La vitesse est la matrice de la nouvelle puissance”, Le Grand Continent, 28 April 2026, https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2026/04/28/la-vitesse-matrice-nouvelle-puissance/.

planning are closely interlinked and complemented by a third phase: identifying and incorporating operational lessons learned during planning and execution.

To achieve this, European forces rely heavily on NATO's integrated military command, currently based in Mons, Belgium, under the authority of an American Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR). The prospect of European forces having to confront a Russian military offensive, however limited, if American forces were ordered – at the critical moment – not to engage by the ultimate political decision-maker, the President of the United States, is a sheer nightmare.

Indeed, while the 2026 reform has ostensibly "Europeanised" the theatre commands (Norfolk for the Atlantic, Naples for the south and Brunssum for the eastern flank), all the Alliance's operational command centres (MARCOM, LANDCOM, AIRCOM and, of course, SACEUR) are now led by American officers.

As General Autellet points out in the analysis cited above, "Europe's most structural – and least discussed – dependency is digital:

"Command and control, targeting, intelligence fusion, electronic warfare, logistics and battlefield connectivity rely on infrastructure that is now largely digital, as well as on the people and software that configure and maintain it. This is where the problem lies. A defence system that does not control its code does not control its forces. Unless Europe masters its own digital infrastructure and secures the skills on which its sovereignty depends, it condemns itself to outright vassalage."

Broadly speaking, this digital architecture is what is commonly called the "combat cloud": all the digital services used to coordinate military operations, together with most office and collaborative working software. Only then come the so-called critical capabilities, in both quantity and quality, discussed in capability assessments and connected to this command-and-control (C2) system: drones, air defence, satellites, transport and so forth.

Moreover, the Ukrainian forces' remarkable resistance to Russian aggression undoubtedly owes much to their courage, the innovation of their industrial base, the skill of their generals and the assistance provided by Europeans and Americans under President Joe Biden. But it also owes a great deal to communications systems provided by US hyperscalers (Starlink) and to intelligence-fusion and decision-support software (Maven Smart).

To achieve coherence as quickly as possible, European forces should urgently focus on establishing a European C2 system capable of operating without the Americans, making the fullest possible use of NATO infrastructure (84% of which is funded by Europeans, Canadians

and Turks), or else developing an entirely European capability to command military operations. This is the approach behind the establishment of a Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) within the EUMS – something EU Member States have still not managed to put fully in place…

Failing agreement, states will pursue national solutions. France has already done so with its Arcadia project, strongly inspired by the Ukrainian-developed Delta system. Progress appears more promising in the satellite sector, with the IRIS² project seeking to create a sovereign constellation of 348 satellites, operated by the SpaceRISE consortium (SES, Eutelsat and Hispasat) with a budget exceeding €15.6 billion. However, in March 2026 Germany announced its own military satellite programme, GXE, running in parallel with – and sometimes in opposition to – IRIS². As usual, European states go it alone whenever they can.[3]

This is precisely why military coherence necessarily requires greater political cohesion, beyond questions of technical expertise and industrial work-sharing. European states must develop the "ability to decide" together, even – and especially – when they disagree.

Just as a house must be built on its foundations, European defence must begin with the most unappealing and difficult element: the institutional framework. It must answer the fundamental questions of "who" (all states or only a vanguard), "how" (decision-making arrangements and funding) and "to what end" (territorial defence or crisis management). In other words, military coherence grows out of political cohesion.

BUILDING POLITICAL COHESION BETWEEN EUROPEAN STATES AND PRESERVING SOCIAL COHESION

Until now, virtually all European defence initiatives, except those undertaken by the European Commission, have sought to preserve unanimity in decision-making, protecting Member States' particular interests at the expense of the wider European interest. The result is that the power to obstruct has proved stronger than the power to build, and that the defence of Europe, by Europe, for Europe remains little more than a dream that can only be spoken of in hushed tones.

[3]Nicolas Barotte, "Avec Arcadia, l'armée française révolutionne son système de commandement", Le Figaro, 2 October 2026, https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/avec-arcadia-l-armee-veut-gagner-la-bataille-du-commandement-20261001.

Yet European defence cannot become a reality until Europeans first decide how to make decisions effectively: not unanimously, on an occasional, issue-by-issue basis, but in a "permanent" and "structured" manner. That is what the cooperation mechanism bearing those terms, provided for in the Treaty on European Union (Article 42(6) and Protocol No 10), should in theory have enabled. It was activated in 2017 but distorted by the way it was implemented.

This is the quantum leap Europeans have never managed to make, despite all their efforts throughout the long history of "European defence".

The European Intervention Initiative

The European Intervention Initiative (EI2) was launched by President Macron in his 2017 Sorbonne speech. Its aim was to create, among a group of fourteen "able and willing" European states, the preconditions for joint operational deployments under various predefined military intervention scenarios: exchanges of liaison officers, joint foresight and planning exercises, sharing doctrine and intelligence, and developing crisis scenarios. Formally, EI2 has never been dissolved and its framework remains in place, but its visibility has declined markedly since 2020–21. Its activities (ministerial meetings and Military European Strategic Talks) have continued discreetly, without any flagship operation.[4]

The coalition of the willing

Unlike EI2, the "coalition of the willing", launched in March 2025 at the initiative of Czech President Petr Pavel, is not exclusively European: it brings together sixteen states, including Japan, New Zealand, Canada and Australia, as well as NATO. Its advantage over EI2 is a permanent headquarters at Mont-Valérien in France, with command alternating between France and the United Kingdom every twelve months and a forward headquarters in Kyiv. Its disadvantage is that it is contingent – activation depends on a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine – ad hoc, having been created for a single purpose, and participation can be withdrawn. It is therefore difficult to expect it to produce lasting, structural effects.[5]

Extended nuclear deterrence

As Emmanuel Macron explained in his March 2026 speech at Île Longue, the evolution of French nuclear doctrine aims to bring together a group of countries around France's nuclear

[4]France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Portugal, Finland, Sweden, Norway and Italy.

[5]France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Czechia, Romania, Canada, Australia and Türkiye, together with NATO and the EU; Japan, New Zealand and other countries have also joined to varying degrees.

deterrent. These countries could participate in joint exercises, strategic consultations and possible temporary deployments of French strategic forces, supplementing rather than replacing NATO deterrence. The initiative does not create a "European nuclear button", nor has any sharing of the ultimate decision ever been contemplated. Nevertheless, by involving other European states in building a force (airborne and perhaps maritime) able to support its own nuclear forces, France is in effect creating a group for mutual strategic support. In the medium to long term, this could become as important a source of cohesion as NATO's Nuclear Planning Group. It is worth recalling that, within that group, the decision to use US tactical nuclear weapons is not shared: it remains the exclusive prerogative of the US President.[6]

The European Security Council

The latest initiative was proposed by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in her State of the Union address on 16 September 2026. She expressed a desire to go beyond merely establishing a consultation procedure among Member States in the event of hybrid attacks (equivalent to Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty), by putting forward "proposals" for a "European Security Council".

The idea of such a council is not new. It dates back to the 2018 Meseberg summit between Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel, where the two leaders supported creating an "EU Security Council" to encourage qualified-majority decision-making. The idea subsequently disappeared from the political agenda, only to resurface in 2026 at the initiative of European Commissioner for Defence An*drius Kubilius. So far, however, nothing concrete has emerged,*

[6]The United Kingdom, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland.

pending the Commission's proposals. This is hardly surprising: the creation of such a council is a matter for Member States, which appear in no hurry to pool their defence instruments.[7][8][9][10]

That is where matters stand. The greater the Russian threat becomes, the less willing European leaders seem to open the institutional Pandora's box. As always, they retreat into "pragmatic" and "realistic" solutions that amount to little more than sticking plasters on a wooden leg. Meanwhile, Franco-German relations are in a dire state, and the Americans are lobbying with extraordinary ferocity in Brussels and national capitals against any form of "European preference". The impetus must therefore come from somewhere beyond politics alone.

PRESERVING SOCIAL COHESION WITHIN EUROPEAN SOCIETIES

Cohesion among Europeans must also be forged at the level of citizens, within our societies themselves. It is there that the battle over perceptions is fought, and where all manner of "psychological operations" are conducted to win a war without having to fight one. Far too many people still believe, despite all the evidence, that Crimea is naturally Russian and that "the people of Crimea freely expressed their wish, through a vote, to join Russia"… The

[7]Élysée website, accessed 2 October: "To look into new ways of increasing the speed and effectiveness of the EU's decision making in our Common Foreign and Security Policy. We need a European debate on new formats, such as an EU Security Council and means of closer coordination, within the EU and in external fora. We should also explore possibilities of using majority vote in the field of the Common Foreign and Security Policy in the framework of a broader debate on majority vote regarding EU policies", https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2018/06/19/meseberg-declaration-renewing-europes-promises-of-security-and-prosperity.

[8]Speech in Sälen, Sweden (SPEECH/26/69), at the "Europe under pressure" conference, and "The Case for a European Security Council", published on his blog on 28 January 2026, which serves as his initial reference text. Kubilius advocates formalising the informal E5+ platform (the five largest Member States) into a European Security Council, with "large" permanent members (the E5), rotating members, leaders of EU institutions, and the United Kingdom invited when European defence in the broader sense is discussed. At its highest level, the Council would meet as heads of state or government. He argues that it should be "more than a crisis-management instrument", with the "highest coordinating role in peacetime as well as during preparations", particularly in steering implementation of the Roadmap on Defence Readiness 2030. He also discusses the Council's role in an existential crisis, coordinating implementation of Article 42(7) TEU, https://andriuskubilius.lt/en/on-europeanization-of-european-conventional-defence-full/.

[9]It should nevertheless be noted that, according to The Rapporteur, "Commission to propose radical decision-making overhaul for larger EU", 29 September 2026, the European Commission is preparing a plan for an EU enlarged to more than 30 members without amending the Lisbon Treaties. The Commission proposes extensive use of qualified-majority voting instead of unanimity in areas including sanctions, human rights, defence and taxation, notably through the passerelle clauses in Article 48(7) TEU.

[10]Under its new "architecture for responding to space threats", the European Council retains decision-making by unanimity. Only in emergencies may the High Representative adopt a provisional response before the Council decides. The Council must then confirm, amend or revoke that response within four weeks of its adoption. B2, "L'Union européenne se prépare à répondre aux menaces dans l'espace", 29 September 2026.

question is how European leaders can counter these operations and rouse their populations from their torpor, lifting an ever-thickening fog of war.[11][12]

Acknowledging – and making others acknowledge – that we are at war with Russia

Yes, we are indeed at war, and Russia is our enemy. Quite simply, while we can choose our friends, we cannot choose our enemies: they choose us. The Russian government has long declared the European Union, and European states more broadly, to be its enemies. What purpose is served by professing friendship towards someone intent on harming you?

Admittedly, this is not an open war in which uniformed European soldiers are fighting Russian troops. But war is a chameleon, constantly changing its form and appearance. Since 1945, formal declarations of war have effectively disappeared from international practice. States prefer to act without declaring war, or to hide behind euphemisms such as "special military operation", perhaps believing this will spare them legal exposure as aggressors.

More than ever, there is a continuum from peace to open war: a ladder that can be climbed or descended one rung at a time. The question is which rung we are on before reaching open warfare. Russia is already high up that ladder, looking down on us. We must therefore stop treating the war in Ukraine as a spectacle taking place elsewhere, with nothing to do with us. Whether we like it or not, we too are on the stage.

Acknowledging that European unity is at stake in this war

The second point our publics must recognise is that nothing less than the European Union itself is at stake: our only means of projecting power in today's world, with Ukraine as our first line of defence. Defending Ukraine means not only defending Ukrainians but defending our Union and what sustains it: our values and political unity. Every party now advocating nationalist retrenchment and making the European Union a scapegoat is, in reality, proposing a "great shrinking" of our power and values.

Contrary to what populists claim, there is no need to choose between our pensions, our children's education and aid to Ukraine. It is a question of priorities. To paraphrase General de Gaulle, the first duty of a state is to defend its citizens. Today, our defence begins in Ukraine. Our forebears may not have died for Danzig, but they died for Dunkirk. Let us not make the same mistake again.

[11]In military terminology, "psychological operations", or "psyops", are a form of special operation conducted by dedicated services.
[12]Remarks made by Marine Le Pen in 2023, reproduced in full by Lou Fritel, "Marine Le Pen peut-elle vraiment rompre avec Poutine ?", Le Grand Continent, 28 September 2026, https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2026/09/28/marine-le-pen-peut-elle-vraiment-rompre-avec-poutine/.

Acknowledging that America is no longer our steadfast ally

We must also acknowledge, regrettably, that our principal ally – the United States of America – is no longer truly our ally and is seeking by every possible means to impose its will on us. Admittedly, the Americans will not abandon the Atlantic Alliance, partly because doing so would require a vote in Congress that is far from assured, but also because it would not be in their own enlightened self-interest. The US defence industry is the Atlantic Alliance's principal beneficiary, while the United States maintains some thirty major permanent bases in Europe, almost all on EU territory, particularly in Germany. Rather than paying to use these facilities, the Americans benefit from European support for their upkeep: land and premises supplied free or at reduced rent, tax exemptions, in-kind services and infrastructure funded by European taxpayers.

The objective interest of US leaders is to maintain a formal alliance that is neither quite dead nor fully alive: one that in practice prevents any European strategic autonomy from emerging, while allowing Washington to shed as many as possible of the security guarantees it is supposed to provide in a conflict. The idea that there is no reason why the United States should finance the defence of wealthy Europeans is now too deeply entrenched in American political debate for there to be any turning back. The genie had been in the bottle from the very beginning. It has now escaped and will never go back in.

Fully embracing counter-hybrid measures while continuing to support Ukraine

The first priority is to develop the means to identify the aggressor behind every hybrid operation, stripping away any pretence of deniability. In hybrid warfare, the investigator becomes as important as the soldier.

The second is to make the aggressor pay a price, even if that price appears disproportionate to the original attack. This is what the German government did after the Leipzig attack: attributing it to Russia, then closing the Russian consulate in Bonn – the last one on German soil – and the Russian cultural centre in Berlin; proposing that additional Russian nationals be added to EU sanctions lists; and increasing pressure on Russia's "shadow fleet". But Europe must go further. For every hybrid attack on European territory or targeting European interests, Europeans must increase their financial or military assistance to Ukraine and retaliate with a hybrid attack of a similar nature. For example, every cyberattack should be met with a cyberattack of equivalent scale.

Putin must be made to understand that he can no longer count on European inaction and that every attack will carry a heavy cost: slowing the passage of his shadow-fleet vessels through

the Baltic or Mediterranean, for example, and ensuring that every kinetic action, such as a violation of our airspace, prompts an appropriate kinetic response.

Counter-hybrid measures also require efforts to influence Russian society. Admittedly, it seems bewitched and lulled to sleep by regime propaganda, yet it does receive information about developments in Europe, and a degree of permeability remains. The Russian diaspora living in exile in Europe could therefore provide a channel for messages that challenge the government's monolithic narrative and, in turn, introduce questions that may create cracks, if not outright fissures, in that narrative.[13]

Supporting Ukraine is not a choice. It is a necessity, not least because European economies are undoubtedly under less pressure than Russia's. European sanctions work like a slow-acting poison. Yet they still contain far too many loopholes, and Russian missiles fired at Ukraine are packed with Western components smuggled through countries allied with Russia. An embargo should be imposed on some of those countries, such as Kazakhstan.

The crucial question is who would lose more if the conflict dragged on: Europe or Russia? Putin will stop only where we stop him – through the collapse of his economy.

CONCLUSION

The old Roman maxim that those who wish to preserve peace must prepare for war has never been more relevant to us Europeans. Yes, we are at war with Russia, and there is every reason to fear that Putin will yield neither to European sanctions nor to the suffering of his population, still less to Donald Trump's friendly appeals. Under pressure from the radical forces he himself has unleashed, he is capable of taking any risk to bring the matter to a head once and for all, including the seizure of European territory.

In these circumstances, we must prepare without delay for open war precisely so that we do not have to fight one, and examine every option, including nuclear escalation. To do so, we must draw every possible military lesson from the war in Ukraine and avoid spending extravagant sums that we can no longer afford on costly, obsolete equipment. Instead, we must integrate our defence industry more closely with Ukraine's, contributing our expertise and critical capabilities in exchange for its innovation and production capacity.

[13]Jana Kobzová and Kadri Liik, "Bewitched Sleep: Russians' Views on Ukraine and the World", European Council on Foreign Relations, October 2026, https://ecfr.eu/publication/bewitched-sleep-russians-views-on-ukraine-and-the-world/.

But above all, we must remove the term ‘hybrid warfare’ from our vocabulary, as it lends itself to all manner of interpretations, including denial. Let us not become embroiled in Byzantine disputes: whether psychological, informational, cyber, hybrid, covert or below the threshold of open conflict, war is war and must be called by its name. We must name the demons in order to exorcise them.

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