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International Scientific Conference on Military Sciences



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Belgrade, Serbia, 11-12 September 2025

Publisher

Military Academy
Veljka Lukića Kurjaka 33, 11042 Belgrade

Publisher's Representative

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Printed by

VOJNA ŠTAMPARIJA
Resavska 40b, 11000 Belgrade

ISBN-978-86-908262-0-9

INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE
ON MILITARY SCIENCES

VojNa 2025

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READINESS 2030 AND REARM EUROPE: IMPLICATIONS FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY OF EU AND SERBIA

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Abstract

The European Commission's Readiness 2030 and the ReArm Europe initiatives, launched in March 2025, aim to enhance the EU's strategic autonomy through joint procurement, industrial consolidation, and accelerated defence readiness. This article analyses both the internal impacts on the EU member states and the external effects on militarily neutral, non-EU countries, with the focus on Serbia. Applying institutional realism and scenario-based analysis, the research identifies key risks: industrial asymmetry, institutional overlap with the NATO, and sovereignty erosion via centralized defence planning. For Serbia, exclusion from the EU-supported instruments such as the SAFE Regulation and the European Defence Fund (EDF), coupled with the "European preference" clause and interoperability standards, may lead to strategic marginalisation. Three future scenarios are developed as follows: limited cooperation, de facto alignment without membership benefits, and diversification toward non-Western actors. The findings suggest that Serbia must adapt its defence posture to a rapidly militarizing European order shaped by dual-use technologies, civil-military integration, and normative convergence.

Keywords: EU defence policy, strategic autonomy, Serbia, non-EU countries, institutional realism, SAFE Regulation, interoperability, military neutrality

Introduction

Europe is facing its gravest security crisis since the Second World War (European External Action Service, 2016, pp. 7, 33; Council of the European Union, 2022, p. 2; NATO, 2022, p. 3, para. 6; U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, pp. 2, 4–5, 15, & 23; Kremlin.ru, 2022, para. 2-3; Popescu, 2025, paras. 1, 6). The post-Cold War balance has fractured, and the final shape of the new international order remains uncertain. The European Commission forecasts that "a new international order will be formed in the second half of this decade and beyond" (European Commission, 2025b, p. 2). Russia's ongoing military intervention in Ukraine and its wartime economic restructuring – with 40% of the federal budget now dedicated to military purposes (Sterling, 2023, para. 2; The Moscow Times, 2024) – have, alongside waning U.S. predictability, challenged the EU to rethink its defence strategy.

In response, on 19 March 2025, the European Commission introduced the White Paper on European Defence – Readiness 2030 as a strategic foundation for the ReArm Europe initiative. This plan calls for a one-off surge in defence investment to enable the EU to reach a sufficient level of military preparedness by 2030 (European Commission, 2025b, pp. 3, 6, 16).

The document identifies key capability gaps and proposes concrete measures: urgent replenishment of ammunition and equipment (European Commission, 2025b, pp. 3–4), sustained military aid to Ukraine framed as “the first line of European defence” (p. 3), and the creation of a new financial instrument Security Action for Europe (SAFE). The SAFE would allow Member States to invest in missile defence, drones, and cybersecurity, with funds raised on capital markets and allocated based on national plans (pp. 16–17).

Beyond military capabilities, the initiative seeks to foster a true EU-wide market for defence equipment (European Commission, 2025b, p. 14), promote technological innovation and industrial ramp-up (pp. 14–15), simplify regulatory and procedural frameworks (pp. 9–10), enhance military mobility through infrastructure investment and harmonized transit protocols (pp. 8–9), and reinforce border resilience (p. 9).

For Serbia, these shifts require a reassessment of its strategic positioning. The central research question is: How will Readiness 2030 and ReArm Europe influence the EU’s strategic autonomy, and what will be their implications for Serbia, which remains outside the EU defence framework?

The working hypothesis is that while these initiatives may enhance the internal EU cohesion and industrial synergy, they could simultaneously amplify structural asymmetries and limit maneuvering space for non-member states like Serbia.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This paper employs a mixed qualitative methodology that combines content analysis of the official EU strategic documents, communications, and policy papers, focusing on declared objectives, instruments, and implementation mechanisms. A scenario-based method is applied to Serbia as a non-EU, militarily neutral state and an EU accession candidate. The paper also critically assesses the EU defence policy through the lens of institutional asymmetries and power redistribution.

These methods are grounded in institutional realism, which highlights the dynamic interplay between power, interests, and institutions. Unlike rational choice theory which sees institutions merely as the product of individual decisions (Poiro, 1993, pp. 958–959), Robert Grafstein argues that institutions are “conditions of choice, rather than objects of choice” shaping the behavior of actors (Poiro, 1993, p. 959).

Institutional realism rejects the view of institutions as temporary conventions but sees them as enduring structures that persist even without wide popularity or full understanding, reproducing patterns of power and behaviors through inertia (Grafstein, 1992, as cited in Johnson, 1994, p. 448). This perspective is particularly apt for analyzing Readiness 2030 and ReArm Europe. Institutional reforms aimed at strategic autonomy may consolidate the interests of dominant actors while sidelining others. Centralized planning and financing could deepen industrial disparities among the EU members, and overlapping mandates with the NATO may provoke duplication and friction. Most notably, joint procurement and capability development may erode national sovereignty by shifting decision-making from national governments to the EU bodies. For Serbia, this creates a dilemma: as

a non-member, it may face pressure to align with the EU defence norms without having a voice in shaping them. While some opportunities may emerge, risks of marginalization and dependency remain.

EU Defence Planning under Readiness 2030: Strategic and Financial Instruments

The ReArm Europe Plan was presented on 4 March 2025 by the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, preceding the European Council session on 6 March (European Commission, 2025e). After concerns were raised by Italy and Spain, it was rebranded as the ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030 (Liboreiro, 2025). The plan outlines a framework to mobilize up to €800 billion for defence investment across the Union, drawing on national fiscal flexibility, a new €150 billion EU loan instrument (SAFE), redirected cohesion policy funds, the European Investment Bank lending, and private capital mobilization (European Commission, 2025b, pp. 16–17).

On 19 March 2025, the European Commission and the High Representative released the *White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030*. The paper outlines three core priorities: (1) urgent closing of critical capability gaps, (2) innovation-driven transformation, and (3) full operational readiness by 2030. It identifies seven key domains for capability development: air and missile defence, artillery systems, ammunition stockpiling, unmanned and counter-drone systems, military mobility, cyber/AI/electronic warfare, and strategic enablers such as surveillance and fuel infrastructure (European Commission, 2025b, pp. 7–8).

These priorities are to be achieved through a coordinated EU-level effort including harmonization of military requirements, joint procurement, and funding via instruments like PESCO and the European Defence Fund. The White Paper stresses that the EU action will support, not replace, Member States' defence prerogatives (European Commission, 2025b, p. 6).

Two complementary instruments support this agenda. The proposed **Security Action for Europe (SAFE) Regulation** would provide up to €150 billion in long-term loans to facilitate joint procurement of defence equipment and the ramp-up of industrial production capacities across the EU (European Commission, 2025c, pp. 1–2). Meanwhile, the **Communication on Accommodating Increased Defence Expenditure** outlines a coordinated approach to temporarily relaxing fiscal constraints through the activation of flexibility clauses in the Stability and Growth Pact, thereby enabling Member States to allocate higher shares of their national budgets to defence spending (European Commission, 2025d, pp. 1–2, 5–7).

Together, these measures aim to strengthen the EU's technological base and defence industry while improving its readiness and interoperability. However, the institutional design issues are evident. The SAFE relies on **Article 122 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)** – an emergency provision that excludes the European Parliament from co-decision, allowing the Council to adopt measures without legislative oversight. This raises concerns about transparency and democratic legitimacy, especially given the increasing scope and budgetary scale of crisis-related instruments (Storr & Wallner, 2023, pp. 172, 180; Ondarza, 2023, pp. 11, 29). Moreover, the “European preference” clause requiring that at least 65% of the overall value of procured defence products originate within the EU, the EEA, or Ukraine, aims to strengthen the internal defence industrial base, but may also create market distortions and exacerbate asymmetries among Member States with uneven industrial capacities (European Commission, 2025c, pp. 6, 14). The White Paper

also reinforces the NATO's role, describing the EU defence development as complementary. At the same time, it opens avenues for cooperation with third countries through the SAFE, PESCO participation, and shared procurement schemes (European Commission, 2025, p. 19).

Discussion: Implications for the EU

The Readiness 2030 agenda marks a major shift in the EU's defence posture, aiming to close long-standing capability gaps, foster industrial consolidation, and reach full operational readiness by 2030. The White Paper outlines urgent priorities across seven domains, including air and missile defence, cyber capabilities, and military mobility, with the goal of ensuring the Union can support or conduct high-intensity operations. Its vision relies on aligning national efforts through harmonization, joint procurement, and funding support, while preserving Member States' sovereignty (European Commission, 2025b, pp. 6–8).

Financially, the ReArm Europe Plan complements this strategic framework. It introduces a two-tier financing model: the SAFE Regulation and activation of the national escape clause under revised fiscal rules. The SAFE, grounded in Article 122 TFEU, enables the EU to rise up to €150 billion in long-term loans to fund defence-related investments. However, this use of an emergency legal basis sidesteps the European Parliament, raising concerns about transparency and democratic legitimacy. The “European preference” clause (65% EU/EEA/Ukraine value-origin requirement) also risks entrenching industrial imbalances within the Union.

The escape clause allows Member States to temporarily deviate from fiscal adjustment paths in order to boost defence spending. The permitted cumulative deviation is up to **1.5% of GDP over a four-year period**, under clearly defined national plans and oversight mechanisms (European Commission, 2025a, p. 2). While this incentivises investment, its design may disproportionately benefit larger Member States with mature industrial ecosystems, leaving smaller economies constrained by co-financing requirements or limited administrative capacity.

Institutionally, these initiatives deepen the EU's defence integration but also risk amplifying asymmetries. Wealthier Member States are better positioned to absorb the SAFE funds and meet procurement conditions, while smaller states may struggle to participate on equal footing. Divergent strategic cultures - between advocates of strategic autonomy and those prioritizing the NATO - could further fragment coordination.

Coordination with the NATO remains sensitive. While the EU insists its efforts are complementary, overlaps in areas such as stockpiling, command structures, and mobility planning raise concerns about redundancy and friction. The NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg warned against “competing” military structures, stating that “creating uncertainty ... only helps the enemy,” especially given the NATO's limited manpower (Foy, 2024, para. 1).

As Bergmann et al. (2021, p. 27) note, the EU “lacks a common command center to coordinate or plan EU operations,” contributing to the gaps in strategic alignment. Initiatives like the EU-NATO Defender Europe exercises demonstrate cooperation, but also underscore the risks of parallel frameworks without integrated operational structures.

To avoid incoherence and duplication, progress will depend on formalized coordination mechanisms, shared capability development priorities, and clear division of roles between the NATO and the EU. While Readiness 2030 and ReArm Europe mark the EU's boldest push toward a coherent

defence policy, unresolved institutional asymmetries and NATO-EU ambiguities could undermine their effectiveness. Transparent governance, equitable burden-sharing, and better integration of national and supranational efforts will be critical, ensuring that external coordination is not weakened by internal fragmentation.

Discussion: Implications for Serbia

As a militarily neutral EU candidate situated between competing geopolitical spheres, Serbia faces distinct strategic pressures stemming from the EU's accelerated defence integration. Although not formally part of the Readiness 2030 or the ReArm Europe Plan, Serbia is likely to experience indirect effects through regulatory shifts, evolving procurement standards, and mounting political expectations.

Risk of Industrial Marginalisation

The EU's "European preference" clause, requiring that at least 65% of the value of procured defence products originate within the EU, EEA, or Ukraine, may significantly limit market access for Serbian exporters such as Yugoimport SDPR. Financial mechanisms like the SAFE and the European Defence Fund (EDF) prioritize EU-based supply chains, placing non-member producers at a disadvantage unless integrated as subcontractors. Common technical standards and procurement aggregation risk relegating Serbia to the role of a consumer, diminishing its potential as an autonomous defence actor and exporter.

Pressures on Military Neutrality

Serbia's policy of military neutrality is increasingly tested by deepening the EU-NATO convergence. Infrastructure initiatives such as Military Mobility could place pressure on Serbia to align transit protocols and logistical standards without formal inclusion in the decision-making process. Moreover, the Kosovo issue may become more complex to navigate, as the EU security and defence policy becomes more closely aligned with transatlantic norms, constraining Serbia's space to maneuver diplomatically and strategically.

Technological Dependency Risk

The EU's heavy investment in emerging defence technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing and unmanned systems risks widening the technological gap between Serbia and the EU. This disparity could increase Serbia's dependency on external suppliers for critical systems, thereby undermining its defence sovereignty. Furthermore, limited access to EU-level innovation ecosystems and specialized training programmes may reduce Serbia's interoperability and participation in joint operations or multilateral initiatives.

Scenario-Based Outlook

Based on current trends, three plausible strategic trajectories can be envisaged:

- **Limited Cooperation:** Serbia maintains its military neutrality while pursuing selective cooperation in non-sensitive areas. This approach preserves sovereignty but limits access to innovation and EU-supported capability development.
- **De Facto Alignment:** Serbia gradually harmonizes its defence and regulatory frameworks with EU standards without obtaining full membership. This scenario erodes neutrality without granting Serbia commensurate influence.

- **Strategic Diversification:** Serbia strengthens partnerships with non-Western powers. While maintaining nominal independence, this trajectory risks deepening technological and political dependencies on actors outside the European framework.

Even without formal accession to EU defence structures, Serbia remains exposed to their structural impact. As an EU candidate country, it faces increasing pressures for indirect alignment and risks exclusion from integrated defence markets. Navigating this evolving environment will require a careful balancing act between preserving sovereign decision-making and engaging selectively with the reshaped European security order.

Conclusion

The Readiness 2030 and the ReArm Europe initiatives represent the EU's most ambitious attempt to redefine its role as a strategic security actor. Confronted with a transformed security environment, marked by prolonged war, technological rivalry, and uncertainty, the EU has sought to consolidate its defence posture through institutional reform, financial instruments, and capability development.

The Readiness 2030 White Paper outlines a vision of full operational readiness by decade's end, while the ReArm Europe provides the financial tools to support it. Together, they propose a defence ecosystem built on industrial coordination, joint procurement, and technological investment. Instruments such as the SAFE and the fiscal escape clause aim to mobilize significant public and private capital, while enforcing a "European preference" in defence production.

This research, grounded in institutional realism, confirms the initial hypothesis: despite inclusive ambitions, these frameworks risk deepening intra-EU disparities and constraining the strategic autonomy of non-member states like Serbia. Larger member states, with stronger industries and fiscal capacity, are structurally better positioned to benefit. Smaller economies may face barriers to eligibility and co-financing. The use of emergency legal bases such as Article 122 TFEU further raises questions of transparency and accountability.

Importantly, the effects of the Readiness 2030 and the ReArm Europe extend beyond the EU's borders. For militarily neutral candidates such as Serbia, these initiatives exert indirect but tangible pressure. Procurement norms, supply chain preferences, and interoperability standards will likely reshape Serbia's defence environment despite its exclusion from formal mechanisms.

The analysis identifies three major risks: industrial marginalisation, erosion of military neutrality, and technological dependency. Serbia's limited access to the EU innovation networks may increase reliance on external suppliers, while political pressure may grow to adopt the EU defence norms. Issues such as Kosovo's status may also become more constrained within an alignment-oriented framework.

In facing these challenges, Serbia must weigh its options. Selective cooperation offers autonomy but restricts access. De facto alignment grants access but compromises neutrality. Diversification toward non-Western actors preserves nominal independence but risks long-term dependency and isolation. Each path entails trade-offs.

Ultimately, the EU's new defence agenda is a legitimate response to growing threats, but its extraterritorial effects highlight the need for inclusive, transparent, and adaptable mechanisms. Serbia's choices will shape not only its military trajectory, but also its strategic place in a changing European order.

Acknowledgement

The article is the result of work conducted within the research project “Security Challenges of the Western Balkan Countries in the European Security Paradigm” No. ISI/DH1/24-25.

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