

PRISM Perspectives

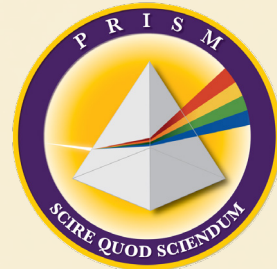
Can Europe Defend Itself?

The Imperative of Strategic Responsibility in an apolar age

By French Army Lt. General Eric Peltier

14 September 2026

Lt. General Eric Peltier currently serves as the French Army Deputy Director General for International Relations and Strategy. He previously served as the head of Joint International Affairs as well as the head of Southern Bilateral Cooperation Department within the French Joint Defence staff. Lt. General Peltier is a Legion of Honour officer, National Order of Merit officer, and holder of the Cross of Military Valour with three commendations.



The [NATO Summit](#) in Ankara on 7-8 July marked a further turning point in the debate over Europe's role in its own defence. Against the backdrop of Russia's continued war against Ukraine, persistent uncertainty over the future trajectory of U.S. engagement and intensifying competition with China, European security is entering a new phase in which long-standing assumptions about deterrence, defence and strategic dependence can no longer be taken for granted. The conditions that once allowed European Allies to defer difficult choices have disappeared: the post-Cold War illusion of unipolarity has given way to an enduring condition of strategic instability.

Established categories that once structured international security – peace and war, ally and adversary, military and civilian domains – have become irremediably blurred in the face of multidimensional and persistent forms of strategic competition. In this emerging apolar age, European security can no longer be conceived as a by-product of transatlantic guarantees. Derived from Richard Haas, who suggested that the 21st century might be moving towards “[nonpolarity](#),” an apolar age is defined as an international system in which no state – or group of states – possesses sufficient power, whether hard, smart or soft, to dominate global politics or provide overall leadership. In such a scenario, power has become so dispersed among numerous actors that the conventional concept of a “pole” becomes meaningless. Rather, it must be anchored

in Europe's ability to assume greater responsibility for its own security.

Navigating this inflection point requires more than rhetorical commitments. It demands a clear-eyed assessment of the structural shifts reshaping the security landscape, a concrete strategy to bridge Europe's capability gaps, and the institutional modernisation necessary to translate concepts like “[NATO 3.0](#)” – coined by US Undersecretary of War for Policy (OSW/P) Elbridge Colby -- into reality. OSW/P Colby argued at the February 2026 NATO Defense Ministerial that European Allies should shoulder a greater share of the burden and subsequently the concept was popularised by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte in discussions regarding a stronger European role within NATO, while preserving the transatlantic partnership.

This evolution must be grounded in a complementary framework that aligns the European Union's instruments with NATO's collective defence architecture.

A structural transformation of the strategic environment

The international security environment is now entrenched in a permanent state of crisis, driven by the intensification and globalisation of strategic competition. The resurgence of high-intensity

warfare on Europe's eastern flank constitutes a profound rupture in this regard. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, sustained by a war effort estimated at 8-10% of its GDP and an economy structurally adapted to prolonged conflict, remains the most direct and durable challenge to European security.

Rather than being viewed as a standalone event, this conflict is inextricably linked to the strategic alignment of anti-Western regimes. Alongside China's assertive consolidation of its military and technological potential, aimed at achieving global primacy by 2050, a renewed coalition of competitors is taking shape. Iran and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) are actively deepening military, industrial, and diplomatic co-operation with Moscow and Beijing, effectively reviving a modern counterpart to the so-called "axis of evil" – the "CRINK axis," a term coined by [Peter Van Praagh at the 2023 Halifax International Security Forum](#) to refer to the grouping of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea (CRINK) in what is perceived as a "loose alliance" of anti-Western nations. This strategic alignment leverages mutual political cover, shared technological ambitions, and complementary military capabilities to challenge the established international order across multiple theatres, though analysts debate whether it constitutes a formal alliance or a marriage of convenience.

The June 2024 *Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership* between Russia and North Korea institutionalised an unprecedented level of bilateral security cooperation, including mutual assistance commitments in the event of armed aggression. Concurrently, Pyongyang significantly expanded its support for Moscow's war in Ukraine through large-scale transfers of artillery ammunition, ballistic missiles, and military personnel. Iran has likewise become an important defence partner by supplying loitering munitions and facilitating Russia's indigenous drone production capabilities, while China has provided critical economic resilience and dual-use industrial inputs – including microelectronics, machine tools, and other components essential to Russia's defence-industrial base – without directly supplying lethal weaponry. As this alignment continues to mature, it is likely to pose an increasingly complex and multidimensional challenge to global security.

Moreover, conflict has become pervasive, extending from the deep seas and exo-atmospheric space to critical energy corridors and undersea cables. The new dynamics of confrontation extend well beyond traditional battlefields, characterised by

hybrid strategies that are increasingly systematic, violent, and complex to attribute. Adversaries routinely deploy cyber-operations, disinformation campaigns, and subversive actions designed to polarise public opinion, erode trust in public institutions, and influence political decision-making. A notable example is the coordinated Russian influence campaign uncovered by France's Vigilance and Protection against Foreign Digital Interference Service ([VIGINUM](#)) in 2024, commonly referred to as the "[Portal Kombat](#)" network, which used a constellation of fake news websites and coordinated online amplification to disseminate pro-Kremlin narratives across several European countries. As a result, virtually anything can be weaponised today, from drone swarms and electronic warfare systems to financial architectures and supply chains.

Concurrently, the progressive erosion of multilateralism and the paralysis of international institutions are accelerating. The decline of international law as a reference and tool for regulating geopolitical tensions constitutes a profound rupture. Permanent members of the UN Security Council routinely exploit their veto power to block resolutions, while unilateral interventions and strategies of *fait accompli* steadily replace negotiated, rules-based intervention frameworks. In this reconfigured geopolitical landscape, the defence paradigm must shift decisively from passive endurance to proactive resilience.

From outsourced security to European strategic responsibility

The assumption that European security can be indefinitely outsourced is dangerously obsolete. The relative disengagement of the United States and its strategic reorientation, based on its [2025 National Security Strategy \(NSS\)](#) and [2026 National Defense Strategy \(NDS\)](#), both of which signal a strategic re-centring on the "Western Hemisphere" and the Indo-Pacific region, which form a structural reality set to endure over time. This shift is often mischaracterised as a rupture, when in fact it presents an opportunity for European empowerment. As [France's 2025 National Strategic Review](#) unequivocally asserts, "Europeans must give themselves the means to control their own destiny." Such empowerment should materialise in the capacity to act decisively in defence of European interests, to shape one's own strategic environment, and to contribute meaningfully to collective security without being held hostage to external political fluctuations. In sum, Europeans must develop the ability to assume full responsibility for their con-

ventional defence, operating under the enduring credibility of the transatlantic nuclear umbrella and within the NATO framework. Complementing this approach, the evolution of French nuclear doctrine towards “forward deterrence” (*dissuasion avancée*) is intended to impose novel strategic dilemmas on competitors, thereby complicating their strategic calculus and reinforcing transatlantic security. Alongside the UK, France remains committed to playing a decisive independent role in strengthening the deterrence capabilities of the Alliance, as stated in the 1974 NATO summit declaration.

This newfound responsibility, however, demands a corresponding evolution in capability development, operational doctrine and force employment. To succeed, Europe cannot simply replicate American military paradigms. It must cultivate a distinct European way of war – one prioritising agility, preparedness, and the capacity to manage escalation across the continuum from sub-threshold competition to high-intensity conventional conflict.

Bridging the capability gap: towards industrial resilience and force readiness

Transitioning from rhetorical commitment to operational reality requires addressing critical capability gaps through concrete, coordinated action. First, the focus must shift from defence spending metrics to tangible capability generation. While the collective ambition to meet and exceed traditional NATO expenditure targets is a necessary foundation, the real measure of preparedness lies in deployable forces, sustainable ammunition stocks and scalable production lines. Accordingly, the Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) architecture must be sized to counter mixed salvos of mass-produced low-cost systems, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles. [To effectively protect Europe](#), interceptor production must far exceed the current annual rate of 1,000-2,000 units. Parallel investments are equally critical in mid- to long-range artillery, drones, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), and electronic warfare. Above all, the development of credible Deep Precision Strike (DPS) capabilities must guide our efforts, providing Europe with the ability to close the gap with competitors and assert a decisive strategic edge.

Second, increased European responsibility in capability development is inextricably linked to industrial cooperation. The European Defence Technological and Industrial Base cannot survive on fragmented procurement, duplicated programmes, and reactive crisis scaling. The joint procurement

of 155mm artillery ammunition, coordinated through EU mechanisms, demonstrates the benefits of aggregating demand at the European level. Yet such initiatives remain the exception rather than the rule. In that regard, sustained annual investment in cutting-edge technologies is essential to convert our structural economic advantage and R&D superiority into enduring industrial supremacy. Furthermore, financial instruments such as EDIP (European Defence Industry Programme), EDIRPA (EU Defence Industry Reinforcement Through Common Procurement Act) and SAFE (Security Action for Europe) must be consolidated and scaled, operating under a binding European preference that safeguards sovereign supply chains and prioritises intra-European capability development.

Third, enhanced industrial capacity must be matched by a commensurate uplift in military readiness. European forces, long accustomed to peacetime structures, must urgently adapt to the realities of high-intensity conflict where an adversary maintains a permanent state of mobilisation and institutionalised war footing. This requires a fundamental shift away from decades of relying excessively on bespoke high-technology systems toward training forces to operate sustainably with mass-produced materiel in prolonged, attritional engagements.

Without personnel trained to operate in a competitive environment, even the most advanced arsenals will remain strategically inert. The [ORION 26 exercise](#) stands as a compelling testament to this approach. Built around a credible scenario, it mobilised over 10,000 personnel across land, air, maritime, cyber and space domains to rehearse sustained high-intensity operations, rigorously testing joint procedures and ensuring all participating forces operate strictly under NATO standards. ORION 26 demonstrates that modern European readiness hinges on the capacity to fight across the full spectrum of conflict – from hybrid and sub-threshold operations to high-intensity warfare – under a common framework.

Europeanising the Atlantic Alliance

The consolidation of European military capabilities must translate into a modernised Alliance wherein European Allies become the principal architects of the transatlantic security architecture, marking a decisive transition from a paradigm of burden-sharing to one of burden-shifting. This requires Europeans to assume greater responsibility across NATO’s command structures, strategic planning

and operational doctrine, ensuring that increased defence investment is matched by commensurate political and military influence within the Alliance. Such a recalibration is not merely desirable but strategically necessary: a more Europeanised NATO would enhance the credibility of collective defence, reinforce the Article 5 guarantee and enable the Alliance to adapt more effectively to an increasingly contested security environment. Encouragingly, a growing number of European governments and strategic stakeholders now recognise the need for this long-overdue institutional transformation.

Realising this objective will require deeper synergies between NATO and the European Union. Contemporary collective defence relies increasingly on crosscutting enablers – defence industrial base resilience, military mobility, critical infrastructure protection, secure supply chains, technological sovereignty and sustained defence investment – most of which fall squarely within the EU’s regulatory, financial, and normative competences. A more assertive European role in support of NATO would thus create natural pathways for policy alignment, directly coupling the Alliance’s military planning processes with the EU’s instruments.

Rather than competing jurisdictions, the two organisations should operate under an explicitly articulated division of labour: NATO would retain its primacy as the collective defence framework, while the EU would function as the strategic enabler, mobilising regulatory leverage, funding mechanisms, and industrial coordination to sustain long-term capability development. This complementary architecture would accelerate interoperability, streamline capability scaling, and ensure that Europe’s expanding defence industrial ecosystem reinforces NATO’s strategic objectives. In doing so, the transatlantic partnership would evolve into a more resilient, institutionally cohesive, and strategically [coherent security framework](#). Nevertheless, while consistent with [Federica Mogherini’s conception of NATO-EU complementarity](#), the argument advanced here proposes a more explicit functional allocation of responsibilities between the two organisations.

Keeping a global outlook: the need for agility

In a strategic environment characterised by the profound interconnection of theatres and the multi-domain nature of contemporary competition, an exclusively Euro-Atlantic and conventionally

oriented posture risks fostering strategic myopia. This new reality demands a nuanced approach to institutional frameworks. While NATO remains the cornerstone of collective defence, it cannot provide extensive coverage across every challenge, and its consensus-driven decision-making process may not always be suited to the tempo required for a rapid response. Consequently, Europeans must be able to react swiftly and decisively to sub-threshold actions and hybrid threats that fall outside traditional Alliance protocols.

A concrete illustration of this operational agility is the joint European effort against the Russian “shadow fleet”. Conducted in strict compliance with international maritime law, these operations demonstrate how Europeans can act decisively when established alliance mechanisms are not the optimal vehicle. Since late 2025, [European navies](#) have successfully intercepted numerous vessels engaged in sanctions evasion. France has acted with determination, intercepting the Boracay (September 2025), Grinch (January 2026), Deyna (March 2026), Tagor (May 2026), and most recently the Deliver (23 June 2026). Parallel operations have been executed successfully by the United Kingdom, with the Smyrtos in June 2026, by Sweden with the Sea-Owl-I and Caffa in March 2026, and by Belgium with the Ethern alongside French forces the same month.

This flexible posture is not confined to maritime law enforcement. It extends to broader strategic formats where Europeans increasingly rely on pragmatic, theatre-spanning coalitions to address diverse security challenges, such as the [Coalition of the Willing](#) or the [Strait of Hormuz Multinational Military Mission](#). Such agility strengthens the transatlantic partnership by fostering a more able and willing Europe, equipped to shoulder its fair share of global security responsibilities both within and outside NATO.

The way ahead

The [July 2026 NATO Summit in Ankara](#) marked an important milestone in Europe’s strategic transformation, reaffirming the need for European Allies to assume greater responsibility within the Atlantic Alliance. The commitments adopted at the summit represent a significant step towards strengthening Allied cohesion, credibility and resilience, while underscoring that a more Europeanised NATO is essential to its long-term adaptation. The question is therefore no longer whether Europe possesses the resources to contribute more substantially to its

own defence. Collectively, it combines formidable economic strength, technological expertise, and industrial capacity. The enduring challenge lies in translating these comparative advantages into a resilient defence technological and industrial base, deployable military capabilities and the political resolve required to act decisively when European security interests are at stake. Achieving this ambition requires moving beyond outdated institutional debates. NATO and the European Union are not competing projects but complementary pillars of the same strategic enterprise. NATO must remain the indispensable framework for collective defence, while the European Union provides the

industrial, regulatory and financial foundations upon which credible military power increasingly depends. Properly aligned, the two organisations can deliver what Europe has too often lacked in the past: strategic coherence.

In an era defined by systemic competition, hybrid coercion and simultaneous crises across multiple theatres, security will increasingly belong to those capable of generating it rather than merely relying upon it. Europe's role in the 21st century will thus depend on whether it can achieve that transition – from strategic dependency to strategic responsibility.