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**The growing role of the European Commission in defence capability development\*\***

**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this research is to present and analyse the growing role of the European Commission in defence capability development. In the first section, I review the literature on the theoretical background of the Commission's role in the European defence policy. In the second section, I briefly present the decision-making processes in the fields of Common Foreign and Security Policy and Common Security and Defence Policy. Following the discussion of the external factors that underpin these developments, I elaborate on the past role of the European Commission and how it has changed after the recent Russian aggression in the Ukraine. I then use SWOT analysis to highlight the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the role of the Commission in European defence. Although several EU member states and institutions supported the further integration of defence policy following the creation of the European Security and Defence Policy in early 2000, the defence-related activities of the EU remained weak and limited. Similar to the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the full-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine in recent years has spurred further development and "Europeanisation" of this policy area. During the last decade, the EU has set the defence agenda in motion and has launched new military-related initiatives due to the deteriorating security environment in the EU's neighbourhood. This has sometimes even involved breaking the taboos on defence and strengthening the role of the

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Commission significantly in the defence industry and space sectors. Following the creation of the European Defence Fund, the most important development in this area concerned the possibility of using EU budget money for defence purposes. Although the defence industry and market of the EU is still fragmented and underfinanced, the European Commission has launched important initiatives to overcome these challenges.

**KEYWORDS:** Defence industry, European Commission, Common Security and Defence Policy, Europeanisation, SWOT.

## 1. Introduction

According to the EU Treaties, the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) constitutes an integral component of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). It is the youngest and one of the least integrated policy areas of the European Union. A prominent feature is still the strong intergovernmental character of its decision-making processes. The robust interconnection between CFSP and CSDP is not fortuitous, given that there is a common perception of security threats and their impact on shaping the foreign, security and defence policy. Foreign policy responses to external challenges and threats also play a role in shaping the interconnection between the two policy areas.

Although several EU member states (MSs) and institutions have supported further integration of defence policy following the creation of the European Security and Defence Policy in early 2000s, defence-related activities of the EU remained weak and limited until 2016.<sup>1</sup> Similar to the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the full-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine in recent years has given new impetus to further develop and “Europeanise” this policy area. During the last decade, due to the deteriorating security environment in the EU’s neighbourhood, the EU has set the defence agenda in motion and has launched new military-related initiatives sometimes even breaking the taboos on defence. The creation of the European Defence Fund has resulted in the most important development in this area: the possibility of using EU budget money for defence purposes. Although the defence industry and market of the EU is still fragmented and underfinanced, the

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<sup>1</sup> Béraud-Sudreau and Pannier, 2021; Molnár 2022; Molnár and Jakusné 2023.

European Commission has launched important initiatives to overcome these challenges.

Despite the continued dominance of intergovernmental decision-making processes in the realm of the Common Foreign and Security Policy—and the Common Security and Defence Policy (as an integral component thereof)—the role of the European Commission has gradually, yet consistently, been strengthened. Since 2016, the traditional boundaries between intergovernmental and supranational decision-making procedures have also become blurred in this policy domain. Due to the spill-over effect, the Commission's core tasks—like agenda-setting, initiating legislation or executive functions—have been extended to the field of defence, especially to the defence industry.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the deteriorating security environment near the EU, Jean-Claude Juncker, then President of the European Commission, stated in an interview in March 2015 that he considered it necessary to set up an EU army and that NATO was not sufficient for territorial defence.<sup>3</sup> Although the creation of an EU army has not materialised and remains unthinkable, the EC's role has been strengthened in areas related to the EU's external action and human security policies traditionally belonging to the European Commission (e.g., enlargement and neighbourhood policy, aid or development policy), and in areas related to the development of European defence capabilities.

In 2017, the European Defence Fund (EDF) was established based on the European Defence Action Plan (EDAP) prepared by the European Commission. The fund coordinates and complements member states' investments in defence research, prototype development, and the procurement and acquisition of defence equipment and technology.<sup>4</sup> The significance of its establishment lies in the fact that it became possible to finance military expenditures from the EU budget for the first time. Since

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<sup>2</sup> Haroche, 2020, p. 853; Håkansson, 2021, pp. 590-591; Fotini, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Euractive (2015) Juncker: NATO is not enough, EU needs an army. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/juncker-nato-is-not-enough-eu-needs-an-army/> (Accessed: 30 April 2024).

<sup>4</sup> European Commission (2017) A European Defence Fund: €5.5 billion per year to boost Europe's defence capabilities, 7 June 2017, [Online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_17\\_1508](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_17_1508) (Accessed: 30 April 2024); Chappell et al., 2020, p. 583.

then, the Commission has actively promoted the idea of creating a European Defence Union and realising strategic autonomy.<sup>5</sup>

The aim of this research is to present and analyse the growing role of the European Commission in the development of defence capabilities. In the first section, I provide a literature review on the theoretical background of the Commission's role in CSDP, discussing neofunctionalism, historical institutionalism, Europeanisation, and the conflict between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism. In the second section, I briefly present the decision-making processes in the field of CFSP and CSDP. Following the introduction of the external factors behind these developments, I discuss the role of the EC in the past and after the Russian aggression. In this article, SWOT analysis is used to highlight the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats regarding the role of the Commission in European defence. Based on available academic works this SWOT analysis can be used to project future developments and identify threats that may impede the achievement of the EC's objectives.

## 2. Theoretical framework

There is a growing body of literature on the increasing role of the European Commission in the field of security and defence. According to Smith, after the launch of the CSDP, it became clear that this policy area was only partially Europeanised, and the distinction between the national and the EU interest had become blurred. The EU sought to create a more integrated CFSP/CSDP governance and institutional structure following the Lisbon Treaty with the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the position of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy—who is also Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP). However, they still had to compete with national diplomacies in the initiation and implementation of CFSP/CSDP decisions.<sup>6</sup> That is why the EEAS has a *sui generis* character in international relations. Europeanisation has been widely discussed and debated by researchers and, being a multifaceted process, it focuses on the impact of the EU membership and integration processes on different domestic policies and politics.<sup>7</sup> While Europeanisation in general can be a top-down and bottom-

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<sup>5</sup> Molnár 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, 2012, pp. 253-254.

<sup>7</sup> Radaelli, C., 1997.; Radaelli, C. M., 2004.

up process, in the case of the European defence market, the top-down process is more relevant as the role of the Commission is significant.

Since the beginning of this millennium, the European Commission has gone through intense change due to external pressure and internal evolution.<sup>8</sup> As a result of these processes and thanks to the strengthening link between the supranational actors—like the Commission and the European Parliament—the Commission has become a more political and less technocratic institution, especially under the Juncker Commission.<sup>9</sup> Following the financial and economic crisis and due to the reforms on the economic governance the Commission started to expand its activities beyond its original competences.<sup>10</sup> According to the historical institutionalist approach, path-dependent processes, historical events and institutional structures influence the development and behaviour of institutions.<sup>11</sup> Both institutional reforms in the early 2000s—resulting from the big bang enlargement—and the multi-faced and multi-level crisis, accelerated the evolution of the Commission. Internal and external factors, and the evolving security challenges have led to the Commission's increasing involvement in defence-related activities as an agenda-setting and policy entrepreneur institution.

According to Haroche, the creation of the EDF highlights a 'new type of offensive functional spillover from the economy to defence'.<sup>12</sup> Håkansson used the revised neofunctionalism to describe the process of further integration within CSDP. According to the cultivated spillover effect, the Commission can support integration 'by acting as policy entrepreneurs'. Due to functional spillover, the inter-dependence between different policy fields can create tensions thus furthering integration.<sup>13</sup> The Commission has enhanced its power through cumulative bricolage tools, and by alleviating member states' sovereignty concerns and motivating for deeper integration in security and defence. According to Müller and contributors,

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<sup>8</sup> Cini, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Egeberg, Gornitzka and Trondal, 2014; Nugent and Rhinard, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Zeilinger, 2021; Farrall, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Cini, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Haroche, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Håkansson, 2021, pp. 590-591.

bricolage means the pragmatic usage and reconfiguration of existing tools to achieve something new. It highlights the fact that a bricoleur must rely on a limited number of available means to pursue its preferences. At the same time, it also means that available instruments of the bricoleur are known and acknowledged by other political actors.<sup>14</sup>

Sabatino argues that the growing role of the Commission in the field of defence industry policy can be considered as a game changer as there is a 'partial shift from intergovernmental to supranational governance in the European defence market'.<sup>15</sup>

### **3. Decision-making processes in the field of CFSP and CSDP**

The European Council and the Council remain key institutions for the decision-making processes and coordination of the CFSP and CSDP. From 1992, in the pillar structure established by the Maastricht Treaty, despite the description "common", the intergovernmental approach remained the dominant form of decision-making in this policy area. Regarding the CSDP, no real community (exclusive or shared) policy such as the common commercial or common agricultural policy has been established. Later, despite the abolition of the pillar structure by the Lisbon Treaty, this structure was not changed significantly: decision-making processes continued to be characterised primarily by intergovernmentalism, the pursuit of consensus, and thus the lowest common denominator.

The European Council, the Council of the EU (namely the Foreign Affairs Council) and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) have a significant role in setting the agenda for European security and defence. The European Commission has traditionally played a limited role in the domain of CFSP and CSDP. Originally, the EU's external relations activities included the design and the implementation of the traditional external action policy areas of the EU and its predecessors, the European Communities. These included the development, humanitarian aid and enlargement policies. The Commission began to strengthen its role in crisis management and in conflict prevention processes with the implementation of the Rapid Reaction Mechanism in

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<sup>14</sup> Müller, Slominski and Sagmeister, 2023, p. 1673.

<sup>15</sup> Sabatino, 2022.

2004 and the Instrument for Stability in 2007, playing a crucial part in tackling the security-development nexus.<sup>16</sup>

The Commission's role has evolved considerably over the past decades. This process was supported by the fact that according to the Lisbon Treaty the HR/VP also became the Vice-president of the European Commission. The actions of the HR/VP reflect a "communitised" role, which complements and strengthens the foreign policy of the member states. The creation of the new position and the establishment of the European External Action Service, means that the HR/VP has had a multifaceted role with various hats: 1) undertaking the traditional diplomatic activities in the field of CFSP 2) chairing the Foreign Affairs Council 3) seeking consensus among the 27 EU member states, and 4) building coherence between the Commission's various external policy instruments such as aid, trade, crisis management and the CFSP. The HR/VP represents the EU in international fora (e.g., the United Nations) and acts as head of the European Defence Agency and the EU Institute for Security Studies.<sup>17</sup>

Compared to other policies, in the field of CSDP, the European Commission has the right of initiative only through the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (who is also the Vice-President of the European Commission) and does not exercise significant executive power in this field. This situation has been significantly changed and affected by the Russian aggression in Ukraine. As a result, the Commission, together with other EU institutions, has promoted the establishment of the European Security and Defence Union by 2025 and the collaborative defence industrial cooperation.

#### **4. Factors behind the developments**

The creation of ESDP/CSDP was driven by the devastating experience of the Yugoslav wars and the reality that the EU alone was not able to stop those military conflicts. The US and NATO were required to play an active role in that peace enforcement and crisis management situation. Nowadays, the war in Ukraine has become a novel driving force for further integration in the field of defence. Besides the Russian aggression in Ukraine, other factors behind the increased defence cooperation include the changing

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<sup>16</sup> Lavallée, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> European Union External Action, The Diplomatic Service of the European Union, [Online]. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/_en).

foreign policy of the United States (and the consequent weakening of transatlantic relationship). This was evident during the Trump administration and exacerbated by the decision of the United Kingdom (UK) to leave the European Union (Brexit). Further, during the financial and economic crisis, member states spent less on the military.<sup>18</sup>

Nowadays, the formulation of defence policy plays a decisive role among the priorities of European governments. This is evident in the 9% decrease in the defence spending of EU MSs between 2008 and 2016,<sup>19</sup> following the years of the financial crisis. Today, they are spending significantly more, with defence expenditure reaching €270 billion in 2023. However, although defence spending increased, only 18% of the investment was realised in a collaborative way within the European Union.<sup>20</sup>

In 2016, Brexit represented a window of opportunity for developing the defence policy. Despite the fact that the UK was well known for its Eurosceptic approach and for hindering further integration of CSDP, we must emphasise that not every initiative has been blocked by the UK—only those representing a clear supranationalism and Europeanisation in this field (like the creation of a EU-level military command or the establishment of PESCO). Conversely, the UK supported industrial initiatives related to common procurement and research, which later led to the establishment of the EDF.<sup>21</sup>

The evolution of the European Commission's institutional role has been influenced by several factors, including shifts in the personalities of key figures such as the President of the Commission or Commissioners with specific portfolios in key areas, or changes in the political attitudes of some member states, and the impact of pivotal issues such as internal tensions resulting from the migration crisis.

## **5. The role of the European Commission in the field of defence**

The growing activity of the Commission in defence-related issues dates to the 1990s, when this institution vainly supported the amendment to Article

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<sup>18</sup> Béraud-Sudreau and Pannier, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Béraud-Sudreau and Pannier, 2021, p. 297.

<sup>20</sup> Besch, S. (2024) Understanding the EU's New Defense Industrial Strategy, [Online]. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2024/03/08/understanding-eu-s-new-defense-industrial-strategy-pub-91937> (Accessed: 30 April 2024).

<sup>21</sup> Béraud-Sudreau and Pannier, 2021, pp. 299-300.



223 of the EEC Treaty (now Article 346 TFEU) on the safeguard of national security interests. According to this article, member states may take measures related to arms production and trade for the protection of their essential security interests. Although this attempt was not successful, the Commission has launched its defence-related activities to gradually extend the rules of the internal market to the defence market. In 1996 and 1997, the Commission recommended that community instruments and its DGs (Directorate Generals) should be used to improve the national defence industries. It also proposed the establishment of a new agency for defence-related activities.<sup>22</sup>

Parallel to the process of establishing the European Security and Defence Policy led by member states and the Council, the Commission started to focus on the initiatives concerning the defence industry and market-related issues. In 2003, the European Commission proposed the gradual creation of a “European Defence Equipment Market” (EDEM) to strengthen the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). The European Defence Agency (EDA) was created in 2004. Although this is the only agency explicitly mentioned by the Lisbon Treaty, and it functions under the authority of the Council of the EU as an intergovernmental body, it has had an important role in the implementation of CSDP decisions. In 2007, the EDA issued its strategy on the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base. The objective of the strategy adopted by the member states was to gradually integrate national capability development and the defence market to improve supply security, thus shifting capability development from the national to the European level. The objectives included the creation of a better coordinated, more competitive defence market—with less duplication—that better serves European defence policy.<sup>23</sup>

In 2004, the European Commission made significant steps in the field of research by publishing a Communication on Security Research, creating a Group of Personalities on Security Research, and by launching a Preparatory Action on Security Research. In 2007, a civilian European Security Research Programme (ESRP) was established, blurring borders between civilian and military research also partially covering dual-use technologies. Following the Commission’s proposals, in 2009, new directives were adopted on defence procurement (Directive 2009/81/EC)

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<sup>22</sup> Håkansson, 2021, pp. 590-591.

<sup>23</sup> European Parliament, 2013, pp. 68-78.

and on guidelines for transfers inside the EU (Directive 2009/43/EC) to decrease the fragmentation of the European defence market.<sup>24</sup> Although some significant steps were taken during the Barroso Commissions between 2004–2014, the issue of European defence and defence market was still politically very sensitive and further integration was not supported by the critical number of member states. Until the 2010s, however, the EU member states fulfilled the EDTIB strategic objectives to a limited extent.

The Russian annexation of Crimea (2014) can be considered as a watershed for these processes. The new EC President, Juncker, and the High Representative, Mogherini, started to express their views on the need for stronger European defence policy. Barnier was Juncker's special advisor on defence between 2015–2016. He also supported the idea of further defence integration. Mogherini and Juncker have a federalist vision of the integration process, representing a new approach to defence and a greater EU role in that field. Slowly but steadily the process has started, as the Commission and the European Parliament, and a growing number of member states support the idea.<sup>25</sup>

Brexit represented a policy window for setting the renewed agenda of European defence. According to Tocci—the main policy advisor of the then HR/VP Mogherini, 'The EU is a bit like a bicycle—unless it's moving, it falls; and at the moment it's not moving on the economy, and it's not moving over migration, so let's just make a big deal in defence'.<sup>26</sup> As decision-making slowed down in other policy areas, the EU MSs needed to show unity after Brexit and the CSDP was the appropriate forum to do so. Following the adoption of the Global Strategy in 2016, the Commission started to play a decisive role in defence research and development funding. This strategy proposed the realisation of strategic autonomy. This idea was mainly motivated by France, which is why "strategic autonomy" appeared in the EUGS.<sup>27</sup>

In his annual speech to the European Parliament on 14 September 2016, Juncker, the former President of the EC, emphasised that the field of defence has been given a special role. Juncker stressed, among other things, that the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who is also the Vice-President of the European Commission, should become a

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<sup>24</sup> Håkansson, 2021, pp. 590–591.

<sup>25</sup> Béraud-Sudreau and Pannier, 2021. pp. 304–305.

<sup>26</sup> Béraud-Sudreau and Pannier, 2021. p. 300.

<sup>27</sup> Béraud-Sudreau and Pannier, 2021. pp. 297–301.

European foreign minister. This opinion showed that the Commission intended to see itself as an authentic governmental body. Regarding the defence union, he emphasised:

Europe needs to toughen up. Nowhere is this truer than in our defence policy. The Lisbon Treaty enables those Member States who wish, to pool their defence capabilities in the form of a permanent structured cooperation. I think the time to make use of this possibility is now.<sup>28</sup>

Since the publication of the EU Global Strategy in 2016, the implementation of initiatives to achieve capability development goals has been resting on four pillars: 1) the usage of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), 2) the launch of the Co-ordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), 3) the establishment of the European Defence Fund (EDF) and 4) the new regulations on common procurement. We must emphasise that the responsibilities of the European Commission and those of the EEAS and the EDA have been steadily expanding. This fact has also led to an institutional competition between them.

The ideas of EDF, PESCO CARD and defence market-related common procurement regulations were also promoted by European defence companies, as they were able to benefit from them. The defence industry supported the realisation of the Preparatory Action on Defence Research (PADR), the European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP), and the EDF supporting collaborative research and development from the beginning.<sup>29</sup>

The European Commission's role in defence-related matters has evolved significantly over the last decade.<sup>30</sup> In 2017, the European Defence Fund (EDF) was proposed by the Commission to support collaborative defence research and development projects among EU member states. The preparatory programs, like the PADR and EDIDP led to the creation of the EDF in 2021. Although the Commission proposed €13 billion for the EDF,

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<sup>28</sup> Juncker, J.-C. (2016) *The State of the Union 2016: Towards a Better Europe – A Europe that Protects, Empowers and Defends*. September 14, 2016 [Online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_16\\_3042](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_16_3042) (Accessed: 30 April 2024).

<sup>29</sup> Béraud-Sudreau and Pannier, 2021. pp. 304-305.

<sup>30</sup> Håkansson, 2021.

because of budget negotiations, €590 million was finally available for the period 2017–2020 and only €7.953 billion for the period 2021–2027.<sup>31</sup>

A “Group of Personalities” was established in 2015 in the framework of the DG Grow and the EDA. The Group of Personalities consisted of chief executive officers (CEOs) of the defence industry, politicians, as well as academics and experts, playing an important role in preparing recommendations about the support of the EU for defence research programs.<sup>32</sup> Although the available financial support remained less than expected, the establishment of the EDF represented an important step in blurring the traditional distinction between the intergovernmental and supranational decision-making institutional framework.<sup>33</sup>

The defence industrial or market-oriented issues, and the decision-making processes have been included in the Europeanisation attempts of the Commission. In 2018, Juncker highlighted the need for more efficient decision-making in the CFSP in his annual EP speech. The European Commission has also drafted a proposal on the need to introduce qualified majority voting (QMV). However, this would only be possible through a comprehensive treaty amendment or the application of the *passerelle* clause according to Article 48(7) TEU. According to Article 31(3) of the TEU, the EC proposed the use of the *passerelle* clause. In line with this, the European Council may unanimously decide—except for decisions having military or defence applications—that the Council may also act by qualified majority in cases other than those mentioned in Article 31 (2). The European Commission has identified three areas where qualified majority decision-making could be used: 1) the promotion of human rights, 2) EU sanctions and 3) the launch of civilian missions. Although the EP supported the European Commission’s proposal to extend the QMV, not all MSs support the idea, and no decision has yet been made at the level of the European Council.<sup>34</sup>

In September 2019, the new President of the EC, von der Leyen, announced the creation of the “Geopolitical Commission” in a “mission letter” to

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<sup>31</sup> European Commission (2017) An European Defence Fund: €5.5 billion per year to boost Europe's defence capabilities, 7 June 2017, [Online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_17\\_1508](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_17_1508) (Accessed: 30 April 2024).

<sup>32</sup> Béraud-Sudreau and Pannier, 2021, pp. 304–305.

<sup>33</sup> Håkansson, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> European Parliament, 2019.

Borrell.<sup>35</sup> Without offering a specific and clear definition, she emphasised the importance of connecting the internal and external aspects of different policies. She noted that the European Commission must become ‘strategically stronger, more decisive and more united’, including the use of its financial instruments. Von der Leyen also emphasised the need to create a European Defence Union.<sup>36</sup>

An important innovation in 2019 was the creation of a new directorate-general (DG) within the European Commission—the Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS),—supplementing the existing directorates-general dealing with more traditional external relations (DG DEVCO, DG ECHO, DG NEAR and DG Trade).<sup>37</sup> The new DG was created on the basis of units coming from the DG Grow with the responsibility of managing space-related issues, the implementation of defence procurement regulations (Directive 2009/81/EC), Military Mobility and the EDF. By the creation of the DG DEFIS, the Commission has empowered itself significantly in the field of defence industry and space sector. This new DG functions under the leadership of Commissioner for Internal Market, Breton. In the field of defence industry, DG DEFIS is responsible for supporting the competitiveness and innovation of the European Defence industry by guaranteeing the development of an effective European defence technological and industrial base. The DG DEFIS has an important role in the implementation of the oversight of the European Defence Fund. Its main task is to promote the evolution of ‘an open and competitive European defence equipment market and enforcing EU procurement rules on defence’. It also has an important role in the implementation of the Action Plan on Military Mobility and the space program of the EU (like COPERNICUS, GALILEO and EGNOS). It supports the realisation of climate objectives in space and defence and security-related activities.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Von der Leyen, U. (2019) Mission letter to Josep Borrell. Brussels: European Commission, [Online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/sites/default/files/2019-04/mission\\_letters/mission-letter-josep-borrell-2019\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/sites/default/files/2019-04/mission_letters/mission-letter-josep-borrell-2019_en.pdf) (Accessed: 30 April 2024).

<sup>36</sup> Zwolski, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Müller, Slominski and Sagmeister, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> European Commission, Defence Industry and Space, [Online]. Available at: [https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/departments-and-executive-agencies/defence-industry-and-space\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/departments-and-executive-agencies/defence-industry-and-space_en) (Accessed: 30 April 2024).

The full-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2022 was a turning point in strengthening the Commission's role in defence related issues. The war clearly showed the shortages and the problems deriving from the undersizing, and the fragmentation and underfunding of European defence industry. On 11 March 2022, during the informal meeting of the European Council in Versailles, member states of the EU expressed their commitment to enhancing the European defence technological and industrial bases and invited the European Commission to continue planning in this policy area.<sup>39</sup>

The urgent demand generated by the war provided both a great challenge and an opening opportunity for the European defence industry. The European Commission with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (who is also the Head of EDA) expressed several goals in their joint communication entitled 'On the Defence Investment Gaps Analysis and Way Forward'.<sup>40</sup> As a consequence, the Commission along with the High Representative, have established the Defence Joint Procurement Task Force (DJPTF) to support the short-term coordination of urgent procurement needs in May 2022. The objective of the task force was to help close the gap between supply and demand by identifying needs and creating incentives. Subsequently, the essential regulatory process has begun.<sup>41</sup> This institutional adaptation clearly shows the growing role of the Commission in defence.

The European Commission has proposed two legal incentives<sup>42</sup> because the increased demand could lead to procurement outside the EU, and consequently delay the realisation of the objectives related to the European defence technological and industrial base. In the short term, the approval of the "European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act" (EDIRPA), and in the long term, the European Defence Investment Programme (EDIP), were proposed to encourage joint procurement, and to increase production capacity, thus making European defence industry more competitive.<sup>43</sup> Although EU defence spending was raised to a record high of €270 billion in 2023,<sup>44</sup> between March 2022 and

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<sup>39</sup> European Council, 2022.

<sup>40</sup> European Commission and High Representative, 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Schnitzl, 2023, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> European Commission, 2022b.

<sup>43</sup> Schnitzl 2023, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Besch, S. (2024) Understanding the EU's New Defense Industrial Strategy, [Online]. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2024/03/08/understanding-eu-s-new-defense-industrial-strategy-pub-91937> (Accessed: 30 April 2024).

June 2023, 78% of the military procurement was from outside the EU (63% of which was from the US) and collaborative spending remained weak.<sup>45</sup>

Due to the increased demand, on 3 May 2023, the Commission submitted a proposal<sup>46</sup> for the adoption of the Regulation on Establishing the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP). The new regulation complemented the one on EDIRPA. The purpose of ASAP was to support the EU in increasing its ammunition and missile production capacity in the interests of the Ukraine and the EU member states. The Commission proposed that the budget of ASAP (€500 million) could come from the transfer of various instruments, especially from the European Defence Fund and EDIRPA.<sup>47</sup>

After reaching political agreement, the European Parliament and the Council adopted the ASAP regulation which was published in the Official Journal of the European Union on 20 July 2023. The new regulation complemented the one on EDIRPA,<sup>48</sup> which was adopted by the European Parliament and the Council in autumn 2023. The new regulation was published in the Official Journal of the EU on 26 October 2023.<sup>49</sup> After the State of the Union Address of President von der Leyen in 2023, the European Commission initiated a consultation process to develop a new European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS). The strategy was elaborated by the Commission and the HR/VP after extensive consultation with key stakeholders. The European Defence Agency played an active role in this process.

In March 2024, the European Commission and the High Representative published the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS)—the first defence industrial strategy of the EU to increase the resilience of the European defence industry. The main purpose of the strategy is to address the challenges posed by the full-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine. It aims to strengthen European defence industry through actions that support collaborative research, investment, production and procurement. This strategy provides a vision for the European defence industrial policy until 2035. The strategy specifies clear indicators for the future. It invites member states 1) to ‘procure at least 40% of defence

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<sup>45</sup> Maulny, 2023.

<sup>46</sup> European Commission, 2023a.

<sup>47</sup> European Parliament, 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Official Journal of the EU, 2023a.

<sup>49</sup> Official Journal of the EU, 2023b.

equipment in a collaborative manner by 2030'; it sets as a goal that, 2) 'by 2030, the value of intra-EU defence trade represents at least 35% of the value of the EU defence market', and calls on member states 3) 'to make steady progress towards procuring at least 50% of their defence investments within the EU by 2030 and 60% by 2035'.<sup>50</sup>

According to the EDIS, a Defence Industrial Readiness Board ("The Board") will be established to bring together representatives of member states, the High Representative/Head of the Agency and the Commission. The main tasks of the new board will include 1) 'to perform the EU defence joint programming and procurement function envisaged in the Joint Communication on Defence Investment Gap Analysis' and 2) 'to support the implementation of EDIP'. This new board will continue the work of the Defence Joint Procurement Task Force. The Board will 'also support the coordination and de-confliction of Member States procurement plans and provide strategic guidance in view of more effectively matching demand and supply'. The board will be prepared and co-chaired jointly by the Commission and the High Representative/Head of Agency. The Board will be formally established within the EDIP Regulation supporting the implementation of EDIP. A high-level European Defence Industry Group will be established to ensure effective cooperation and dialogue between governments and industry. The new board's 'programming and procurement function will be based on the existing instruments and initiatives, notably the Capability Development Plan (CDP), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)'.<sup>51</sup>

The growing ambitions of the Commission are also demonstrated by the fact that in 2024, at the Munich Security Conference, von der Leyen proposed the new position of commissioner for defence.<sup>52</sup> This statement

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<sup>50</sup> European Commission (2024) EDIS | Our common defence industrial strategy, p. 15, [Online]. Available at: [https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/edis-our-common-defence-industrial-strategy\\_en](https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/edis-our-common-defence-industrial-strategy_en) (Accessed: 30 April 2024).

<sup>51</sup> European Commission (2024) EDIS | Our common defence industrial strategy, pp. 8-9, [Online]. Available at: [https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/edis-our-common-defence-industrial-strategy\\_en](https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/edis-our-common-defence-industrial-strategy_en) (Accessed: 30 April 2024).

<sup>52</sup> Brzozowski, A. (2024) EU defence commissioner proposal gains traction, EurActiv, 19. February, [Online]. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/eu-defence-commissioner-proposal-gains-traction/> (Accessed: 30 April 2024).



shows clearly the results of this process—the strengthened role of the Commission in defence (and defence industry) issues.

## **6. SWOT analysis of the role of the European Commission in defence**

This SWOT analysis enables the identification of areas of strengths, the elimination of weaknesses, the use of opportunities and the mitigation of threats.<sup>53</sup> Strengths are positive internal factors that are controlled by the organisation, in this case, by the European Commission, which provides institutional background for defence-related activities. Weaknesses are internal, of a negative nature, and within the control of the organisation. Identifying them creates the possibility to implement key improvements. Opportunities can be defined as external positive possibilities that can be capitalised on. Such opportunities are frequently beyond the influence of the EU, or situated at the margins (for example, the evolution of international public opinion concerning one of the EUs decisions). The threats are identified as difficulties, external obstacles or constraints that have the potential to prevent the development of a policy area (for example, the defence industry). Threats fall beyond the competences or the influence of the EU, or are also situated at its margin (for example, the development of the war in Ukraine).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Karppi, Kokkonen and Lähteenmäki-Smith, 2001, p. 16; Dealtry, 1992, p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> Europa.eu (2024) SWOT analysis - strengths, weakness, opportunities, threats, Evaluation Unit DEVCO, [Online]. Available at: <https://wikis.ec.europa.eu/display/ExactExternalWiki/SWOT+analysis+-+strengths%2C+weaknesses%2C+opportunities+and+threats> (Accessed: 30 April 2024).

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- institutional framework and Background of the European Commission</li> <li>- experience of the European Commission in the field of planning, implementing and controlling the EU financial programs</li> <li>- creation of the European Defence Fund</li> <li>- strategic thinking at the EU level</li> <li>- available financial support from the EU budget</li> <li>- institutional innovation: the creation of the DG DEFIS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- lack of significant collaborative defence investment</li> <li>- lack of substantial financial support from the EU budget</li> <li>- fragmented institutional background on the EU</li> <li>- Institutional competition between the European Commission and other actors, like the more intergovernmental agency, the EDA</li> <li>- The differences in the member states' threat perceptions, their strategic cultures and their diverging relationship with the US and NATO</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the Commission's role as a policy entrepreneur to support further integration</li> <li>- the spill-over deriving from the interdependences between different policy fields</li> <li>- the implementation of the EDF, EDP and EDIS</li> <li>- Institutional developments, like the establishment of the Defence Industrial Readiness Board</li> <li>- The worsening security environment</li> <li>- The social support of the European citizens</li> <li>- new financial opportunities (the lending of the European Investment Bank Group)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- absence of political support from member states for further integration</li> <li>- absence of political support from member states for further budgetary reform</li> <li>- diverging strategic industrial interests of member states and of industrial players</li> <li>- the increasing support of Eurosceptic political parties at national and European level</li> <li>- hybrid threats and external interference</li> </ul>

Source: Author

The creation of the European Defence Fund is the primary strength. It has solidified the role of the Commission, which has had several decades of experience in the field of planning, implementing and controlling the EU financial programs. According to Sabatino, the EDF has become a “game changer for defence” supporting the introduction of partial supranational governance in the European defence market.<sup>55</sup> Strategic thinking is also a strength because strategic documents like the Strategic Compass (2022) or the European Defence Industrial Strategy provide a clear vision for further development. Available financial support from the EU budget represents an important incentive and strength for further development. As data shows, after the second call of the EDF, 41 collaborative defence research and development projects with a total EU support of almost €832 million were selected for funding in 2023.<sup>56</sup> The Commission has empowered itself significantly in the field of defence industry and space sector<sup>57</sup> through the new institutional structure within the Commission—by the creation of the DG for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS). This manages the Commission’s activities regarding the implementation of European Defence Fund, and the Action Plan on Military Mobility.

The lack of significant collaborative defence investment and substantial financial support from the EU budget are a weakness that can negatively affect the implementation of the ambitious objectives. Another weakness is that the institutional background on the EU level is still fragmented, and the European Commission must compete with other actors, like the intergovernmental agency—the EDA. The differences in the member states’ threat perceptions, their strategic cultures and their diverging relationship with the US and NATO have the potential to weaken the Commission’s effort to assume a more prominent role in this field and to advance deeper integration.<sup>58</sup>

Opportunities derive from the Commission’s role as a policy entrepreneur to support further integration. Interdependences between different policy fields can create tensions thus creating a spill-over effect

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<sup>55</sup> Sabatino, 2022.

<sup>56</sup> European Commission (2023b) Result of the EDF 2022 Calls for Proposals, [Online]. Available at: [https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-grants/calls-proposals/result-edf-2022-calls-proposals\\_en](https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-grants/calls-proposals/result-edf-2022-calls-proposals_en) (Accessed: 30 April 2024).

<sup>57</sup> Müller, Slominski and Sagmeister, 2023.

<sup>58</sup> Tardy, 2018.

from the economy to defence.<sup>59</sup> The implementation of the EDF, EDP and EDIS indicates a bureaucratic spillover that could accelerate the initiatives of the Commission.<sup>60</sup> Institutional developments—like the establishment of the Defence Industrial Readiness Board—will further strengthen the Commission’s role in the field of defence. The worsening security environment in the proximity of the European Union—particularly the war in Ukraine—could act as both a threat or an opportunity for the Commission to play a stronger geopolitical role.<sup>61</sup> It is notable that developments in the field of defence are also supported by the citizens. According to Standard Eurobarometer (100 Autumn 2023), 77% of respondents are in favour of ‘a common defence and security policy among EU member states’.<sup>62</sup> Another opportunity is provided by the proposal of ECOFIN in April 2024 to update policies and framework for the lending of the European Investment Bank Group (EIB Group) to the security and defence industry.<sup>63</sup>

Potential threats were highlighted by the fact that the European Commission was not fully supported by the member states during the EU budget negotiations. According to Besch, ‘In theory, cooperation offers economic benefits such as reduced equipment duplication, increased production, and lower costs. In practice, national interests and protectionism, coupled with operational and bureaucratic inefficiencies, have historically impeded effective collaboration’.<sup>64</sup> Sabatino (2022) argues that ‘diverging strategic industrial interests of member states and of industrial players seek to prevent a deeper integration of the European defence market’.<sup>65</sup> The absence of substantial support from member states for further budgetary reform represents a significant obstacle to progress.

<sup>59</sup> Håkansson, 2021, pp. 590-591.; Haroche, 2020.

<sup>60</sup> Haroche, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Håkansson, 2024.

<sup>62</sup> Standard Eurobarometer 100 - Autumn 2023 - Europeans' opinions about European Union's priorities – Report, [Online]. Available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3053> (Accessed: 30 April 2024).

<sup>63</sup> European Investment Bank (2024) EU Finance Ministers set in motion EIB Group Action Plan to further step-up support for Europe’s security and defence industry, [Online]. Available at: <https://www.eib.org/en/press/all/2024-143-eu-finance-ministers-set-in-motion-eib-group-action-plan-to-further-step-up-support-for-europe-s-security-and-defence-industry> (Accessed: 30 April 2024).

<sup>64</sup> Besch, S. (2024) Understanding the EU’s New Defense Industrial Strategy, [Online]. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2024/03/08/understanding-eu-s-new-defense-industrial-strategy-pub-91937> (Accessed: 30 April 2024 ).

<sup>65</sup> Sabatino, 2022. p. 134.

The increasing support of Eurosceptic political parties at national and European level may also hinder the strengthening of the Commission's role in general and in the field of defence. Hybrid threats and external interference can negatively affect the deeper integration in this field.

## **7. Conclusions**

During the last decades, the European Commission has gone through severe changes accelerated by external factors and internal developments. Institutional reforms (like the creation of the HR/VP position and the establishment of the European External Action Service) and several crisis situations (from the financial crisis to the war in Ukraine) have pushed the development of the Commission. Additionally, Russian aggression in Ukraine, the changing US foreign policy, especially during the Trump administration, Brexit and the financial and economic crisis underpinned these developments. The increasing role of the Commission in defence industry policy has been interpreted as a game changer for realising a 'partial shift from intergovernmental to supranational governance in the European defence market'.<sup>66</sup>

Originally, the role of the Commission was only limited in the areas of CFSP and CSDP. This mainly only included the implementation of the traditional external action policy areas of the EU—like the development policy, the humanitarian aid policy or the enlargement policy. This institutional structure has been significantly changed by the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Consequently, the intention to establish the European Defence Union by 2025 and the realisation of collaborative defence industrial cooperation have been promoted by the Commission. The creation and management of the EDF has blurred the traditional distinction between intergovernmental and supranational decision-making processes. Through the creation of the DG DEFIS in 2019, the role of the Commission was strengthened significantly in the field of defence industry and space sector. The commencement of full-scale war in Ukraine has highlighted shortages and the problems deriving from the undersizing, fragmentation, and underfunding of the European defence industry. Thus the Commission's agenda-setting and regulatory role were also reinforced in the field of defence policy.

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<sup>66</sup> Sabatino, 2022.

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