

PEACE AND SECURITY

# RESPONDING TO EU SECURITY AND DEFENCE CHALLENGES

A Social Democratic Perspective

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In the face of growing strategic uncertainty, Europe must rethink its security and defense policies, considering the diverse priorities of its member states as well as strategic partners outside the EU.



For social democrats, this moment represents both a challenge and an opportunity to steer the EU towards reform and renewed relevance on the global stage. Progressive forces must reclaim the security agenda, reframing security not only in military terms but also in terms of human security, democracy, rule of law and freedom.



From a social democratic perspective, it is essential to redefine resilience as the ability to withstand not only military threats, but also social, economic and environmental crises.



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## INTRODUCTION

The last three years turned out to be one of the biggest tests for European resilience, peace and cooperation in recent history. The return of war in Europe with Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine as well as major geopolitical shifts have strained the EU's ability to promote its values and defend its interests: Hamas' terror attack on Israel and the unprecedented Israeli response it triggered, leading to severe humanitarian suffering and displacement, the risk of escalation with Iran and the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria have additionally jeopardized the fragile equilibrium in the Middle East and fuels polarization within Western societies. The real-life scenario of a growing influence of right-wing nationalist forces in the EU and a US that may no longer remain a reliable ally after Donald Trump's re-election to the White House dramatically underlines the volatility of the EU's current security and defense architecture. Against this backdrop, the European Union is forced to act more united than ever while the more hostile environment requires it to increase its capacity and willingness to act, strengthen its resilience and ensure solidarity and mutual assistance. Only as it acts as a strong and coherent political actor will the EU manage to uphold its values and principles, assume more responsibility for the security of its citizens and support the global rules-based order, as well as human security. The aim of this paper is to propose a draft common agenda for European social democratic forces, offering a progressive perspective on defense and security issues in European politics. These issues, crucial for the future of the European Union, can and should be addressed through the principles of social justice, multilateralism, and solidarity, ensuring that European progressive forces play an active role in shaping a balanced and forward-looking security agenda.

## STRUGGLING FOR THE GLOBAL ORDER: THE EU'S CHALLENGES AHEAD

In recent decades, the European Union (EU) has prospered thanks to a stable and favorable global environment, buying cheap products especially from China, procuring affordable energy from Russia, and above all outsourcing its security costs to the United States. Solid international norms, reliable allies and functioning multilateral institutions did the rest, facilitating cooperation and ensuring security and stability for years. In this environment, the EU, with its multilateral and intergovernmental nature, has managed to grow and strengthen. Today, however, the scenario has changed radically. The ambiguous relationship with China, the historically low ties with Russia, and the uncertainty surrounding the new Trump presidency in the United States pose deep and radical questions. From being a pivotal actor in the Western world, the EU risks falling into the twilight zone, overwhelmed by global disorder.

The EU faces existential challenges not only internationally, but also domestically. Internationally, the war in

Ukraine threatens to jeopardize the political and military unity of the Union itself, due to divisions among member states over military and economic support for the government in Kiev to counter Moscow's invasion. In the Middle East, the war between Israel and Hamas, coupled with the recent collapse of Assad's regime in Syria, risks triggering a domino effect that could potentially reshape the region, with significant repercussions for Europe in terms of humanitarian impact, security, and stability. The fast-developing emerging countries of the 'BRICS' group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, Iran) are questioning the Western model of development, including the European one, by imagining an alternative global trade and financial system, not based on the dollar, in which in essence the West is no longer the main pivot. Against the backdrop of this "global disorder," the United States and China are increasingly competing assertively for global technological and military leadership, pushing Europe to rethink its horizons and consider new challenges in terms of defense and security. All these interstate challenges are further exacerbated by global transnational issues, such as climate change and the ongoing digitalization of societies, which require coordinated responses based on international cooperation rather than competition, challenging the EU's ability to survive, adapt to the present, and find new tools to work effectively with its partners.

Internally, the EU faces its own set of disruptions. Populist and Eurosceptic parties have gained greater influence, advocating for less European integration and fueling social fragmentation in their respective countries. The rise of populism has been exacerbated by governance difficulties and a paralysis in the EU's decision-making process. The leadership vacuum currently being experienced by the political class has allowed Eurosceptics to further strengthen their arguments, creating a growing distance between European citizens and Brussels. In addition, the political difficulties faced by institutional European parties in forming stable majorities that can counter populist forces have hindered the EU's ability to function in a coordinated manner, particularly in crucial areas such as defense, foreign policy, and security.

To navigate this shifting geopolitical landscape and avoid marginalization, the EU must redefine its place in the world. No longer can it rely on outdated assumptions or external guarantees of security and prosperity. The EU must carve out a distinct European approach to global engagement, one that embraces flexibility, innovation, and resilience. By strengthening alliances based on shared values and principles — without compromising them — the Union can position itself as a confident and independent global actor. Success in this endeavor depends on the EU's ability to adapt to new challenges, build strategic partnerships, and assert its relevance in an increasingly multipolar world. Only by reinventing itself can Europe secure its prosperity and influence amid the chaos of the 21st century.

## THE SOCIAL-DEMOCRATIC RESPONSE TO EU CHALLENGES

These crises demand not only a cohesive European response but also a profound cultural and political shift within the Union. Addressing the challenges of a multipolar world, rising populism, and transnational threats requires the EU to move beyond technocratic solutions and embrace a renewed vision of shared purpose. This is where social democratic forces have a critical role to play. Historically, social democracy has championed the principles of solidarity, equity, and internationalism—values that align closely with the ideals of a unified and resilient Europe. At a time when fractures threaten both the EU's internal cohesion and its global relevance, social democrats must lead the charge in redefining the Union's approach. This means advocating for policies that prioritize social investment, environmental sustainability, and democratic accountability while resisting the pull of narrow nationalism or complacent neoliberalism. Yet in today's world, marred by wars and geopolitical instability, this renewal cannot ignore the urgent need for Europe to do much more in terms of defense and security. The war in Ukraine, ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, and the global arms race underscore how vulnerable the EU remains without a robust, coordinated defense strategy. A Europe that aims to be a global actor must not only promote peace but also be capable of defending its interests and values in a world on fire. To effectively tackle these challenges and steer the European Union toward a resilient and influential future, social democratic forces must focus on four key areas where decisive action is both necessary and achievable.

First, social democrats must articulate a clear vision for defining Europe's interests in the emerging multipolar world, charting a course that reconciles fundamental values with pragmatic needs. Second, they must renew their commitment to strengthening Europe's security and defense capabilities, ensuring that EU policies are robust and future-proof in an increasingly volatile global environment. Third, given the uncertain state of transatlantic relations — particularly in light of recent electoral outcomes — social democrats must lead efforts to reshape Europe's partnership with the United States, fostering a relationship that remains strong while advancing Europe's strategic autonomy. Finally, they must work to reconcile social and security policy objectives, striking a balance that upholds security without undermining social cohesion, and avoiding the simplistic "guns versus butter" trade-off.

These four priorities will determine Europe's future role on the global stage and the credibility of social democratic forces in shaping a progressive vision for Europe. They represent a crucial opportunity for social democracy to rise to the challenges of the present and seize the opportunities that lie ahead.

## DEFINING EUROPE'S INTEREST IN THE EMERGENT GLOBAL MULTIPOLARITY

In a world marked by systemic rivalries and geopolitical uncertainty, Europe must assert a clear and strategic role to secure its interests and values. European social democrats are in a unique position to lead this transformation, redefining the European interest through a vision that combines pragmatism, creativity and an unwavering commitment to democratic principles. To remain relevant, Europe must act cohesively and strategically, especially in the face of the US-China dualism and an emerging multipolar order.

For too long, security has been a conservative forces domain. Social democrats must reclaim the security agenda by addressing security in its full scope—not just military spending, but also economic resilience, technological independence, social development, freedom, and democracy. The pandemic and ongoing crises show that security is multi-dimensional; addressing threats requires a comprehensive approach. It is essential to communicate this clearly to citizens, highlighting the interconnectedness of defense and social stability. Social democrats should also reinvigorate the concept of conditionality in foreign relations, linking aid, trade agreements, and cooperation to respect for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. This will strengthen the EU's normative influence and ensure partnerships are built on shared principles, not short-term interests.

The core question for progressist forces must be: what are we fighting for? A clear answer to this will allow social democrats to rebuild trust with disillusioned citizens, especially those who no longer vote. Once this vision is defined, it will be possible to articulate a European patriotism rooted in solidarity, equality, and human rights. This vision can counter nationalist narratives and promote a sense of collective European identity.

In a world where authoritarian powers challenge the liberal order, Europe must resolutely defend democracy and multilateralism. Social democrats face the task of redefining the EU's role in the international arena. Europe's success will depend on its ability to innovate and respond to multiple crises simultaneously. Social democrats must lead this rethinking, channeling diverse voices into a unified, strategic vision that prioritizes collective action, security, and solidarity. The challenge is not simply to balance defense and welfare spending but to present defense as an integral part of the broader social contract. Security must encompass not only military deterrence but also economic stability, democratic resilience, and social protection. By aligning defense investments with social cohesion, social democrats can ensure that Europe remains a beacon of democracy, justice, and peace in the new world order. But the EU must not only defend its values: it has to also project them internationally. Values, guarantees, tools, ideas, and reputation cannot be exported without strong European leadership endowed with a clear vision for the future. This leadership must chart a course that ensures a prosperous future for the EU and its partners. Rather than creating

new institutions or mechanisms, the focus should be on strengthening and reforming the existing ones. The EU's treaties provide a solid foundation, but they require updates to address current realities. Social democrats must press for reforms, applying pressure on Member States that fail to respect the rule of law. This is a critical exercise if the EU is to remain relevant and credible on the international stage.

## FUTURE-PROOFING EU SECURITY AND DEFENSE POLICIES

Challenges on the horizon share a common factor: they loudly call for the EU to shift its posture and redefine its security and defense policies. It is time for the EU to take concrete steps to acquire greater military capabilities to defend its own interests, even outside its continental borders, but the challenges are various.

First, social-democrats have to recognize that the “Europeanization” of the EU's military capabilities will not happen in the short term, so an incremental path must be found to progressively move towards that goal. For this to happen, the decision-making mechanisms – such as the veto – must change and express a clear political will. A political will that, to date, has been entirely absent from the Member States, as seen in the case of the EU Battlegroups. These multinational military units, created to rapidly respond to international crises with about 1,500 soldiers and ready to be deployed within 5–10 days for crisis management, peacekeeping, and humanitarian interventions in conflict or unstable regions, have never been used. Although they were conceived in 2004 and formally established in 2005 as part of the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) with the goal of giving the EU a quick and autonomous tool to respond to international crises while also contributing to strengthening the EU's collective defense capacity, the Battlegroups, which could have been the starting point for a proto-European army, are perhaps the clearest example of a missed opportunity in EU defense. Despite their creation and operational readiness, the main reasons for their non-use include high costs, ambiguity in their mandate, interoperability issues, and the availability of alternatives – such as UN peacekeepers or NATO forces. But ultimately, the lack of political consensus around their deployment has been the principal obstacle. The EU requires unanimous agreement among its 27 Member States to deploy a Battlegroup. This high level of consensus is always difficult to achieve, particularly because the foreign policy priorities of Member States differ, and not all always agree on when and where to intervene.

This connects directly to the second challenge: the different threat perceptions among Member States and their public opinions. This peculiar situation poses a not inconsiderable theoretical and cultural challenge in the field of security for European progressives: diverse geographical, historical, economic, and political factors complicate the formulation of a common European response. Eastern and

Northern European states, such as Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, and Sweden, naturally perceive Russia as the primary threat to their security, especially after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This has led many of these countries to call for greater NATO military presence in the region to reinforce their defense. Western and Southern European states, like France, Spain, Italy, and Greece, instead see terrorism and instability in the Mediterranean as their primary threats. This reflects their direct experience with jihadist terrorist attacks and the geographic proximity to unstable regions such as North Africa and the Middle East. Central European countries, like Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, are heavily focused on energy and infrastructure security due to their traditional reliance on Russian gas and oil supplies, making energy security a top priority, especially after the war in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia. Southeastern European countries, such as Bulgaria, Romania, and the Western Balkans, see stability in the Balkans and migration as crucial security concerns. Adding to this, the United Kingdom, following Brexit, has maintained a global approach to security threats, with a strong focus on cybersecurity, terrorism, and climate change. London has also increased its focus on the Chinese threat, particularly regarding technological and digital security. This divergence in threat perceptions poses a significant obstacle to formulating common security and defense policies at the European level. The EU, already struggling to balance national interests in various fields, faces an even more complex challenge in the area of security. The priority that some states assign to the Russian threat, for example, does not always align with the concerns of other countries that view terrorism or migration crises as the most pressing challenges. This fragmentation of threats makes it difficult to develop shared and coherent strategies in terms of defense spending, resource allocation, and cooperation among Member States. Without a unified strategic vision, the EU risks remaining vulnerable to external threats and less effective in responding to international crises, while global actors like Russia, China, and the United States pursue more cohesive and assertive policies. It is clear that without structural reforms, the future of European security and defense policy will not be simple.

The third challenge for progressives is to convince citizens, related parties and societies that the only way forward in the field of security is to build step-by-step structures for a true common defense project. France and Germany, for example, have launched the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS), a new tank project that began officially in 2018 and is intended to become the standard platform for most European armies by 2040. Italy, the United Kingdom, and Japan, on the other hand, launched a project in 2022 to develop a sixth-generation stealth fighter, known as the Global Combat Air Program (GCAP), which aims to produce the first aircraft by 2035. These projects could represent the embryonic phase of interoperable weapons systems but must be placed within the context of deep industrial reforms that move towards the creation of a common European defense industry. This industry must keep

pace with new technologies and their sophistication, particularly in the fields of cybersecurity and Artificial Intelligence.

In other words, social democrats face an epochal challenge because they must prove to be more credible than right-wing parties on security issues. Progressive forces in Europe, which have never made security policies a priority, must now strive to convince their citizens that there is a good reason to discuss defense and increase spending in this sector, as the future of the EU itself is at stake. The tools and mechanisms are already in place, but there needs to be clear political will to avoid delays that could undermine the EU's ability to defend itself, even "alone" if future transatlantic relations become compromised or unreliable. And this is not about aiming to replace NATO. While developing its defense capabilities, the EU should not duplicate or substitute the central role that NATO plays in collective protection and transatlantic security. Rather, it is about developing defense capabilities that complement NATO, not substitute it. The EU should focus on areas where NATO is not present or less active, such as peacekeeping missions, crisis management, or internal security. The distinction of "roles" must remain and, in fact, become even clearer. NATO should remain the primary organization for collective defense against conventional military threats, especially from Russia, while the EU can play an important role in other areas, such as cybersecurity, border defense, and unconventional threats, such as hybrid threats and disinformation. The goal, for social democrats, has to be to strengthen the EU's defense capabilities without weakening the transatlantic bond with the United States and other NATO partners and to Achieve greater strategic autonomy.

## RESHAPING TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

The transatlantic relationship was a cornerstone of post-World War II geopolitics. However, its foundations have eroded as security challenges have shifted beyond Europe, American expectations have gone unmet, and Europe has struggled to balance its contributions, especially in defense. The reelection of Trump, who could not be more distant from Biden's affinity for Europe, raises profound doubts about the durability and future of the relationship between the EU and the United States. With diminished US support for European defense and growing focus on Asia and the Indo-Pacific, Europe may no longer be a priority for Washington. This shift raises doubts about the US commitment to NATO, the war in Ukraine, and the rules-based international order, fueling calls for European strategic autonomy. While transatlantic cooperation remains vital—evidenced by solidarity during Russia's war on Ukraine—Europe still relies on the US and NATO for security. The gap between Europe's defense aspirations and its capabilities is stark, underscoring the need for a cohesive European defense policy. Social democrats have the responsibility to overcome the fragmentation of EU defense systems and strengthen its role within NATO. A renewed

European commitment to NATO could redefine the Alliance's purpose, balancing Cold War-era containment with modern crisis management. Europe's strengths in reducing violence and addressing human rights violations could offer NATO new approaches to security and peacekeeping and secure EU a new role in maintaining global security. To revitalize the alliance, both sides must commit to shared values, a common political agenda, and innovative solutions. This requires addressing generational challenges, defending democracies, and tackling the leadership crisis affecting both Europe and the US. A reduced US role could create a leadership vacuum, but also offering the EU an opportunity to reshape transatlantic relations. Europe must align its interests with those of the US, showing it can contribute to global stability. But to lead effectively, the EU needs clearer decision-making processes and consensus among Member States.

Ambiguities in addressing international crises, such as differing responses to Ukraine and Gaza, must be resolved. Social democrats have a moral obligation to rebuild transatlantic relations on principles of democracy, human rights, and international security. Social democrats, long champions of internationalism, must ensure that shared interests and values guide cooperation. The credibility of Europe and the global liberal order is at stake. Europe must prove it is a reliable partner and a capable global actor, ready to stand on its own if necessary, while maintaining strong transatlantic ties.

## RECONCILING SOCIAL AND SECURITY POLICY REQUIREMENTS

Bridging the gap in defense capabilities—ranging from infrastructure to modern equipment—requires large-scale investments. These costs will inevitably impact the financial planning of both individual EU countries and the Union as a whole, intensifying the debate over resource allocation.

For social democrats, this presents a complex challenge: how to sustain increased defense spending without compromising the core values of equality and social cohesion that define their political vision. The solution lies in a strategic approach where defense and social needs are complementary, not opposing. The most important aspect of this debate is avoiding the trap of a binary "guns versus butter" logic. This outdated dichotomy—where spending on defense is seen as a trade-off against social welfare—should be rejected. Instead, a political vision is needed in which defense investments are integrated into a broader strategy that also strengthens social infrastructure, enhancing the overall resilience of European societies. The "guns versus butter" logic creates a false choice between military security and social welfare. Social democrats have to undertake a more integrated approach that recognize that national security and social welfare are interconnected, and together, they can provide a stronger foundation for long-term stability.

Integrating defense investments into a framework that also strengthens social infrastructure means creating a system that supports citizens during both international crises and daily life. For example, investing in civil protection and crisis management programs that involve citizens or creating digital defense infrastructures that safeguard community rights and security can ensure that security benefits society as a whole. This vision extends beyond just strengthening the military; it promotes a resilience built not only on military deterrence but also on the strength of democratic institutions, digital defense education, and a high standard of welfare. A practical example of this approach could be the formation of a voluntary civil defense framework, where citizens are trained in emergency management and civil protection, or the incorporation of digital education in schools to raise awareness of online risks. In this way, resilience becomes a collective effort, making defense a shared responsibility between the state and the citizens, rather than being reduced to a budgetary or ideological debate. Social democratic policies must therefore provide reassurance about defense investments, while also clearly explaining how these investments will strengthen domestic welfare and security.

## REFORMING EU SECURITY AND DEFENSE: KEY PRIORITIES FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRATS

In light of increasing geopolitical instability and shifting global dynamics, the EU must reassess its security and defense policies. Social democrats have a unique opportunity to lead this transformation, ensuring that Europe adapts to new challenges while staying true to its values. The following key points outline the crucial areas where progressives can reshape the EU's security approach:

- **Adapting security and defense policies:** in the face of growing strategic uncertainty, social democrats must rethink EU's security and defense policies. This involves considering not only the diverse priorities of EU member states but also fostering stronger ties with strategic partners outside the Union. The EU must build a more cohesive and flexible framework that aligns with the evolving global order.
- **Reclaiming the security agenda:** for social democrats, this moment represents both a challenge and an opportunity to steer the EU towards reform. Progressives must take the lead in redefining security, moving away from a purely military focus. Security should be viewed in a broader context, incorporating human security, the defense of democracy, the rule of law, and the promotion of freedom. By doing so, social democrats can offer a vision of security that resonates with European citizens and responds to the complexities of the modern world.
- **Redefining resilience:** from a social democratic perspective, resilience should be understood as the ability to withstand not just military threats, but also social,

economic, and environmental crises. Strengthening resilience in this comprehensive sense means prioritizing the protection of citizens, the reinforcement of democratic values, and the prevention of crises that could undermine Europe's long-term stability.

These proposals represent a framework for a progressive, inclusive, and forward-looking EU security and defense policy. Social democrats can lead the change by championing a vision of security that is not only about defense against external threats but also about safeguarding the values and institutions that define Europe.

## CONCLUSIONS

In recent years, the EU has rediscovered that freedom and democracy are not abstract ideals but concrete forces that still resonate with people. This was reaffirmed both by the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the importance of solidarity, and by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which reaffirmed the enduring appeal of democracy. But freedom cannot exist without security. European social democrats are called upon to lead the debate in reconciling these two concepts, protecting values and rights while addressing citizens' legitimate security concerns. This means advocating for increased defense spending, not as an end in itself, but as a means to safeguard the space of freedom across Europe. The challenge is immense: the world has changed, and the EU must adapt. Social democrats are uniquely positioned to lead this process, promoting cooperation and reforming the security system with a multilateral approach, without falling into the trap of confrontation. It is crucial to propose an innovative approach that integrates security and social justice, developing a vision of "progressive sovereignty" that addresses global challenges and strengthens European democracy on the global stage. In the face of adversity, social democrats must remember that the future is not something to be endured, but something that can and must be shaped with hope and determination.

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## A Social Democratic Perspective



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