

## **STRATEGIC READINESS 2030:** EUROPEAN SECURITY THROUGH STRATEGIC THINKING

ANDREA **GILLI**, MAURO **GILLI**, NICCOLÒ **PETRELLI**

IEP@BU Policy Brief  
n.46

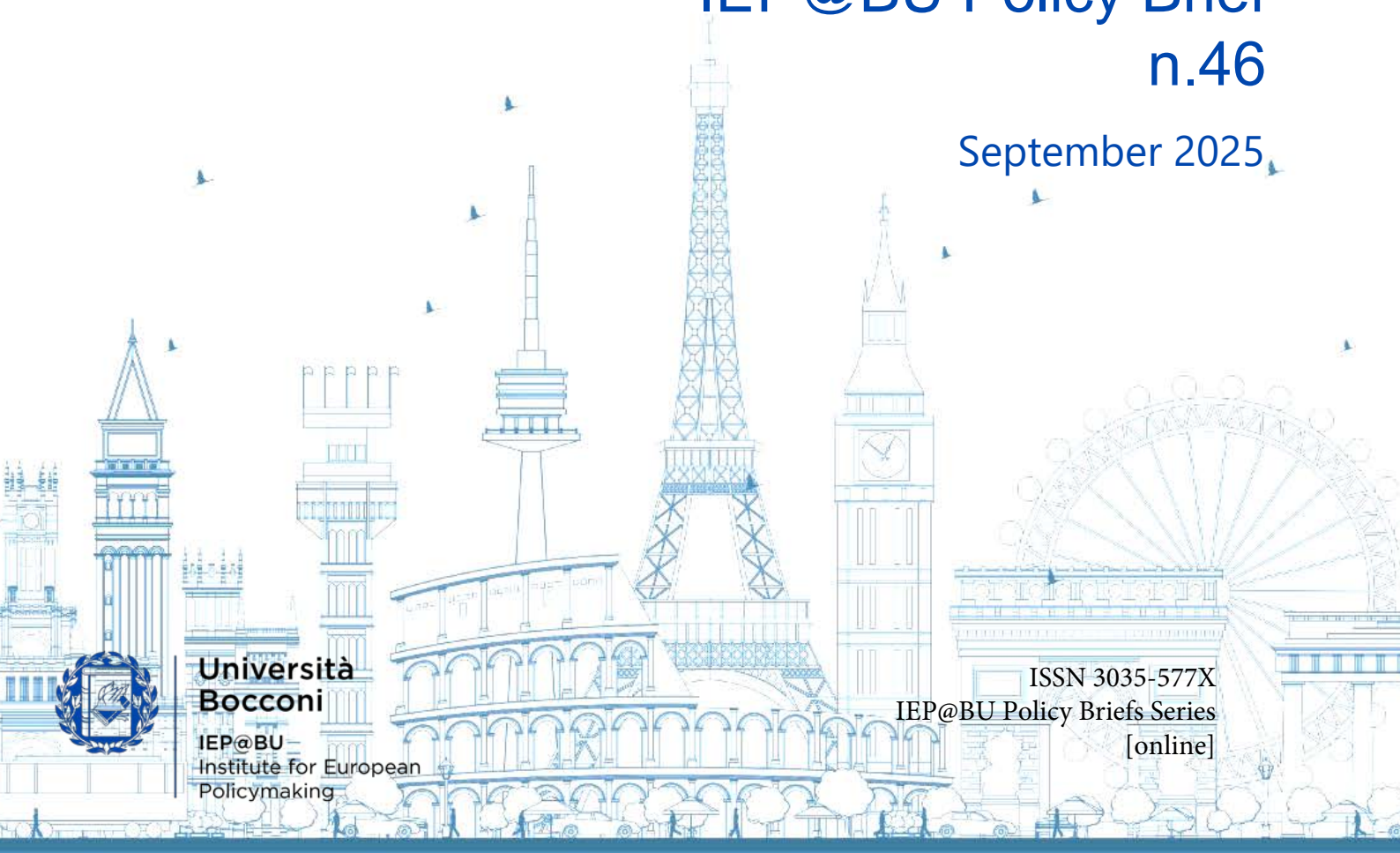
September 2025



Università  
Bocconi

IEP@BU  
Institute for European  
Policymaking

ISSN 3035-577X  
IEP@BU Policy Briefs Series  
[online]



*IEP@BU does not express opinions of its own.  
The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors.  
Any errors or omissions are the responsibility of the authors.*





**Andrea Gilli** is Lecturer in Strategic Studies at the University of St Andrews, Senior Advisor to the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense in Italy, and Expert Mentor of NATO DIANA (Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic).



**Mauro Gilli** is Professor of Military Strategy and Technology at the Hertie School.



**Niccolò Petrelli** is Assistant Professor of Strategic Studies, University Roma Tre.



## Executive Summary<sup>1</sup>

Europe is rearming. Defense budgets are rising across the continent, topping over €300bn in 2024 while last July's proposal for the EU's 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) allocates additional €131 billion to aerospace and defense — five times more than its predecessor. Yet resources are not enough.

Europe wants to achieve security through more strategic autonomy, but strategic autonomy requires more than weapons, factories, and supply chains: it requires a strategy, i.e. the intellectual capacity to define objectives, align ends and means, anticipate adversaries, and adapt to uncertainty.

Unlike the United States, which has cultivated, since 1945, an extensive and competitive ecosystem of universities, think tanks, research institutions, and defense agencies to integrate strategy with policy, Europe's strategic thinking remains fragmented along national lines, underfunded, and weakly connected to decision-making.

Without change, the surge in European defense spending risks misallocating resources, duplicating efforts and leaving critical gaps, while remaining structurally dependent on American guidance.

In this Policy Brief, we argue that Europe must invest in its cognitive capacity alongside its industrial capacity. Thus, after having launched *Defense Readiness 2030*, Europe should also adopt a *Strategic Thinking Readiness 2030*, with the following proposals:

- launch Javier Solana Chairs, university Jean Monnet-like Chairs, embedding strategy in education through promotion of substantive knowledge (military technology, defense planning, intelligence studies) as well as wargames, and simulations to foster strategic understanding and cultivate early practice;
- fund excellence and people in research via lean, competitive mechanisms that reward quality rather than bureaucracy or buildings;
- launch European International and Military Affairs Fellowships, analogous to the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations', to bridge research and policy by embedding scholars in EU, NATO, and national ministries as well as military officers in European think tanks and universities;
- fund the creation of two itinerant Offices of Net Assessment and two itinerant Offices of Technology Assessment-like centers to foster multidisciplinary research integrating political, economic, and technical expertise to ensure a plurality of views and methods as well as foster healthy competition
- fund the organization of continent-wide forecasting tournaments and wargame competitions among think tanks and universities to strengthen Europe's strategic quotient.

These reforms require modest resources: dedicating just 0.1% of European countries' annual defense spending to research and analysis, or around €300m per year, could radically transform EU strategic intellectual capacity. At the beginning, we recommend starting with lower resources, to

---

<sup>1</sup>The authors would like to thank Carlo Altomonte, Stefano Feltri, Daniel Gros and Antonio Missiroli for the extensive feedbacks and comments. Errors and mistakes remain the authors' only.



enable the stable and organic growth of Europe's strategic ecosystem.

In order to foster a EU-wide strategic culture as well as prevent national dynamics taking over funding, we recommend relying on a European Defense Fund-like mechanism, whereby national investments (0.5% of each country's annual defense budget, for a €150m total) are matched by EU investments (another €150m).

The current MFF could already be used in this respect and the Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS) would be responsible for its implementation and control. The European External Action Service would be responsible for organizing the strategic directions, aided by an independent, rotational academic taskforce ensuring the quality and intellectual independence.

The overall rationale of *Strategic Thinking Readiness 2030* is clear: more strategic autonomy cannot be achieved with money only, it also requires strategic capacity. Like a hedge fund after having secured its initial capital, now Europe has to invest in the underlying brainpower necessary to outperform competitors and adversaries. Otherwise, without enhancing its intellectual skillset to the level of its defense spending and policy ambitions, Europe cannot achieve its strategic goals and ultimately its security.



## Introduction

Over the past decade — and with dramatic acceleration since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine — Europe has launched unprecedented initiatives to strengthen its defense. National defense budgets are rising, new programs have been created, and the EU's 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) earmarks €131 billion for aerospace and defense – a fivefold increase over the previous cycle, equivalent to the annual defense budget of a medium-sized European state.<sup>2</sup>

These developments mark a paradigmatic shift after decades of neglect. Yet money can buy weapons and factories, but not strategic autonomy or security. To transform budgets into real power, Europe needs strategy and strategy requires intellectual infrastructure — the capacity to define priorities, align means and ends, and anticipate challenges under conditions of uncertainty.<sup>3</sup>

### *Spending is not Security, It Requires Strategic Thinking*

History shows the risks of equating resources with security. Napoleonic France and the Soviet Union both fielded vast armies, but strategic overreach and misaligned priorities doomed them.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, smaller states such as Venice, Prussia or Singapore have achieved striking successes by employing limited means coherently.<sup>5</sup> Strategy, not spending, determines effectiveness by integrating military, diplomatic, and economic instruments, imposes priorities, and provides a framework for adaptation. Without strategy, resources scatter: Europe risks misallocating resources, duplicating capabilities, neglecting critical technologies, and fielding military forces ill-suited to actual threats.<sup>6</sup>

Strategy, however, cannot be improvised at the moment of crisis; it rests on sustained strategic thinking — the intellectual process of defining objectives realistically, anticipating adversaries, and weighing trade-offs.<sup>7</sup>

Strategic thinking, in turn, requires analysis, imagination, and practice. It must be cultivated through education, institutions, and networks. The United States recognized this need after World War II.<sup>8</sup> Faced with the growing complexity of technology, its expanding global and diverse responsibilities, as well as accelerating international dynamics (from finance to trade, migration to information), it

---

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, *Europe's Budget: Defense* (Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union, 2025). The previous budget did not include space.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Colin S. Gray, *Theory of Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Paret, *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010)

<sup>5</sup> Hal Brands (ed.), *The New Makers of Modern Strategy: From Ancient World to the Digital Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Strategy & Defense Planning: Meeting the Challenge of Uncertainty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

<sup>7</sup> Paul Bracke, "Net Assessment: A Practical Guide," *Parameters*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring 2006): 90-100.

<sup>8</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Strategic Studies and Public Policy: The American Experience* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1982); Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).





built a robust ecosystem of universities, think tanks, federally funded research centers, and defense institutions that integrated scholarship with policy.<sup>9</sup> These universities, centers and institutions pioneered the application of economics, game theory, operations research, and campaign modeling to defense, among others, contributing to strategy developments. Civilian experts circulated between academia, government, and the armed forces, fostering a culture where ideas were tested against operational realities.

This ecosystem did not guarantee flawless strategy — U.S. history includes major failures — but it enabled adaptation and innovation unmatched elsewhere. Crucially, it embedded strategic thinking in the very fabric of American defense.

### *Europe's Strategic Deficit*

Europe, by contrast, remains intellectually underpowered. Mario Draghi's recent speeches unquestionably highlight the problem: for the past 30 years, the EU thought its internal market was a source of geopolitical influence through its market power, conditionalities, standards, and regulations. Until it was not: the EU market could not stop Russian tanks, neutralize China's shadow practices or deter U.S. tariffs.

The problem of the EU, in this respect, is two-fold. On the one hand, national political positions prevent the identification of themes, conceptualization of proposals and adoption of solutions. On the other, EU's broader strategic studies are fragmented across 27 national establishments, with different cultures, approaches and priorities.

Additionally, an EU-level coordination and direction, favoring the rise of a strategic culture, is missing while European think tanks and universities generally operate on modest budgets, short-term projects and through bureaucratic obstacles.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, scholars rather than accumulating research practice spend their time applying, managing or monitoring grants. Unsurprisingly, applied defense analysis, campaign modeling, and wargaming are rare in Europe. Ever scarcer is conceptual defense innovation.

Moreover, career paths remain rigid, discouraging circulation of talent between academia, government, and the military. European think tanks, in general, produce valuable work but lack the mass, the continuity, or the embeddedness of their U.S. counterparts, thus often limiting themselves to commenting on what is being done (or not) by governments and other policy actors or coming up with visions and proposals that practitioners find rather general and difficult to implement.

The result is a self-reinforcing strategic deficit: as defense budgets grow, Europe lacks the intellectual infrastructure to use them effectively. This gap undermines both the credibility and

---

<sup>9</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich and Barry D. Watts, *The Last Warrior: Andrew Marshall and the Shaping of Modern American Defense Strategy* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Gros and Giorgio Presidente, "Big budget, Old Habits? Funding Innovation in Europe with the Next Framework Programme," *Commentary* (Milan: Institute for European Policy-Making, 2025).



sustainability of Europe's push for autonomy.

### *Purpose and Proposals*

Building on the lessons from the U.S. while adapting to European realities, we propose six lines of action for developing the EU's cognitive capacity alongside its defense industrial capacity: promoting an understanding of strategy through Jean Monnet-style Chairs in strategic studies, the Javier Solana Chair also aimed at fostering early practice via wargames and simulations; funding excellence and people in research, not buildings and bureaucracy; linking research and policy through structured fellowships; supporting multidisciplinary research teams through Office of Net Assessment and Office of Technology Assessment-like organizations; and raising Europe's strategic quotient with forecasting and wargaming competitions.

These reforms require minimal resources: dedicating just 0.1% of annual EU countries' defense spending, or around €300m per year, to research and analysis would represent a transformative step. We recommend launching European Defense Fund-like mechanisms whereby national allocations are matched by EU funding – which could come from the MFF. This has three advantages. First, it incentivizes national investments.

Second, it permits a strategic direction and coordination role at the EU level – eventually through the European External Action Service, aided by an independent academic board responsible for ensuring excellence and intellectual independence. The Directorate-General for Defense, Industry and Space could be responsible for the management and implementation.

Importantly, we do not recommend that, starting from tomorrow, Europe spends €300m for research and analysis: the expertise, the people, the infrastructure is simply missing. Thus, such an expenditure would not deliver proportional results. For, we suggest that this spending starts with some pilot projects, with funding growing incrementally to ensure the organic and sustainable growth of Europe's strategic thinking ecosystem.

In short, both European countries and the European Union are putting serious money on the table. But unless they also invest in strategic thinking, it risks buying power without purpose. Strategic autonomy cannot be achieved industrially; it also requires the concomitant promotion of a EU-wide strategic culture and the underlying cadre of strategic thinkers, scholars and analysts.

## **Why European Strategic Autonomy requires Strategic Thinking**

For much of the post-Cold War era, Europe lived under the illusion of a "peace dividend". Recent developments are strongly questioning past choices, with significant investments and initiatives both at the national and at the EU level. The pursuit of superior strategic autonomy, however, requires a coherent strategy and strategy requires strategic thinking: this is where Europe should focus.

### *Europe's strategic momentum*

After the end of the Cold War, European countries' defense budgets shrank, armed forces downsized, and strategic analysis was deferred. The United States provided the ultimate security





guarantee, while European governments redirected funds toward other priorities.

The world has, however, changed: Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China's growing assertiveness, multiple conflicts in the Middle East, and uncertainty about Washington's long-term commitment have triggered a continental reawakening. European defense spending is rising: nearly doubling from less than €180bn in 2014 to over €320bn in 2024.<sup>11</sup>

In the meantime, the EU has launched new instruments — EDIRPA, ASAP, the creation of a Directorate General for Defense and Space, and last March's EU Commission White Book, among others.<sup>12</sup> These initiatives, altogether, aim to strengthen industrial capacity, enhance intra-EU cooperation and make available additional funds through different financial mechanisms.

Most strikingly, the new 2027-34 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) proposed last July by the Commission earmarks €131bn for aerospace and defense, five times more than the previous cycle – or around €20bn per year, more than countries like Spain or the Netherlands spend on defense. This is unprecedented.

### *Spending does not equal Security*

The increase of defense spending at the national level and the initiatives launched at the EU level signal Europe's growing awareness about the challenges it faces and the importance of defending itself.

However, Europe needs first and foremost solid and coherent strategies. Resources, however large, are not enough. Money can buy new tanks, planes, or ammunition, but without direction, these capabilities may fail to meet one's own actual needs or goals. As discussed in a previous *Policy Brief* from the Institute for European Policymaking, nobody really knows whether Europe needs tanks or submarines, drones or jet fighter.<sup>13</sup> Budgetary figures will not provide an answer.

In fact, the size of the defense budget is a poor proxy of a country's security. Napoleonic France, despite mobilizing Europe's largest armies, collapsed under strategic overreach.<sup>14</sup> The Soviet Union sustained one of the largest militaries in history but squandered it through misaligned priorities.<sup>15</sup>

Conversely, smaller states from Venice to Florence, Prussia to Singapore have historically achieved striking successes by using their limited resources coherently.<sup>16</sup> In other words, material power

---

<sup>11</sup> European Defence Agency, *Defence Data 2023-24* (Brussels: European Defence Agency, 2024).

<sup>12</sup> [https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/index\\_en](https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/index_en).

<sup>13</sup> Andrea Gilli, Mauro Gilli and Niccolò Petrelli, "Before Vegetius: Critical Questions for European Defense," *Policy Brief*, No. 31 (Milan: Institute for European Policy-Making, 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Charles J. Esdaile, "De-Constructing the French Wars: Napoleon as Anti-Strategist," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2008): 515-552.

<sup>15</sup> Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Beatrice Heuser, *the Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010); Colin S. Gray, *Strategy and History: Essays on Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2009).



without strategic direction risks waste, duplication, or even self-destruction.<sup>17</sup>

Strategy serves this purpose: it turns money and equipment into security, connecting ends, ways, and means.<sup>18</sup> Strategy imposes priorities, preventing governments from pursuing everything at once, integrates different tools of statecraft — military, diplomatic, economic — so that they reinforce one another, and provides a framework for adaptation, allowing states to adjust when conditions change.<sup>19</sup>

In Europe, without a coherent strategy, countries may pursue redundant capabilities, gaps may not be identified or addressed, challenges ignored, and adversaries' strategies downplayed. Worse, Europe may find itself with impressive arsenals unsuited to the actual threats it faces. Strategy, therefore, is not a luxury. It is the precondition for turning Europe's financial and industrial investments in defense into effective security.

### *Strategy Requires Strategic Thinking*

Yet strategy requires an intellectual process that defines objectives realistically, anticipates adversaries' actions, and weighs trade-offs under conditions of uncertainty: this is called strategic thinking.

Strategic thinking is not a product to develop or a process to comply with: it requires analysis, imagination, and practice.<sup>20</sup> These elements cannot ensure success, but without strategic thinking, failure is more difficult to avert. Overall, strategy cannot be improvised at the moment of crisis.<sup>21</sup> This is why societies that cultivate strategic thinking — through education, institutions, and networks — are more resilient when shocks occur. The United States understood this need after World War II, building a vast ecosystem of strategic studies in universities, think tanks, and government institutions.

Europe, by contrast, leaned on NATO and American expertise, leaving its own strategic thinking underdeveloped.<sup>22</sup> More importantly, as European defense spending is increasing to meet bigger ambitions, its strategic thinking must make a qualitative leap forward. Otherwise, a dangerous imbalance looms on the horizon: its growing defense allocations run the risk of lacking the intellectual infrastructure necessary for their effective employment. While this has always been true, we live in

---

<sup>17</sup> Edward N. Luttwak, *The Pentagon and the Art of War: The Question of Military Reform* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

<sup>18</sup> Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Robert G. Angevine and Jeffrey S. McKittrick, "Andrew Marshall and Net Assessment," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. No. 5 (2023): 1062-1081.

<sup>21</sup> Andrea Gilli, "Net assessment: 'competition is for losers'," *NDC Policy Brief*, No.09 (Rome: NATO Defense College, May 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Keith R. Tidman, *The Operations Evaluation Group: A History of Naval Operations Analysis* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1984); Tamir Libel, *European Military Culture and Security Governance: Soldiers, Scholars and National Defence Universities* (London: Routledge, 2016).



a world characterized by complex, interdependent and multidisciplinary dynamics, challenges and threats that strategy cannot rely on chance or approximation. A proper ecosystem is needed.

## The U.S. Strategic Thinking Ecosystem

To understand Europe's gaps and delays in strategic thinking, it is worth looking at the U.S. experience. The U.S. system is not perfect or bereft of problems. However, it represents a useful model to understand what Europe should work on and how. This section first briefly describes the U.S. broader defense expenditure, then illustrates how its strategic ecosystem has emerged, how it is organized and finally how it works.

### *The emergence of the U.S. strategic ecosystem*

The United States spends over a trillion dollars on defense annually: the U.S. Department of Defense works on \$1tn budget, to which one should add the intelligence community (CIA, NSA, etc.), NASA, and the Department of Energy's nuclear activities, thus reaching a \$1.2tn. Moreover, including the Department of Veterans Affairs — whose \$400 billion budget covers pensions and healthcare for former servicemembers, costs that in Europe are typically part of defense budgets — the U.S. total defense spending exceeds \$1.5tn – without considering the R&D conducted by private companies.

Debates about the efficiency of this spending abound. Yet, regardless of whether U.S. resources are used optimally, there is no doubt that American defense rests on more than financial prowess. Crucially, it is supported by a strategic thinking ecosystem: a network of institutions, methods, and professional communities that inform policymakers, shapes debates, and align resources with national objectives. At the roots of this ecosystem lie three key features: shared intellectual patterns, sustained funding and a diversified structure, which are more evident by looking at how this ecosystem emerged.

Building on the pre- and World War II experience, including the war games conducted in the 1930s at the Naval War College to anticipate a possible campaign in the Pacific against Japan, the employment of mathematical models to improve tactical, operational and strategic performance during the conflict and, most importantly, the experience of the Applied Mathematics Panel a consensus emerged in the U.S. from the late 1940s that new military technologies, with their increasing complexity, created significant planning and handling challenges especially given the global and diverse threats the U.S. was facing.<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, top-down policy guidelines were often seen too general or overly specific, proving largely ineffective for peacetime development and direction of the armed forces across diverse contingencies.<sup>24</sup> This reality revived pre-World War II ideas of approaching strategy and defense

---

<sup>23</sup> David J. Lonsdale, "Strategy: The Challenge of Complexity," *Defence Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2007): 42-64.

<sup>24</sup> Steven Ross, *American War Plans: 1890-1939* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 38, 183; see also Henry Gole, *The Road to Rainbow: Army Planning for Global War: 1939-1940* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2003).



analysis as problems of management.<sup>25</sup>

In 1949, leading U.S. strategist Bernard Brodie advocated for a scholarly enterprise to establish a new “science” of strategy, noting that the technological complexity, long development timelines, and high costs of military systems demanded a sound methodological approach rather than reliance on eternal strategic principles.<sup>26</sup> A few years later, defense strategists Charles Hitch and Alain Enthoven echoed this view, emphasizing that widespread military innovations necessitated a scientific method for strategy-making.<sup>27</sup>

During the 1950s, institutions like the RAND Corporation pioneered efforts to address strategy development more effectively by applying economics, game theory, operations research, systems analysis (a method using quantitative models to optimize complex systems), and statistical modeling to defense problems.

Starting with the Kennedy administration in 1961, civilians with expertise in political science, economics, engineering, and mathematics moved from academia, think tanks, Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs), and private industry to the Pentagon. There, they tackled practical problems, including aligning resources with strategic priorities, assessing weapons systems, troop deployments, and logistics, developing concepts to refine strategy, and conducting campaign analysis (e.g., simulating military operations to evaluate effectiveness).<sup>28</sup>

In the following decades, as civilian experts with diverse backgrounds began to move regularly and fluidly between the Pentagon, academia, think tanks, research institutions, and industry, a robust network of intellectual exchange emerged. This network helped blur the line between academic scholarship, business analysis, and government analytical work in defense.<sup>29</sup> It contributed to the emergence of a paradigm that persists today in the U.S., whereby academics, think tank scholars, and defense officials share, to a considerable extent, a similar strategic culture, common methods and approaches as well as goals and perspectives.

More specifically, the U.S. strategic thinking ecosystem is broadly based on multidisciplinary, rigorous methods, empirical data and policy recommendations. In other words, even a cursory comparison of the works by major U.S. think tanks, security scholars, private consulting companies and federal agencies shows a good mix of convergence and divergence that effectively contributes

---

<sup>25</sup> Edward Meade Earle, ‘National Defense and Political Science’, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (December 1940), 481-495.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard Brodie, ‘Strategy as a Science’, *World Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (July 1949), 467-488.

<sup>27</sup> Alain Enthoven, “Choosing Strategies and Selecting Weapons Systems,” in Samuel E. Tucker (ed.), *A Modern Design for Defense Decisions: A McNamara-Hitch-Enthoven Anthology* (Washington, DC: Industrial College of the Armed Forces, 1966), 134, 138; Charles Hitch, *Decision-Making for Defense* (Berkeley, CA: University Press of California, 1965), 23.

<sup>28</sup> Albert Wohlstetter, “Analysis and Design of Conflict Systems,” in E.S. Quade (ed.), *Analysis for Military Decisions* R-387-PR (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1964), 103-149.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006).



to public debates and policy developments.

### *The organization of the ecosystem*

Although implicitly anticipated in the previous paragraph, it is worth illustrating clearly the five main categories constituting the U.S. strategic ecosystem:

- *U.S. Government.* Within the U.S. federal system, there are multiple institutions responsible for studying and analysing questions concerning national and international security, including the Government Accounting Office (GAO), the Congressional Research Service (CRS), and the Office for Management and Budget (OMB).
- *U.S. Department of Defense.* Within the U.S. defense establishment, there are multiple centers conducting research and analysis. First and foremost, the Office of the Secretary of Defense has solid internal analytical capabilities.<sup>30</sup> Various other offices, like the Defense Science Board and the Defense Innovation Board, provide additional independent support. The military services then conduct research and analysis both at the joint level, like the United States Strategic Command (STRATCOM), and at the service level, through single-service commands like United States Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC). Finally, professional military education (PME) institutions like the U.S. Army War College, the U.S. Naval War College, the U.S. Air University, the U.S. Naval Post-Graduate School, beside teaching, also conduct extensive research. Suffice it to say that modern wargames started in the U.S. Naval War College in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>31</sup>
- *Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs).* FFRDCs like the RAND Corporation, MITRE, the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) and many others have historically played a vital role in generating conceptual developments and empirical analyses which have ended up informing U.S. policy. For instance, RAND promoted the application of game theory to strategic questions in the 1960s, IDA conducted seminal studies on the sources of military effectiveness in land combat while CNA anticipated the challenges the Soviet Union was facing in the later part of the Cold War, de facto predicting by more than a decade its collapse.<sup>32</sup>
- *Think tanks and universities.* Think tanks and universities then conducts research either for the U.S. government or independently. Think tanks like Brookings Institution or the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) have budgets around €100m and then there are dozens of other centers with budgets from few to dozens of millions per year – coming from donations, grants and contracts from individuals, foundations and private companies. U.S. universities like MIT, Johns Hopkins, Columbia, Chicago, Notre Dame, Georgetown and Stanford, among many others, have historically devoted significant attention to the field of

---

<sup>30</sup> Alain C. Enthoven and K. V. Smith, *How Much Is Enough? Shaping the Defense Program, 1961-1969* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1971).

<sup>31</sup> Norman Friedman, *Winning a Future War: War Gaming and Victory in the Pacific War* (Washington, DC: Naval History and Heritage Command, Department of the Navy Washington, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Krepinevich and Barry Watts, *The Last Warrior*; Jeffrey S. McKittrick and Robert G. Angevine (eds.), *Reflections on Net Assessment: Andrew Marshall* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2022).





strategic studies, with large centers directly working on these topics (like the Belfer Center at Harvard or CISAC at Stanford).

- *Private companies.* Private companies finally contribute to the research enterprise of the U.S., either as suppliers to various U.S. federal agencies or as part of their own activities. Prime U.S. defense contractors have their own research centers as do consulting companies working in aerospace and defense.

### *The ecosystem at work*

The American experience underscores that strategic thinking is not the byproduct of brilliance alone, but of sustained institutional investment. It requires diversified structures, professional incentives, and shared intellectual frameworks.

This system has not guaranteed success — U.S. strategy has known failures, from Vietnam to Iraq — but it has enabled a level of learning, adaptation, and innovation unmatched elsewhere. It is particularly interesting to see how the ecosystem works in practice. Universities provide courses on strategy, defense and military affairs which endow students with the knowledge and skills to approach bigger topics.

Think tanks and federal agencies offer young professionals an opportunity to practice research. The U.S. Department of Defense or the military forces contract out to think tanks or universities projects for addressing policy challenges which then inform policymaking. Military officers can spend time at U.S. universities either as Ph.D. fellows or Military Fellows, bringing their expertise but also gaining new skills and perspectives. Think tankers and academics join policy circles or the armed forces. U.S. professional military education institutions recruit university Ph.D to teach and conduct research. Policy officers join think tanks or academia after their service. This mix of competition, cooperation, shared purpose and common cultural and analytical background favors exchange, promotes conceptual innovation and works against group-thinking.<sup>33</sup>

## **Europe's Strategic Thinking Deficit**

While Europe's defense spending is increasing rapidly, the intellectual foundations of its strategic thinking remain inadequate — not only in absolute terms, but also relative to Europe's growing ambitions. Europe's strategic thinking is fragmented, without a common strategic culture, methods and direction. Its funding is modest and hampered by administrative compliance. Finally, there is little circulation of talent, which further exacerbate the siloed-nature of its ecosystem.

### *Fragmentation*

Europe's intellectual ecosystem in defense is dispersed across 27 national establishments. Each

---

<sup>33</sup> Margaret O'Mara, *The Code: Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2019).





state maintains staff colleges, advisory bodies, and research institutes, many of which are excellent in their own right. But none possesses the mass, reach, or long-term funding to shape strategy at a continental level. This geographic fragmentation prevents the rise of a common strategic culture and, thus, of shared methods and approaches. The end result is that debates largely follow national or functional lines, while the public is only superficially engaged, with implications for the legitimacy of this enterprise and its attractiveness for potential talent. Additionally, a coherent overarching direction is missing, thus preventing either the necessary depth or, in some cases, sufficient depth.

### *Modest Investment*

The U.S.-based RAND Corporation, which also works on non-defense issues, has a \$500m annual budget.<sup>34</sup> The U.S.-based Institute of Defense Analysis's 5-year budget runs between \$1.1 and 1.4bn, or in the \$250-300m per year.<sup>35</sup> Major American think tanks such as CSIS or Brookings operate with annual budgets in the range of €10–100 million. Most European think tanks, in contrast, operate on a fraction of these figures, mostly in the €3-7m range, and very few above €10m.

Even the most significant European think tanks employ dozens, rather than hundreds, of researchers and rely on relatively short-term, project-based and heavily bureaucratic contracts that, no matter their intent, *de facto* discourage cumulative expertise and conceptual innovation. While U.S. think tanks rely on satellite images, wargames, operations research or extended field-studies for their analysis, most European think tanks simply cannot.

Universities reveal a similar imbalance. Europe hosts world-class institutions. Yet, most of its universities lack or have very limited expertise in strategic studies, defense policy or military affairs – leaning more often toward other sub-disciplinary areas of specialization that, while important, address other questions. This has serious consequences.

On the one hand, this state of affairs prevents the production of young graduates with extensive skills and expertise. On the other, the very universities cannot contribute to pressing policy debates, such as whether European countries need the U.S. F-35 stealth fighters, whether competition in space affects nuclear deterrence or whether Europe's naval modernization should focus on surface or underwater vessels.

### *The Missing Circulation of Talent*

Europe's rigid career structures represent another source of weakness. While in the United States, there is a constant circulation of talent between academia, think tanks, government, and the armed forces, in Europe is mostly absent as professional incentives in most countries discourage crossing sectoral boundaries. Military officers rarely spend extended periods in universities or research institutes – if any at all; academics seldom move into government service; think tanks rarely contribute to policy development, either with analyses or proposals.

---

<sup>34</sup> RSM US LLP, *RAND Corporation: Consolidated Financial Statements: Fiscal Years Ended September 30, 2024 and 2023* (Washington, DC: RSM US LLP, 2025).

<sup>35</sup> [https://www.usaspending.gov/award/CONT\\_AWD\\_HQ003421F0040\\_9700\\_HQ003419D0001\\_9700](https://www.usaspending.gov/award/CONT_AWD_HQ003421F0040_9700_HQ003419D0001_9700)



Exceptions exist, but they are rare and often temporary. The consequence is siloed expertise – which Europe’s fragmentation across national boundaries further exacerbates – rather than a dynamic ecosystem where ideas circulate and are refined through practice which, throughout history, has represented a major source of innovation and accumulation of knowledge and expertise.<sup>36</sup>

## From Defense Readiness 2030 to Strategic Readiness 2030

If Europe is serious about strengthening its defense capabilities, it must also invest in its intellectual foundations. For, after *Defense Readiness 2030*, we recommend that the EU launches *Strategic Readiness 2030*, a set of concrete proposals aimed at fostering a stronger European ecosystem of strategic thinking. The emphasis is on people, methods, and ideas — not bureaucracies. Before delving into the details, we discuss the institutional and financial aspects.

### *Achieving Defense Readiness 2030 through Strategic Readiness 2030*

Last spring, the European Commission launched *Defense Readiness 2030*, an ambitious plan to fund European countries’ defense modernization through SAFE (Security Action for Europe), a common funding mechanism aiming at reducing the debt burden for EU Member States. As discussed, however, Europe needs strategy before guns, and strategy requires strategic thinking. For implementing our proposals, we recommend that:

- European countries and the new EU Commission MFF aim to allocate 0.1% of EU countries’ defense budgets to research and analysis. EU countries currently spend around €320 billion annually on defense, while the MFF plans to add another €20, for a total close to €350 per year. Redirecting just 0.1%% of that sum (€320 million, or roughly the annual budget of the US Institute for Defense Analyses) to research and strategic analysis would transform Europe’s intellectual landscape. Our proposal, as of now, has a budget of around €200m, or less than 0.7%.
- The mechanism should follow the rationale of the European Defense Fund, whereby national contributions are matched by EU-level funding: this would incentivize spending at the national level and multiply resources. This means, the 1% target should be equally split between national governments and the EU Commission.
- The European Commission’s Directorate General for Defense, Industry and Space would be responsible for the management and execution of this program, while the European External Action Service could be involved in the definition of strategic directions, requirements and priorities. However, an independent academic board would aid this latter part of the work, ensuring policy-relevance, excellence and academic and intellectual freedom.

---

<sup>36</sup> Matt Ridley, *How Innovation Works: And Why It Flourishes in Freedom* (New York, NY: Harper, 2020); Joel Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena: Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Joel Mokyr, *A Culture of Growth: The Origins of the Modern Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Frans Johansson, *The Medici Effect: What Elephants and Epidemics Can Teach Us About Innovation* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2004).



- We recommend starting with a pilot project, to ensure an organic and sustainable growth of Europe's strategic thinking ecosystem. This means the following proposals could be started at 30% of their final goal.

### **Javier Solana Chair in Strategy: 50 chairs, €500,000 each, for a total €25,000,000**

For decades, European countries have neglected the intellectual and cultural dimension of defense. Strategic studies remain marginal in most universities, and many curricula fail to expose students to the fundamentals of security, strategy, and military affairs. To close this gap, we propose:

- Launching Javier Solana Chairs in Strategic Studies, Jean Monnet-like Chairs funded by Erasmus+. Solana, undisputed founding father of the EU as a strategic actor, having served as both NATO Secretary General as well as the EU's first High Representative, remains a widely respected figure across Europe and transatlantic circles. Anchoring the initiative in his name would provide both symbolic legitimacy and practical recognition, making these chairs a flagship of Europe's strategic renewal. These chairs would institutionalize the teaching of defense and strategy across Europe, anchoring them in mainstream higher education. Selection should be based exclusively on demonstrated excellence, including publication of think tank reports with wide visibility and/or peer-reviewed articles in top security journals as well as proven, broad, substantive expertise, i.e. knowledge of military history, military technology, intelligence or foreign countries, or defense policy.
- 50 Chairs, in Europe, seem a reasonable number. The allocated budget would cover the salary, expenses and hiring of research assistants. The Chairs should also be open to junior researchers who have unquestionably proved their value, i.e. ground-breaking publications. Following SAFE, we recommend that these chairs are also open to EU countries' partners, like the UK, Ukraine or Japan, both to welcome non-EU scholars and to enable EU scholars to work abroad for a few years – analogous to the U.S. Fulbright Program. Having non-EU nationals as Solana Chairs has a major benefit: like Renaissance Florence or Belle Epoque Paris blossomed thanks to foreigners, we believe that attracting talent would be in the interest of Europe. The number of Chairs eligible to non-EU candidates could be set at a fraction of the total number, like 30%.
- Chairs should be 3+3 years for scholars within 10 years from their Ph.D. and 5+5 years for those above. The fellowship would be assigned to the scholar, not a university: this would strengthen his/her bargaining position who could then not only decide where to work but also obtain more favorable working conditions.
- Chairs should focus on practical, and substantive, and policy-relevant knowledge, in other words they should concentrate on teaching that enhances understanding of actual issues and problems in strategy and defense policy. This includes teaching classes on analysis of military operations, defense planning, technology, and/or running wargames, simulations, and scenario-based exercises that raise students' "strategic quotient" and foster directly applicable skills. This would gradually build a new generation of European strategists embedded in academia but closely linked to real-world defense challenges or, in any case, spread strategic ideas and methods throughout the broader population.



## **Funding Excellence, Not Bureaucracy: 10 competitions, €10m each, for a total of €100m**

Europe does not need more administration-heavy institutions. Thus, research funding should target excellence and people rather than buildings or administrative tasks.

- A phased-competition system should be introduced: applicants submit initial short proposals responding to a specific call entailing minimal paperwork; those selected receive modest initial funding (e.g., a few thousand euros); at each subsequent stage, successful projects receive larger grants, culminating in a few winners securing significant resources.
- This model would cut the waste inherent in today's system, where think tanks and universities can spend significant resources simply to apply for a grant without generating any real value – actually they deplete researchers' skills and creativity – especially younger ones who, instead of accumulating substantive knowledge and specific understanding through meaningful work will have to devote their time in never-ending paperwork.<sup>37</sup>
- Redirecting that effort into actual research would immediately strengthen Europe's analytical capacity. The guiding principle is simple and straightforward: every euro must generate analysis, not bureaucracy. To promote fair and transparent competition, applicants can apply only at every other round, when they cannot apply, they will have to serve as peer-reviewer. Instances of boycotting or sabotage of other projects (quite a common praxis in academia) will lead to permanent ban of the institution and its affiliated researchers.
- The DG Defense, Industry and Space would gather proposals from the European External Action Service and EU countries' Ministries of Defense, generate additional ones should those submitted overlook issues considered of critical importance at the EU level, and identify a certain number of key topics. The academic board would vet the selected topics, assess their scholarly feasibility and, in case, introduce amendments.
- Ten grants would be launched every year. Every participant is required to submit a one-page description of its project. Those selected at this phase share €100,000. The following phase requires a 5-page proposal. Those selected share €300,000. The next phase requires a 50-to-100 page-long project. The winner will get €300,000, the second €200,000 and the third €100,000. Any researcher or research team in Europe able to question the data, the evidence or the methodology used in these studies will receive the amount allocated to the winner. Participants waive from the beginning the right to appeal these decisions. This would ensure high-quality effort and disincentivize p-hacking, plagiarism and other practices which affect academic research.

---

<sup>37</sup> Assume a think tank or a university wants to apply for a grant. The grant requires the coordination of 10 researchers. Overall, each researcher spends 40 hours on this grant. This means 400 hours of work. At €100 of cost per hour between salaries, healthcare, pensions and fixed costs such as facilities, equipment and operating expenses, the think tank has de facto spent €40,000 without any real benefit for anyone. The importance of practice is stressed by the literature in cognitive psychology. See for instance Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1990); Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool, *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2016).



## **Bridging Research and Policy: 150 Fellows, €150,000 each, for a total €22,500,000**

Europe's intellectual ecosystem suffers from weak interaction between research and government. Unlike in the U.S., where many officers and officials hold PhDs and scholars rotate through government posts, European career paths are rigid. For this purpose, we recommend granting each year 75 fellowships reserved for scholars and 75 fellowships reserved for military or defense officers.

- A European International Affairs Fellowship should be established, modeled on the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations program. Scholars and analysts would spend 12 months embedded in EU institutions, NATO, or national defense ministries. This would expose policymakers to external expertise while giving academics and think tankers firsthand experience of decision-making environments. Such fellowships would create a cadre of professionals fluent in both academic and policy languages. The fellows would work on a policy problem relevant to the organization she s/he is assigned. A final report will have to be published.
- A European Military Fellowship would enable military officers to spend time in think tanks or universities either to teach defense and military issues or conduct research.

## **Supporting Multidisciplinary Research: 4 centers, €7.5m each, for a total of €25m**

Strategic challenges are inherently cross-disciplinary. Understanding Russia's war effort requires insights into supply chains, industrial production, and energy security; analyzing hypersonic missiles demands familiarity with physics and engineering. Yet academic silos discourage this kind of work which, in contrast, they should promote to pursue the public good mission they are supposed to serve.<sup>38</sup> Multidisciplinary research must hence be promoted. For this reason, we recommend running a competition, every five years, to create 4 centers:

- 2 Offices of Net Assessment: ONA-Blue and ONA-Red
- 2 Offices of Technology Assessment: OTA-Orange and OTA-Green

Both the Office of Net Assessment and the Office of Technology Assessment, in the U.S., have a long and glorious history. Both, paradoxically, have been closed. The idea is that any EU-based think tank, university or entity would be entitled to apply to host these centers. The selection criteria would include the degree of multidisciplinary of the team, the impact of their publications and the rigor of their methods. Each center would conduct 50% of its work in total autonomy while 50% would be assigned by boards composed of academics, defense officers and European Members of

---

<sup>38</sup> Steven Johnson, *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2010); Dashun Wang and Albert-László Barabási, *The Science of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).





Parliament. The creation of multiple centers serves to promote competition as well as set thresholds for performance assessment. If one of the two centers significantly underperform the other in research output, there will be no doubt about its work.

### **Raising the Strategic Quotient through Competition: 4 contracts €7.5m each, for a total €15,000,000**

Strategic thinking can also be strengthened through competitive exercises that foster creativity and analytical rigor. For this purpose, we recommend awarding 4 3-year contracts for the organization of two different types of activities:

- 2 contracts for organizing a wargaming competition among universities, think tanks and any other interested party. The winner – a university, a think tank or a private company – would be responsible for organizing the competition as well as setting aside monetary awards reserved for participants and winners. For instance, each think tank, university or other participant could apply and, if selected, be awarded €50,000, and the three winners would get €250,000, €100,000 and €50,000, the rest of the budget would go towards the organizing entity.
- 2 contracts for a European version of the Good Judgment Project, funded by the U.S. Intelligence Advanced Research Project Agency (IARPA), where research teams and students forecast geopolitical events to sharpen anticipatory skills.<sup>39</sup> Like above each selected participant could be awarded €50,000, and the three winners would get €250,000, €100,000 and €50,000, the rest of the budget would go towards the organizing entity.

Such initiatives would both raise analytical standards and generate a culture of intellectual competition across Europe – let alone reward with status and funding top-performers, forcing others to adapt and change. As above, the simultaneous launch of multiple contracts serves to promote competition as well as set thresholds for performance assessment.

### **Administrative costs: 4 contracts, €5m each, for a total of €20m**

For the administrative management and financial audit of these grants, we recommend running a tender reserved for external private companies. This would have several benefits:

- Universities and think tanks would specialize in what they do best, research, not administrative activities;
- External, private companies have an inherent incentive in pursuing lean procedures and technological innovation;
- Competition would keep costs down and clearly separate the administrative from the research costs.

---

<sup>39</sup> <https://goodjudgment.com/>





## Conclusion: Toward a Strategic Europe

Europe today finds itself at a paradoxical crossroads. It is spending more on defense than at any point in its modern history, yet it remains intellectually underpowered. The material pillars of security are being strengthened, but the intellectual foundations — the ideas, methods, and institutions that give meaning to force — lag dangerously behind. Without those, Europe risks becoming a follower power: wealthy in defense assets, but reliant on others to understand, organize, and deploy them effectively.

Strategic thinking is not a luxury. It is the connective tissue between resources and security outcomes. The United States, over the past century, built institutions capable of turning concepts into strategy and strategy into operational practice. Europe has not — or only to a limited extent. Its debates remain fragmented, nationally bounded, and chronically underfunded. Its think tanks are generally too small, its universities often detached from practice, its circulation of talent too rigid. The result is an ecosystem rich in commentary but thin in cumulative expertise. Yet the cost of correcting this imbalance is negligible compared to the sums already devoted to rearmament.

A few hundred million euros per year — less than a fraction of a single major procurement program — could finance the chair, fellowships, institutes, wargames, and applied research networks that would give Europe its missing cognitive capacity. What Europe lacks is not money, but priority. Launching *Strategic Readiness 2030*, after *Defense Readiness 2030* would help address these issues.

Europe must cultivate an intellectual infrastructure commensurate with its ambitions. That means investing in centers of excellence with critical mass, creating mechanisms for talent to circulate across sectors, integrating applied methods such as operations research and scenario modeling, and anchoring strategic thinking in real defense planning. It also means legitimizing these efforts through broader public engagement: bringing parliaments, media, and civil society into the conversation so that strategy is not the preserve of elites alone. If Europe succeeds, the reward will be more than autonomy. It will be the capacity to think and act strategically in a turbulent world: to anticipate, to coordinate, to lead. If it fails, Europe will remain a giant with uncoordinated limbs, reliant on American guidance to translate resources into security. The stakes are therefore simple.

Europe does not only need more weapons. It needs more ideas: knowledge as the stock of capital, ideas as its spin-offs and, indeed, dividends. And without ideas, even the best weapons will remain inert.

