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Le Plan has always been a crossroads. It publishes its own analytical work but also seeks to share outside ideas, freely expressed by different authors. This is the spirit of La Collection du Plan*, with this latest contribution from a major European figure, who offers his vision on a key issue: the importance of engaging European citizens in the rearmament of Europe.*

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Rearming for Democracy: investing in defence, preserving our freedom

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Faced with the rise of authoritarian regimes, drawn out conflicts on Europe's doorstep, hybrid and cyber threats, the European Union must learn again to speak the language of power. Investment in defence is no longer optional: it has become a condition for the survival of democratic regimes.

At the 2025 Hague Summit, NATO allies committed to investing 5% of their GDP in defence and security by 2035. In an already highly constrained budgetary context and a political climate marked by strong social tensions, military spending may appear excessive or even unjustified. While this spending is necessary, it inevitably competes with other public policies.

This investment therefore raises a key question: in order to guarantee social cohesion and democratic foundations, how can we ensure that defence efforts gain public support?

Defence strategy should not be seen as a financial burden, but should be collectively recognised as an investment in peace, autonomy and the preservation of freedoms.

Safeguarding democratic values through increased investment in the defence industry

European countries are facing a hybrid destabilisation strategy in particular aimed at undermining Western support for Ukraine. France is no exception. As a major player in the Western world, it is directly targeted by a wide range of destabilising actions. Faced with these new forms of threat and the risk of a high-intensity conflict, it is necessary to increase defence budgets, modernise military capabilities and support an autonomous European defence industrial base. This requires, for example, abundant and diversified strategic stocks, which include ammunition and weapon systems that are both more economical and more robust.

It also means stimulating disruptive innovation and achieving new technological leaps. Military superiority relies on the ability to integrate and master such technologies. Recent drone incursions in Europe have highlighted the lag in European air detection capabilities against low-altitude flying objects. The war in Ukraine also revealed the central importance of Starlink in the current technological conflict and the need for the EU – currently dependent on American support – to develop its own European space system, particularly a satellite constellation. Finally, AI and cyberspace have become areas of strategic competition and conflict in their own right, where informational sovereignty, system resilience and operational control are now at stake.

Significant investment in defence is therefore both urgent and justified.

Several EU Member States – Germany, Poland and the Baltic States – are massively reorienting their spending towards defence. Denmark, for example, announced in February the creation of a new "acceleration fund" worth 50 billion kroner (around €6.7 billion). This fund, in addition to the 200 billion Danish kroner (€26.8 billion) already earmarked between now and 2033, will be mobilised in 2025 and 2026. It will enable the country to increase its military spending to 3.2% of GDP by 2025, compared with 1.38% in 2022 – marking a turning point in its security policy. Among the most significant investments is the acquisition of eight long- and medium-range air defence systems, for a record amount of nearly €7.76 billion. This commitment underscores a clear desire to modernise and strengthen the country's defence capabilities.

France has also committed to increasing its defence spending. The Military Programming Law (LPM) establishes steady growth in French defence spending over the period 2024–2030, initially at around €3.3 billion per year. The 2026 Finance Bill plans to accelerate this effort, with an increase of €6.7 billion compared to 2025. This will gradually bring the "defence mission" effort (excluding pensions) to nearly €70 billion in 2030. The Military Programming Law is a first step in building up defence

capabilities, but this must be further intensified to meet the 5% GDP spending commitment and the scale of international threats. Responding to this strategic paradigm shift will require a doubling of spending by 2030.

It is no longer simply a question of "guaranteeing peace", but of preparing for the worst in order to preserve the democratic sovereignty of our continent in a world that has once again become dangerous.

Building public understanding and collective commitment to defence spending

Public support for the defence strategy is crucial. It is a matter of ensuring that the population consents to the means of guaranteeing peace and respect for individual freedoms. However, in times of security tensions, and in the absence of sufficiently solid democratic foundations, political decisions can be centralised, opaque, or even removed from public debate. Citizens' lack of understanding and confusion risk weakening the democratic legitimacy of defence choices and even lead to rejection from the population.

The Democracy Perception Index highlights low support for increased defence spending, particularly in Italy and France, where only 25% of the population express clear support. Furthermore, only 26% of the French population would be prepared to physically engage in defending their country in the event of armed conflict, compared to 50% in Norway and Sweden[1].

Political parties at both extremes are already capitalising on this lack of support. On the far left, some denounce growing militarisation as incompatible with social and climate priorities. On the radical right, criticism often focuses on international alliances (particularly NATO) or the nature of external interventions. Added to this is a broader mistrust of institutions, accentuated by limited education on defence issues and a certain opacity in strategic decisions. In Spain, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has failed to secure sufficient political leeway to meet the commitment to spend 5% of GDP on defence, on the grounds that reducing other public spending would jeopardise the country's social cohesion.

However, social cohesion in Europe is directly threatened by tensions that are themselves extensions of armed conflict. The opportunistic use of new technologies has extended confrontation into new areas that blur the boundaries between civilian and military spheres: cyberspace, the sea, outer space, the information domain…. Collective security and the military spending should not be perceived as a threat to freedoms, but as a means of guaranteeing them.

1. **Nira Data (2025),** *Global Pulse: Security and Defense*. ***A global study on the public perception on security and defense.***

Democratic nations have in the past been able to mobilise significant resources for their security without compromising their prosperity. The idea that high levels of military spending would be unprecedented or difficult to sustain needs to be put into perspective in light of recent history, particularly that of the Cold War. During this period, European states made exceptionally large defence budgetary commitments. France, for example, devoted around 4-5% of its GDP to defence in the 1960s-1980s — notably to finance its own nuclear deterrent and maintain a powerful conventional army. This investment resulted in the creation of major industrial programmes (ballistic missiles, nuclear submarines, military aeronautics) that enabled France to develop key skills in these strategic areas. The Cold War demonstrated that an ambitious defence policy could coexist with economic development, provided that it was part of a clear, long-term national strategy.

Building democratic legitimacy: recommendations for strengthening citizen support

Defence is not a neutral tool: it serves the strategic vision of a state and its values. However, the meaning of military commitments has gradually eroded and must once again be collectively understood, debated and accepted. The war in Ukraine has certainly caused a stir, but this remains relative. Today, the return to a bloc mentality makes it more necessary than ever to adopt a renewed political and institutional approach based on transparency, education and citizen participation. Several means can be mobilised to re-establish this link between defence and democracy.

RECONSTRUCTING A SHARED DEFENCE CULTURE

The first step is to rebuild a common strategic vision through **a clear, proactive communication strategy that is relayed at all levels of public action**. This strategy must be based on structuring narratives that mobilise symbols, history and culture.

In a digital society where perceptions often dominate reality, narrative is a strategic weapon. The Cold War provides an emblematic example of narrative: the USSR was perceived as an existential threat, justifying long-term investments and strategic alliances such as NATO. Winston Churchill's speech in Fulton – "an iron curtain has descended across Europe" – laid the foundations in 1946 for a common imaginary opposing democracy and totalitarianism. The mobilisation of symbols and the use of culture (films, posters, books) also contributed to the perception of a world fragmented between two blocs. Coupled with the fear generated by the nuclear threat, this narrative made it possible to unite efforts without causing major divisions in public opinion, despite massive public investment.

RESPONDING TO EMERGING THREATS THROUGH CONCRETE AND TRANSPARENT ACTIONS

These issues must be anchored in citizens' daily lives through concrete and visible actions. The Nordic countries – notably Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark – offer tangible examples of awareness-raising, stemming from a deeply rooted culture of preparedness, i.e. the preparation of society as a whole for emergency situations.

In 2024, Sweden revised its civil defence advice manual, *In Case of Crisis or War*. Originally designed during the Cold War, it now includes advice in the event of a nuclear attack, armed conflict, or cyberattacks. This booklet was distributed by post to all households and is also available in digital formats. The Danish Emergency Management Agency has distributed a five-page document to citizens entitled "*Be Prepared*", containing information on hybrid activities and information influence, as well as on maintaining essential services in times of crisis.

Other democratic countries could draw inspiration from these examples to launch national, European or joint awareness campaigns for NATO allies. Contemporary media (video clips, infographics, interactive platforms, popular publications, public debates) could be used to make defence understandable, legitimate and accessible. Modern threats (cyber, fake news, space) must also be covered in specific modules in school curricula in order to educate informed and engaged citizens. Anticipating crises helps to strengthen collective confidence.

COMMUNICATING ON THE SOCIETAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF DEFENCE INVESTMENT

Beyond awareness-raising efforts, it is crucial to change perceptions of military spending in order to win public support. The aim is to ensure that defence investments benefit society as a whole – going beyond strictly military considerations – and to make these benefits accessible and tangible to the entire population.

This requires building bridges between the civilian and military worlds, particularly in the field of innovation. In Israel, the porosity between the defence and civilian tech sectors has led to the emergence of a particularly dynamic innovation ecosystem, where technologies developed in a military context are quickly transferred and adapted to the civilian sector – and vice versa. Companies have been born out of this synergy. This model has many specific features and is therefore not transferable to European democracies, but it can inspire initiatives that promote collaboration between civilian researchers, start-ups and defence actors, in order to accelerate dual innovation and strengthen our strategic autonomy.

Investment in military research and development is a powerful driver of technological innovation. Many major civilian advances have their origins in military programmes: the internet, GPS, drones, satellite imaging and certain composite materials. Once transferred to the civilian sector, these technologies stimulate productivity, create new markets and improve citizens' daily lives.

Defence spending thus plays a key role in shaping the industrial fabric. It supports a large ecosystem of companies, from major arms manufacturers to small and medium-sized subcontractors, thereby contributing to economic sovereignty and the development of skills in strategic sectors (aeronautics, cybersecurity, electronics). This promotes the creation of sustainable, non-relocatable jobs. These benefits should be fully reflected in public communication.

REAFFIRMING THE CIVIC DIMENSION OF DEFENCE ENGAGEMENT

The persistent gap between citizens and public action can be bridged by involving the population more closely in defence efforts, as full participants in the national strategy. This idea is clearly articulated in the Danish civil security manual, "*Prepare yourself – for yourself and for society; you are part of Denmark's crisis management*".

The Scandinavian culture of civil preparedness embodies this spirit by regularly organising nationwide crisis management exercises. In 2022, for example, Norway conducted a full-scale exercise simulating a hybrid attack, mobilising the armed forces, hospitals, schools, government agencies, the media and volunteer citizens. With regard to the military aspect of engagement, national service, although suspended in France, still evokes a certain nostalgia in public opinion due to the values it represented: solidarity, responsibility and civic duty. The Universal National Service has helped reopen the debate on youth engagement. In a context of budgetary constraints, more flexible, hybrid and less costly forms of engagement should be explored (voluntary civic or military service, resilience support missions, cyber reserve, etc.).

STRENGTHENING EUROPE'S COMMON DEFENCE FRAMEWORK

Finally, national defence efforts must be part of a collective vision at the European level. **Faced with the strategic withdrawal of the United States, only the European Union and its Member States continue to defend a multilateral approach, essential for stability and peace.**

The European project can no longer afford to remain fragmented by historical divisions between national prerogatives and European common defence matters. The idea that defence is exclusively a matter of national sovereignty is being eroded by the pressure of facts: no European army, taken in isolation, is currently capable of responding effectively to the rise of threats at its borders. **Member States share vital interests, common vulnerabilities and, in many cases, joint theatres of operation.** Therefore, refusing to pool resources, investment and planning weakens

everyone. European cooperation in the field of defence does not mean the erosion of sovereignty, but rather its strengthening through strategic mutualisation.

Significant progress has already been made, such as the creation of the European Defence Fund, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and efforts to standardise capabilities. However, this progress remains insufficient and too slow in view of the acceleration of crises. The urgency of the situation calls for a change of scale: joint procurement planning, joint borrowing, enhanced interoperability, increased intelligence sharing, coordinated investment in defence industries to enable the emergence of structuring cooperation projects, and the rapid build-up of autonomous and credible European capabilities. This requires a political leap forward, capable of overcoming reflexes of mistrust and administrative compartmentalisation.

The time for institutional debate is over; now is the time for coordinated, rapid and credible action. In this context, the development of a flexible and pragmatic "**coalition of the willing**" would make it possible to overcome the obstacles linked to decision-making procedures and the heterogeneity of national positions within the Union. By bringing together Member States willing to go further in the European integration of their capabilities, it could be the driving force behind a more ambitious and operational European defence.

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