ELF – POLICY BRIEF
No 6 | October 2026



A Stronger Europe for a Stronger NATO

Abstract

Russia's aggression and growing uncertainty about the United States have made European deterrence an urgent task. Drawing on the ELF conference "Stronger Europe for a Stronger NATO", this brief argues that the main problem is no longer money or diagnosis, but coordination and delivery. It examines three areas – industry and procurement, EU–NATO cooperation and emerging technologies, and EU–US relations – and sets out seven recommendations: buy together, fix the supply chain, institutionalise EU–NATO cooperation, speed up innovation, counter hybrid warfare, keep the United States engaged and stand firmly with Ukraine.



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Introduction

Europe no longer lacks a diagnosis, it lacks delivery. At the European Liberal Forum (ELF) conference "Stronger Europe for a Stronger NATO" in Brussels on 28 September, 2026, MEPs, NATO and EU officials, diplomats and experts agreed on the threat. Russia is a direct strategic threat. Drone attacks, arson and sabotage against industries that support Ukraine are no longer exceptional, and Russia's hybrid campaign is deliberate: it tests our red lines and aims to undermine our ability to agree on a response.

Speakers differed in tone. Some called for "confidence and clarity", another saw "no reason to panic yet", since NATO deterrence has worked so far. Others were blunter: five years into the effort to strengthen defence production, results remain disappointing, and Europe still cannot stop the drones that appear over its territory almost every night.

This brief distils the conference's three parallel breakout sessions: industry and procurement, emerging technologies, and EU–US relations. In addition, it includes a panel on EU–NATO relations, focusing on one question: how can the EU and NATO divide the work so that their efforts reinforce rather than duplicate each other? Its premise is that a stronger Europe makes a stronger NATO.

Industry and procurement

Participants stressed that Europe's main problem is not a lack of funding. Participants in the industry breakout cited roughly €1.6 trillion of annual spending potential, yet it is spent in a fragmented way. A security expert put joint procurement at below 20% and noted that between 2016 and 2025 European states bought around 58% of their systems in the United States, while total imports grew by 140%. Each country keeps what one participant called a "toy version" of an army. National design requirements shut out foreign suppliers and duplicate failures, and procurement cycles are so long that equipment is outdated by the time contracts are signed.

Europe still runs a procurement system built for peacetime, whereas Ukraine had to reinvent its own. Participants drew a parallel with the Cold War, when sustained spending of 3–4% of GDP created deterrence, and recalled Ukraine's message that implementing ideas matters more than discussing them.

The breakout session also identified a bottleneck that is often overlooked: skilled labour. Participants referred to a survey of more than 200 defence companies that pointed to workforce shortages, not financing, as the main constraint on scaling up. Prime contractors have no financing problems; difficulties arise further down the supply chain, where smaller producers cannot access public funding. Rigid HR rules further limit firms' ability to adjust their workforce.

Participants proposed:

- Voluntary joint procurement, with transparent models that let governments demonstrate domestic benefit through industrial spillover.
- Specialisation between countries, backed by EU-level guidelines on production volumes and types.
- Direct funding for smaller producers and start-ups, and procurement "sandboxes" in which military users continuously test and iterate, following the model of Ukraine's agile small teams.
- Funding for redundant and "unpopular" capacity now, so that companies remain viable after the war.
- A new political narrative that presents defence as economic investment; participants in the session cited a return of roughly €6 for every €1 spent.

Two cautions emerged. The pledge of 5% of GDP must not be diluted: dual-use investment is valuable, but it can crowd out spending on actual defence. And moving from spending to production takes years. Significant capabilities by 2030 are realistic, but not sooner.

EU–NATO cooperation and technology

The panel on EU–NATO relations rejected the idea of competition between the EU and NATO. The two have different objectives but can be highly complementary. The same panel suggested a simple division of labour: NATO leads on what should be done, while the EU's toolbox – research funding, joint acquisition, regulation – addresses how. The expert warned that the two organisations still work in silos, run two or three parallel planning processes, and cannot exchange classified information because of the Turkey–Cyprus problem.

Participants offered three concrete ideas to close this gap. First, a standing leadership steering group linking EU and NATO leadership directly, so that the two organisations are aligned from the top rather than coordinating case by case. Second, pooled planning processes: today the EU and NATO run two or three separate planning cycles, which duplicates work and can produce inconsistent requirements for member states. Third, a joint EU–NATO resilience planning process, in which NATO sets the requirements and the EU helps member states to meet them. One participant preferred this joint approach to a new EU-only emergency security protocol.

Resilience can only be delivered at EU level, by turning NATO requirements into national implementation and making use of the 1.5% of GDP earmarked for it. New EU tools are arriving: one MEP recalled that a separate defence budget line was forbidden only a few years ago, and the Commission official announced the first European Project of Common Interest, "The Drone and Counter-Drone European Resolve".

Hybrid threats need the same joint approach. Hybrid is expected to become an operational domain of the Alliance within roughly fifteen years and wants a bigger EU role. Practical steps are available now: reduce Russian diplomatic presence to a minimum, close Russian cultural institutes, expel officials engaged in hostile activity and act against the shadow fleet and Russian oil.

The technology session concluded that drones and AI matter today, with quantum following; one participant expected current encryption to be breakable within a few years. Participants noted that the European Defence Fund needs about six years to deliver a prototype, which is too slow. Europe also generates foundational innovation but loses manufacturing and scale-up to China and the United States. Participants called for faster tendering for innovation, regulatory sandboxes, clusters in areas where Europe is already strong, such as quantum chips, and data kept on European soil. Europe should cooperate with the United States without depending on it, widen partnerships with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Canada, and integrate Ukraine's combat experience into allied systems.

Future of EU–US relations

When asked to describe the relationship in one word, participants answered "strained" – but also "recoverable" and "patience". Friction runs along security, trade and diplomacy. Washington's strategic focus is shifting towards China, and participants voiced concern about American political support for illiberal movements in Europe. At the same time, the US demand that Europeans spend more on defence is one Europe should have met earlier.

Participants did not rule out a deterioration. If pressure on Europe grows, some foresaw a form of "divorce", in which each side learns to live without the other; others pointed out that American foreign policy depends on who holds power at a given moment, and that the unpredictability of the presidency is itself a risk. The practical implication is to prepare for both outcomes: Europe should be ready to carry a larger share of its own defence while preserving the transatlantic link.

There are real positives. The United States remains committed to NATO, and shared values persist in many areas, such as human rights, freedom of expression and pluralism. Trade, however, is a double-edged sword that creates dependencies, which is why "de-risking" matters beyond defence.

On buying European, participants were realistic. Anything above 50% would count as a success, and where US suppliers deliver faster, buyers will choose them. Europe has the potential to be an equal partner, but slow decision-making holds it back. The best argument is to show that Europe can deliver on what Washington asks.

Participants agreed on three measures for the next two to four years: be more transparent and ask what Europe can do; maintain dialogue at every level; and offer something constructive, such as further decoupling from China. Cyber cooperation was also named as an important factor.

Conclusion and recommendations

Deterrence is rebuilt by delivery, not declarations. The conference points to seven priorities:

- Buy together. Make voluntary joint procurement the default, with transparent domestic-benefit models, and set EU-level guidelines on specialisation and production volumes so that each country stops duplicating the others.
- Fix the supply chain. Fund smaller producers and start-ups directly, and address the skills shortage and the rigid labour rules that hold back scaling.
- Institutionalise EU–NATO cooperation. Create a standing steering group, pool planning processes and run joint resilience planning.
- Speed up innovation. Introduce sandboxes and faster tendering, and build the manufacturing and scale-up capacity that Europe's innovators currently find elsewhere.
- Counter hybrid warfare. Reduce Russia's diplomatic footprint, close its cultural institutes and enforce sanctions on the shadow fleet.

- Keep the United States engaged. Maintain dialogue, be transparent, de-risk from China and buy European where it is realistic.
- Stand firmly with Ukraine. Deliver on pledged support, integrate Ukraine's battlefield experience into allied systems and keep NATO membership as the strategic end point.

None of this requires new treaties. It requires political leadership, parliamentary backing for sustained budgets and a shift in mindset towards total defence. During the closing it was emphasized that Europe must keep supporting Ukraine and deliver on its 3.5% commitment.

Author bio

Peter Bátor has served as a diplomat, analyst, policy adviser, and speechwriter for two Presidents of Slovakia, as well as for ministers, deputy ministers, and ambassadors. His diplomatic experience includes a posting to Slovakia's Permanent Delegation to NATO in Brussels, where he served as Deputy Permanent Representative and Chief Political Adviser. Before NATO, he was Director of the Cabinet and adviser to the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs.

About ELF

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 50 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

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DOI: 10.53121/ELFPB6

ISSN 2736-5816

Graphic Design: Altais

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