The Giant Stirs?: Failing Forward in EU Defense Integration after the Ukraine Invasion

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the evolution of European Union defense integration following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, through the analytical lens of "failing forward." While the EU has introduced a suite of new defense initiatives, these efforts continue to reflect patterns of incremental, reactive integration shaped by institutional constraints and member state divergences. Drawing on recent policy documents and expert analyses, the research demonstrates how the EU's fragmented defense landscape has prompted partial, often insufficient reforms that nonetheless cumulatively advance integration, better matching the predictions of failing forward than other integration theories. The findings highlight both the limits and persistence of integration under crisis, illustrating how institutional shortcomings drive forward momentum without producing fully optimal outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia shattered Europe's post-Cold War security assumptions and exposed the deep structural weaknesses of the European Union's defense architecture. Long perceived as a guarantor of peace, the EU suddenly faced a crisis that its existing mechanisms were ill-equipped to manage (Simonet 2023). The war highlighted the severe inefficiencies caused by national divisions in defense production, leading to equipment shortages and duplication across member states (Clapp 2024). In response, European leaders at both the national and EU levels scrambled to introduce a series of emergency measures: the EU's 2022 Strategic Compass set new geopolitical priorities, Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced Germany's "Zeitenwende" in defense policy, and EU-wide defense spending surged, with expenditures projected to rise by 10% in real terms in 2023 (European Defence Agency 2024). Yet, as this paper argues, these initiatives, while significant, largely followed a pattern of crisis-driven, politically constrained integration rather than a coordinated strategic overhaul—illustrating the EU's continued tendency to "fail forward" rather than decisively reform.

The outbreak of the war propelled the long-marginalized question of coordinated European defense to the forefront of political discourse. Although formally enshrined as an objective of the Union since the Maastricht Treaty, meaningful defense cooperation between member states has historically been hampered by discordant national strategies and competing industrial priorities (Monaghan 2023). The Russian invasion represents the first moment in several decades where the strategic priorities of EU member states have converged to a degree sufficient to create a genuine, albeit fragile, opportunity for increased cooperation—particularly in defense. As each member state embarks on its own rearmament efforts, the need for centralized coordination has only intensified. Without such leadership, the same issues of

equipment duplication, industrial fragmentation, and strategic incoherence that have long plagued Europe's defense landscape risk being perpetuated. The EU thus faces a critical juncture: as Josep Borrell, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, posed in the foreword to the Strategic Compass, "If not now, then when?" (Council of the European Union 2022).

As the conflict enters its third year, the European Union has indeed taken unprecedented steps to expand its role in defense, launching a suite of initiatives aimed at addressing both immediate operational needs and longer-term structural shortcomings. These initiatives—ranging from the rapid scaling up of the European Peace Facility (EPF) to the launch of the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS), and the Readiness 2030/ReArm Europe Plan—mark a clear departure from the EU's traditionally cautious and intergovernmental approach to defense. Yet despite their scale and ambition, the overall impact of these measures remains mixed. Many initiatives continue to be shaped by the familiar dynamics of political compromise and institutional constraint, with several falling short of their stated objectives or revealing new limitations even as they attempt to close old gaps. Rather than decisively resolving long-standing capability shortfalls, the EU's defense initiatives have often created a feedback loop of partial fixes and reactive reforms, consistent with a broader pattern of crisis-driven but incomplete integration.

This paper argues that the EU's evolving response to the Ukraine war is best understood through the lens of the "failing forward" theory of European integration, first developed by Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier (2015) and later adapted to the field of defense by Bergmann and

Müller (2021). According to this framework, crises expose the inadequacies of existing integration frameworks, prompting politically constrained reforms that incrementally advance the integration project without fully resolving the underlying causes of dysfunction. Applied to the post-2022 period, failing forward suggests that the EU's historic steps toward a more active defense role—while significant—are largely characterized by improvisation, institutional patchwork, and political caution rather than by strategic coherence or supranational consolidation. Through a detailed analysis of the evolution of EU defense initiatives since February 2022, this paper examines the extent to which the Ukraine crisis has enabled the EU to expand its role in defense, through what mechanisms it has done so, and with what structural and political limitations.

In doing so, this paper also assesses whether the continuation of the war has catalyzed a shift from purely improvised, stopgap instruments toward more coherent and forward-looking forms of integration—potentially signaling a partial departure from the classic failing forward dynamic. While early initiatives such as the expansion of the EPF, the launch of EDIRPA, and the adoption of ASAP were largely reactive and fragmented, more recent instruments like the EDIS and the Readiness 2030 White Paper demonstrate a greater degree of strategic planning and institutional ambition. Nonetheless, even these later initiatives remain heavily dependent on voluntary coordination mechanisms, national discretion, and limited EU financial resources, leaving open the question of whether the EU is truly escaping the structural and political constraints that have long characterized its efforts at defense integration.

The findings of this paper suggest that while the EU has made historic strides in expanding its defense role since 2022, its progress remains largely in line with the failing

forward pattern: crisis-induced, politically constrained, and institutionally partial. Early reforms often exposed new gaps more than they closed existing ones, triggering further rounds of ad hoc adaptation rather than comprehensive structural reform. Later initiatives demonstrate clear signs of institutional learning and a more forward-leaning strategic posture, but they too remain vulnerable to the centrifugal forces of national sovereignty, divergent threat perceptions, and industrial competition. As a result, the EU appears to be entering a transitional phase—advancing incrementally through crisis and adaptation, but not yet achieving the degree of strategic autonomy or supranational coherence needed to consolidate its defense ambitions fully.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, it provides a literature review of theoretical approaches, beginning with the failing forward theory, followed by neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism; the literature review concludes with a historical overview of European defense integration from 1998 into the Russian invasion. Second, it analyzes the EU's immediate responses in the first year of the war, including the scale-up of the EPF, the launch of EDIRPA, and the creation of ASAP. Third, it examines the post-2023 initiatives, particularly EDIS and the Readiness 2030 White Paper, and compares them with the earlier responses. Finally, the paper discusses how these developments reflect broader patterns of EU integration and what they suggest about the future trajectory of EU defense cooperation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To ground this analysis, the next section surveys three main theories of European integration: failing forward, intergovernmental bargaining, and neofunctionalism. This paper is also informed more generally by the historical context surrounding efforts of European integration leading up to the initial Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The "Failing Forward" Theory

To begin this literature review, this paper will examine the principal theory of European integration upon which the paper's analytical framework is based, namely the theory of "failing forward". The concept of failing forward emerged from scholarship on European integration during the Eurozone crisis. In a seminal article, Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier (2015) introduced failing forward to describe a cyclical pattern in which EU integration advances through crises but in an incomplete way. Their analysis of the Eurozone's governance showed that intergovernmental bargaining often produces "lowest common denominator" agreements, leaving policies only partially integrated (Jones et.al. 2016). These incomplete arrangements then sow the seeds of future problems: policy gaps and design flaws eventually contribute to a crisis. In response to the crisis, member states negotiate new reforms, again limited to what all can accept, which leads to incremental deeper integration – yet still not a fully adequate solution (Jones et.al. 2015). In short, failure (in the form of a crisis) drives the EU project forward, but only by prompting piecemeal fixes that remain imperfect. Jones et al. characterize this as a sequential cycle of "piecemeal reform, followed by policy failure, followed by further reform" (Jones et.al. 2015). Over time, the EU does integrate more deeply, but each step is achieved by

"failing forward" through crises rather than by comprehensive design. The failing forward model builds on existing integration theories but adds a crucial temporal dimension. It reconciles liberal intergovernmentalism's emphasis on hard bargaining and national preference constraints with neofunctionalism's insight about crises triggering further integration. Notably, the scholars behind failing forward also caution that this mode of integration has downsides. Economically, incremental crisis-driven integration can be costly for citizens of member states caught in failures as seen in the Euro crisis (Jones et.al. 2015). Politically, a union that seems to lurch from crisis to crisis may suffer erosion of public support (Jones et.al. 2015). This caveat is important to keep in mind when applying the framework to other policy domains: failing forward is not a triumphant march toward federalism, but a fraught process that risks undermining the EU's credibility even as it incrementally advances integration.

While born from economic integration studies, the failing forward framework has been increasingly applied to the subject of European defense integration. The CSDP has similarly progressed through hesitant steps as the Eurozone, often in response to perceived failures or external crises. Scholars have begun to ask whether Europe's defense integration since 2000 follows a failing forward pattern akin to that observed in economic governance. Bergmann and Müller's (2021) study directly apply failing forward to CSDP and finds a familiar cycle of crisis, limited reform, and further (but still incomplete) integration (Bergmann and Müller 2021). They observe that despite some renewed momentum in EU defense cooperation – for instance, the launch of major initiatives in the late 2010s – progress has often lagged behind ambitions, and reforms have "failed to address important shortcomings" in EU crisis management capabilities (Bergmann and Müller 2021). Using case studies of the Civilian CSDP Compact (CCC) and the

EPF, Bergmann and Müller trace how past failures prompted these initiatives. For example, chronic shortfalls in civilian mission deployments led to the 2018 CCC, where states pledged to improve civilian security capabilities. Similarly, the inability to finance military operations collectively – a weakness revealed during crises in Africa and elsewhere – spurred the creation of the EPF in 2021, a fund to more flexibly finance military missions (Bergmann and Müller 2021). In both cases, the authors find a pattern of experiential learning and policy feedback: EU institutions and governments recognized the previous failures and responded with new mechanisms, but these solutions were themselves constrained compromises (Bergmann and Müller 2021). The long-term dynamics of CSDP integration thus mirror the failing forward sequence. Crucially, each round of failure leaves some gaps unresolved – for instance, the EPF, while innovative, does not address deeper issues like EU force generation or strategic lift capabilities, meaning future crises could expose those gaps.

Compared to the other two more traditional integration theories, failing forward is able to synthesize the strengths and focuses of both intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism. It agrees with liberal intergovernmentalism that state interests and bargaining constraints shape each integrative act, and with neofunctionalism that unintended consequences and functional pressures drive the process forward over time (Jones et.al. 2015). Bergmann and Müller explicitly frame the failing forward approach as "charting the course of integration dynamics identified by neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism, through time, revealing its cyclical nature" (Bergmann and Müller 2021). This makes failing forward a particularly appropriate lens for CSDP, which, as demonstrated in the previous sections of this review, has evidence of both intergovernmental bargaining limiting integration as well as spillover effects

Deeping integration. Unlike some optimistic neofunctionalist predictions, defense integration has not been smooth or exponential; but unlike a pure intergovernmental stalemate, it also hasn't remained static: with progress resulting from crises and failures. Therefore, the failing forward framework seems to provide a compelling lens through which to view European defense integration, and the remainder of this paper will seek to demonstrate this by extending the theory to the developments in European defense integration resulting from the Ukraine war.

Intergovernmentalist Theory of Integration

Intergovernmentalism, a foundational theory of European integration, emphasizes the primacy of state preferences and interstate bargaining. As seen in the previous section, the theory of intergovernmental bargaining and consensus is also key component of failing forward dynamics. It is therefore natural for this paper to continue this literature review with intergovernmentalism and its emphasis on the importance of member state preferences in international integration.

Broadly speaking, intergovernmentalism comprises of three theoretical strands, classical intergovernmentalism, liberal intergovernmentalism and new intergovernmentalism. Classical intergovernmentalism was pioneered through the work of US academic Stanley Hoffmann and gained popularity in the mid 1960s (Verdun 2020, 1). Hoffmann's classical intergovernmentalist view argued that nation-states remain the key actors in European integration, especially in areas touching core national sovereignty. Writing in the 1960s, Hoffmann observed a fundamental distinction between "low politics" (economic and technical matters) and "high politics" (foreign policy and defense) (Hoffmann 1966). He contended that while integration could progress in low politics due to trade-offs and spillovers, in high politics national governments would be far more

protective and "obstinate" in yielding authority (Hoffmann 1966, 864–866). Hoffmann famously stated that national governments were "more obstinate than obsolete" – a direct rebuke to the neofunctionalist notion that the nation-state would wither away in an integrating Europe (Hoffmann 1966, 882–883). According to this view, when vital national interests such as security are at stake, states are unwilling to be compensated by gains in other areas and will insist on retaining decision-making control. This "logic of diversity" (i.e. the persistence of national differences and priorities) sets limits on the "logic of integration" (i.e. the spillover of integration into new sectors) (Hoffmann 1966, 882). In short, classic intergovernmentalism predicts that defense and security cooperation will remain intergovernmental – coordinated by states on their own terms – or else they will stall, because these realms involve questions of national survival and autonomy that states guard closely.

Classical intergovernmentalism fell out of prominence in the 1970s and 80s as European integration accelerated further and neofunctionalist theories saw greater prominence. Though theoretical developments of intergovernmentalism continued during this, the next major contribution to intergovernmentalist theory would occur in the 1990s in the work of Hoffmann's student Andrew Moravcsik (Verdun 2022, 6). Moravcsik's liberal intergovernmentalism (LI) included the grand bargains that produced EU treaties in its formulation (Moravcsik 1993; 1998). LI retains the intergovernmentalist assumption that states are the primary actors and that major integration decisions result from interstate bargaining. However, it adds a "liberal" analysis of national preference formation and a rationalist account of institutional choice. Moravcsik argued that national preferences are shaped by domestic societal interests, whether in the form of economic groups, or geopolitical pressures, and governments act rationally to maximize those

preferences on the international stage (Moravcsik 1993, 483–484). In his comprehensive study The Choice for Europe, Moravcsik (1998) posited a multi-level framework. First, National leaders aggregate interests of powerful domestic constituents to define the national position. For example, industries, public opinion, or ideology can influence whether a country seeks deeper cooperation in a given area (Moravcsik 1998). Governments then negotiate at the European level to pursue these preferences. Outcomes reflect bargaining power and asymmetrical interdependence. States with greater power or less need for cooperation can exact better terms. Finally, states design or empower EU institutions to secure and enforce the agreements they've reached, but only to the extent that it serves their interests. Moravcsik summed up the core of LI by explaining that national leaders' choices "responded to constraints and opportunities stemming from the economic interests of powerful domestic constituents, the relative power of each state in the international system, and the role of international institutions in bolstering the credibility of interstate commitments" (Moravcsik 1998, 18). This framework suggests that even in security integration, states will cooperate if domestic interests (e.g. industries such as defense or public demand for security) push for it, and if interstate bargaining produces a mutually beneficial deal, often buttressed by institutions to ensure no state cheats on commitments.

Comparing the two theories in the context of European defense integration, Hoffmann's classical version is clearly rooted in realist thought, with its skepticism that high-politics integration would ever substantially advance; as well as its critique of earlier neofunctional optimism and focused on the international system and state sovereignty. Hoffmann predicted that as long as national security was at stake, especially in a Cold War context where the primacy of NATO is undisputed, European defense integration would be minimal or intergovernmental at

best (Hoffmann 1966, 873–875). Moravcsik's liberal intergovernmentalism on the other hand, while it acknowledges the difficulty of integrating high politics, does not rule out cooperation if it aligns with national interests. LI would explain even major steps in EU foreign or defense policy as outcomes of national interest convergence. Moravcsik, for instance, interpreted the Maastricht Treaty's provisions on a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as largely the product of intergovernmental bargaining driven by national calculations – a symbolic step that states agreed on to complement economic union, rather than a supranational leap (Moravcsik 1998, 500–504). In this sense, LI can accommodate instances of defense cooperation by pointing to shifting preferences, such as new security threats or economic incentives, that make cooperation advantageous, and by noting that such cooperation will be designed on intergovernmental terms, including features such as unanimous decisions, opt-outs, and a minimal role for the Commission.

Finally, in more recent years, scholars have observed that even after the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992 and the Treaty of Lisbon, as the EU ventured into new policy areas, including security and defense, the integration often proceeded without the traditional "supranational" community method. The theory developed in response to this has been termed the new intergovernmentalism (Bickerton, Hodson, and Puetter 2015). In essence, new intergovernmentalism finds that member states have sometimes preferred to deepen integration through intergovernmental frameworks and new bodies (such as the European Council or intergovernmental agreements) rather than by expanding the powers of supranational institutions like the Commission. In EU defense policy, this is evident: initiatives are frequently led by member-state consensus, and new coordination structures (e.g., coordinators, networks, or the

intergovernmental European External Action Service supporting CFSP) are created instead of granting supranational institutions direct control. This perspective complements classic and liberal intergovernmentalism by highlighting a deliberate choice of mechanism: integration via intergovernmental means. It suggests that states seek the benefits of cooperation while avoiding transfers of sovereignty – a pattern often seen in European defense cooperation.

One could point to many of the recent advances in European integration as matching the prescriptions of the intergovernmental model of integration. PESCO, for example, was created entirely by inter-state bargaining and a convergence of national interests. A frequently cited dynamic was the Franco-German bargain on the level of inclusivity: France initially envisioned PESCO as a small, ambitious club of militarily advanced nations, whereas Germany advocated a more inclusive approach open to as many states as possible (Blockmans and Crosson 2021, 89–90). The outcome of an inclusive PESCO with relatively flexible commitments reflects a classic compromise between major states' preferences, consistent with Moravcsik's model of interstate bargaining yielding a lowest-common-denominator agreement. Germany, as a larger state with concerns about unity, influenced the design, while France accepted a broader PESCO in exchange for getting the initiative launched at all. Smaller states, for their part, joined to avoid being left out of defense cooperation.

Despite the prevalence of intergovernmental theories in analyses of European defense integration, academics have still raised many critiques regarding comprehensiveness of the intergovernmentalist approach. One critique in particular is that intergovernmentalism underestimates the role of supranational institutions and non-state actors in shaping defense integration. For instance, the European Commission and the European Parliament played a role

in advocating and shaping the European Defense Fund – the Commission proposed the idea and pushed it forward, and the Parliament amended and approved the funding. A strict intergovernmental view might see the Commission as merely executing the will of states, but in practice the Commission has shown agenda-setting power, for example. by framing the EDF as part of the EU's industrial strategy and proposing regulations for it. Scholars have noted that the Commission's new role in security and defense challenges the "new intergovernmentalism" claim that states only empower specifically created intergovernmental bodies. Here, they have also empowered the traditional supranational body in a new area (Nováky 2020). Further, Commission officials have also been instrumental in getting industry buy-in and structuring projects, which might gradually make member states more comfortable with EU involvement (Carnegie Endowment 2024). Thus, another critique is that intergovernmentalism is too static; it treats state interests as fixed or exogenous, whereas in reality, institutions like the Commission can help reshape what states perceive as their interests by illuminating new possibilities or creating new incentives. These critiques and limitations of intergovernmentalism brings this paper onto the final theoretical framework in this review: neofunctionalism.

Neofunctionalist Theory of Integration

Neofunctionalism, alongside intergovernmentalism, is one of the classic "grand theories" of European integration that failing forward is based upon, originally developed by Ernst Haas and others in the mid-20th century. It posits that regional integration tends to deepen through incremental spillover processes: integration in one area creates pressures and incentives for integration in related areas (Haas 1958). Over time, supranational institutions gain influence and political elites shift their loyalties toward the new center, advancing integration further.

Traditionally, neofunctionalism was associated with "low politics", such as economic and technical integration, and early neofunctionalists were cautious about its application to sensitive "high politics" fields like defense. However, contemporary neofunctionalist scholars contend that while the path of integration may be jagged, with frequent crises and setbacks, spillover can extend into high-politics domains under certain conditions (Schmitter 2004; Hooghe and Marks 2019). Scholars argue that EU defense cooperation has, in part, resulted from functional spillover originating in other policy areas. The creation of the single market, Economic and Monetary Union, and Justice and Home Affairs cooperation all generated new security interdependencies that eventually "spilled over" into the defense realm. For example, the EU's need to protect its external borders and foreign policy interests, once it had integrated internal security and economic policies, helped spur the development of CSDP (Schimmelfennig 2018).

Outside the functional spillovers occurring due to growing interdependencies, neofunctionalists also highlight political spillover, whereby national political elites and interest groups, having benefited from integration in one realm, come to support integration in another. In the defense context, this is reflected in how European military and defense-industrial elites have gradually embraced EU-level cooperation. Studies note that member governments saw tangible advantages in pooling efforts: cost savings in defense spending, improved military interoperability, and a stronger collective voice in global affairs (Ojanen 2006). These incentives led even traditionally skeptical states to agree on new defense mechanisms over time. The Saint Malo declaration of 1998, for example, can be interpreted as political spillover in action. Two leading states, France and the UK, concluded that handling European crises required an EU capability, which had become a logical next step after the success of the single market and

currency. Subsequent milestones like the Helsinki Headline Goal (1999), establishing EU rapid reaction forces, and the European Security Strategy (2003) further institutionalized CSDP, each building on preceding achievements. Neofunctionalist scholars claim that even if progress was slow or interrupted, the direction was set: "spillover effect and supranationalism continued" to push CSDP forward despite occasional stagnation (Baykara 2021). They argue that every major step in EU defense – from the first EU crisis-management missions in the 2000s to the agreement on new frameworks in the 2010s – resulted from pressures engendered by prior integration steps, combined with shifting expectations of elites who increasingly saw a common defense policy as both necessary and inevitable (Schimmelfennig 2018).

Finally, neofunctionalists recognize the agency of supranational actors in facilitating spillover – a mechanism sometimes called cultivated spillover. This implies that leaders of EU institutions deliberately use their influence to expand integration into new areas. In the defense field, this has become more visible in recent years. The European Commission in particular has actively cultivated integration by framing defense-industrial cooperation as a logical extension of the single market. The creation of the EDF is used as an example of this. As Pierre Haroche (2019) documents, the Commission seized on geopolitical events, such as doubts about the U.S. security guarantee under the Trump administration, to justify an EU fund for joint defense research and capability development – a role previously outside the Commission's purview. Neofunctionalists scholars argue that the EDF initiative exemplifies how supranational entrepreneurship can drive integration even in high-politics sectors. By launching the EDF, the Commission effectively inserted itself into defense policy and "demonstrated the initiative power of the Commission as a High Authority," exerting a "deep impact on […] spillover logic" in this

field (). The EDF created functional spillover too: it linked defense R&D with the single market and innovation agendas, thereby blurring the line between economic and security policy (Baykara 2021). Scholars also argue that the Commission's new role in defense has reactivated neofunctionalist dynamics. National defense industries and bureaucracies, attracted by EU funding and rules, begin to shift their expectations and loyalties "from states to new central authorities" at the European level (Baykara 2021). In essence, by offering material incentives and policy frameworks, the Commission and other supranational bodies cultivate further cooperation that might not occur through intergovernmental bargaining alone (Haroche 2019).

Taken together, these spillover processes suggest a gradual EU militarization through integration logic. Studies in this vein often conclude that, despite periods of stagnation or member-state reluctance, the EU has followed a more or less "possessed path" toward a common security and defense policy (Baykara 2021). Even apparent setbacks or pauses can be interpreted as temporary spillbacks – the neofunctionalist term for reversals – which do not derail the overall trajectory (Rosamond 2000). In fact, neofunctionalism predicts an uneven, dialectical progression: crises or pushback may slow integration, but they also prompt adaptive responses that eventually enable more integration (Niemann and Schmitter 2009). True to this expectation, the Euro-Atlantic crises of the 2010s (e.g. Russia's annexation of Crimea, terror attacks, Brexit, U.S. ambivalence under Trump) ultimately spurred Europeans to deepen defense collaboration rather than abandon it. As one author notes, "in the end, policy spillover and supranationalism are going to make an upward movement" in integration, because the logic of interdependence reasserts itself (Baykara 2021).

While neofunctionalism provides a more optimistic integration narrative, many scholars question its applicability to EU defense, especially in light of the relative stagnation that has occurred in many EU initiatives soon after their establishment, as seen in the many delayed projects under PESCO. Critics of neofunctionalism underscore that formal supranational power in CSDP is minimal: the Commission had no treaty mandate in defense procurement or military policy prior to 2016, and even now its role via the EDF is tightly circumscribed by member-state oversight. The High Representative and EEAS can coordinate and propose, but cannot compel states to act. Thus, critics, such as intergovernmentalist scholars, see cooperation without federalism: a pooling of resources on intergovernmental terms, not a supranational integration. For example, Adrian Hyde-Price (2006) argued that European defense collaboration functions on the basis of realist balancing and alliance politics (with NATO as the primary framework), rather than any spillover logic. He and others note that states participate in EU missions when it aligns with their interests and often still rely on NATO or ad-hoc coalitions for high-intensity operations, implying that CSDP's scope is limited by what sovereign states allow it to do.

All in all, neofunctionalism provides a valuable lens for interpreting the long-term dynamics of European defense integration, particularly through its concepts of functional, political, and cultivated spillover. It highlights how integration pressures can emerge across different policy domains and how supranational actors can help drive cooperation even in traditionally sensitive areas such as defense. However, the theory's underlying optimism—its assumption of inevitable, cumulative progress—can obscure the persistent structural constraints, political divergences, and implementation failures that have repeatedly limited the EU's ability to achieve coherent defense integration. Especially in light of stalled initiatives like PESCO and

the limited supranational authority embedded in the CSDP framework, critics argue that European defense integration has not followed a seamless trajectory of ever-deepening cooperation, but rather a path marked by incomplete compromises, recurring crises, and political hesitation. To fully appreciate these complexities—and to better situate the EU's recent defense initiatives within their broader context—it is necessary to examine the historical evolution of European defense integration itself. The following section provides an overview of key developments in EU defense policy from the 1998 Saint-Malo Declaration to the eve of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, tracing the institutional, political, and strategic factors that have shaped the EU's fragmented defense landscape.

Historical Overview of European Defense Integration

Understanding the historical context of European defense integration is essential, as it provides a baseline from which to compare the EU's defense integration efforts post-invasion. While this section covered a relatively broad period of time, the purpose of the section is to outline some of the important developments that have influenced state of European defense integration efforts before the Russian invasion. This section will also highlight the origins of many of the instruments that will be relevant in the later discussions of the paper.

While there were several efforts to create continent-wide defense coordination in the few years following World War II, the involvement of the nascent European Communities in defense coordination were non-existent; the only significant attempt at integrating European militaries – the European Defense Community, was vetoed by the French National Assembly in 1954 (Graf von Kielmansegg 2019). In the following decades of the Cold War, there was little to no progress made to work towards European defense integration. The first signs of life for European defense

integration to appear would do so after the end of the Cold War. The Yugoslavian Wars of the 1990s, alongside the disastrous events of Srebrenica, had revealed that the newly created EU was entirely unable to act in a security dimension (Oikonomou 2012). This revelation prompted both the United Kingdom and France, the two most powerful European military nations of the time, to express open support towards the creation of common European defense (Mathiopoulos and Gyarmati 1999). This support was cemented in the joint 1998 Saint-Malo Declaration, stating, "[...] the Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so […]" (Saint Malo Declaration, 1998). Though the EU did already have "Common Foreign and Security Policy" (CFSP) as one of its fundamental pillars under the Maastricht treaty, the widespread consensus amongst government officials up until 1998 was that CSFP would be developed under the aegis of NATO (Mathiopoulos and Gyarmati 1999). The Saint Malo Declaration's overt support for the EU to develop its own defense capacity therefore represents a significant departure prior assumption that NATO would remain Europe's sole defense and security framework, and is in many ways the first concrete step towards realizing coordinated European defense.

In the immediate years following the Saint Malo Declaration, there was an initial flurry of progress in the development of a coordinated EU defense. In 1999, at the end of the European Council meeting in Helsinki, the leaders of EU member states issued a "headline goal", calling for the creation of a 50,000 to 60,000 men strong EU military force that was capable of deploying within 60 days of a crisis and remaining sustained for one year by 2003 (European Council 1999). While these developments at the time seemed to indicate that the EU was rapidly moving towards coordinated defense, the military aspect of EU defense integration soon met

resistance. The United States swiftly declared its position after Saint Malo through Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who summed up the American position with the "three Ds" policy: no duplication, no decoupling, and no discrimination. (Mathiopoulos and Gyarmati 1999). This response directly demonstrated the US's continued support for NATO as Europe's primary security provider. Though Secretary Albright's language does also express support for the development of ESDP, it would be ultimately read in a manner that stood rigidly against the expansion of ESDP as an armed force and security provider (NATO 1998). At the same time, while European leaders were able to reach a consensus on the broad aims of the Helsinki headline goals, disagreements immediately surfaced once discussions regarding the implementation of the goals began. The differences in member state interests and recognition policy, for example, greatly hampered the effectiveness of European forces intervening in Kosovo just a year after Saint Malo (Bruschetta 2021). Finally, in 2003, the EU and NATO reached the Berlin Plus Agreement, which on paper allowed the EU the ability to utilize NATO resources. In practice, however, potential collaboration between the EU and NATO through the agreement was limited in several ways: NATO has to first refuse to intervene in the conflict before the EU can utilize NATO resources to intervene themselves, and use of NATO resources by the EU requires the approval of the entire alliance. This not only further solidified NATO's primacy as the sole defense and security framework for Europe, it also granted veto power to states like Turkey that share membership in only one organization over any case of direct EU and NATO cooperation (Gardiner and McNamara 2008). All told, by the end of 2003, the process of European defense integration has larger stalled in its tracks, especially in the realm of military coordination.

All this is not to say that the process of European defense integration was entirely stalled by the end of 2003. It was in that same year that the EU would release its very first security strategy document, the European Security Strategy, and while military integration remained largely stalled, new initiatives and efforts arose during this time in the realm of industrial integration that would set the stage for much of progress in EU defense integration made after the Russian invasion. Perhaps the most significant development of this period is the establishment of the European Defense Agency. Established in July 2004, the EDA, an intergovernmental body tasked with supporting EU member states in developing defense capabilities, promoting armaments cooperation, and strengthening the European defense industrial and technological base. Despite its ambitious mandate, the EDA quickly encountered significant challenges that undermined its effectiveness. Once again, the persistent divergence of national interests, particularly in procurement policies and defense industrial strategies, which limited the agency's effectiveness (Slijper 2009). Budgetary constraints and political disagreements further hampered the agency's capacity to act decisively; for example, proposals for a substantially larger, multi-year budget met resistance, notably from the United Kingdom, which insisted on stringent oversight and justification for expenditures (Slijper 2009). Moreover, the EDA's relatively small staff and limited resources restricted its operational reach, while its role remained somewhat ambiguous within the broader EU and NATO defense frameworks. These early difficulties left the EDA with an ambitious mandate but limited practical impact in its formative years.

The next major development for EU defense integration would come at in December 2009, when the most recent change to the Treaties of the European Union in Lisbon came into

force. The treaty established the current framework under which EU efforts of defense integration is managed: the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). Outside of establishing a new framework, the treaty expanded the scope of EU's security policy to include joint disarmament operations, humanitarian and rescue missions, and other tasks linked to counter-terrorism efforts. It also introduced a mutual defense clause, Article 42.7, committing member states to aid one another in the event of an armed attack, while emphasizing consistency with NATO commitments (Official Journal of the European Union 2012). Another key innovation was the establishment of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which allows willing member states to deepen defense collaboration through binding commitments in the form of joint projects formed on an ad-hoc basis based on the needs of member state militaries (European Parliament, 2024).

While the Treaty of Lisbon again expanded the toolkit available to the EU in promoting defense integration, these tools were still limited by the dominance of member state governments in matters of defense. Despite being tasked with identifying collaborative opportunities and managing the Capability Development Plan, which aimed to signal to members states the most pressing capability needs of the continent, national governments have continued to prioritize their own procurement strategies and industrial interests, often viewing the EDA's recommendations as secondary to NATO's defense planning processes. PESCO also encountered very similar difficulties as the EDA. While PESCO has generated a substantial portfolio—over 60 projects spanning domains from cyber defense to logistics—many of these initiatives have tended to focus on incremental improvements or areas where consensus was easiest to achieve, rather than tackling the most critical gaps in European military capability

(Pugnet, 2023). For example, the Military Mobility project, aims to streamline bureaucratic procedures and infrastructure barriers to facilitate the movement of troops and equipment across borders, but does not actually drive any industrial cooperation or fill any capability gap within European militaries (European Commission n.d.c). In both the case of the EDA and PESCO, the dominance of member state governments led to the strong limitations being placed on their initially ambitious mandates, and they remained in largely the same state with major changes occurring until outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

Between the Treaty of Lisbon and the outbreak of the war, there are two more important instruments that will be relevant to later discussions. The first of the two is the European Defense Fund (EDF), which was founded in 2017, but only received enough funding to function in 2021. The EDF was conceived as the EU's main instrument to boost collaborative research and development in defense and to strengthen the Union's strategic autonomy and industrial competitiveness, and was given an initial budget of €8 billion for the 2021-2027 period. Implemented through annual work programmes, the EDF supports projects across all military domains, with the aim of targeting critical technologies and capabilities identified in the EU's Capability Development Plan developed annually by the EDA (European Commission n.d.a). Compared to previous programs that served a similar purpose of funding defense R&D, the EDA is funded at a significantly larger sum, and is also a unified program under the direct administration of the European Commission, and represents one of the ways in which the Commission extended its competences in defense integration in the run up to the war in Ukraine. Finally, in 2021 the EU established the European Peace Facility, an off-budget instrument funded by member states which like the EDF consolidated and replaced previous pilot programs.

The EPF had two main purposes, first is to provide funding for join-European military operations, and the second was to provide assistance to EU partners around the world (European Commission n.d.b). Notably, due to its status as an off-budget mechanism, the EPF is able to circumvent normal EU budgetary restrictions, and is the first EU instrument that allows for the funding and acquisition of lethal equipment, though use of the EPF still requires unanimous consent of member states (Maletta and Héau 2022).

Understanding the historical trajectory of European defense integration underscores the complexity and enduring nature of the challenges faced by the EU in developing a coherent and effective security policy. From the initial diplomatic breakthroughs like the Saint Malo Declaration onward, it is clear that European defense integration has been shaped as much by fluctuating political consensus among member states as by institutional innovation. Despite important milestones—the creation of the European Defence Agency (EDA), the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon, the launch of PESCO, and the establishment of the EDF and the EPF—persistent national interests, NATO's structural primacy, and recurring political divergences have consistently limited the depth of these efforts up to 2022. This historical context reveals that while a framework for integration existed prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it remained fragile, heavily contingent on external shocks to galvanize political will and drive forward momentum. It is against this backdrop that the Ukraine war must be understood: not simply as an unprecedented external threat, but as the catalyst for a new cycle of crisis-driven integration. The following chapter will apply the failing forward framework to examine how the EU's initial responses during the first year of the war reflect both the opportunities and the enduring limitations of European defense integration.

THE FIRST YEAR OF THE WAR: THE EU'S INITIAL RESPONSES

This chapter intends to use the failing forward theory to analyze the EU's defense integration efforts during the first year following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (February 2022 to early 2023). It will examine three major initiatives launched or expanded in response to the war: (1) the rapid scale-up of the European Peace Facility (EPF) to finance military aid to Ukraine, (2) the proposal and negotiation of the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), and (3) the launch of the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP). Each case study explores how the design, implementation, and constraints of these initiatives reflect the logic of crisis-driven, incremental, and politically constrained integration posited by failing forward theory. Rather than simply recounting policy details, the analysis uses official documents – notably European Parliament Research Service (EPRS) briefings on EDIRPA and ASAP – to illustrate how these measures were conceived as urgent fixes that moved EU defense integration forward, albeit in limited and fragmentary ways. After the case studies, a comparative section evaluates the explanatory power of failing forward theory against two classic theories of European integration, neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism.

Case 1: European Peace Facility Scale-Up

As introduced in the historical overview of the paper, the European Peace Facility, established in 2021, was a new off-budget fund intended to finance common costs of EU military missions and security assistance to partners (Maślanka 2023). From its inception, the EPF was a product of intergovernmental compromise and was limited in scope. To appease member states'

concerns, it is not funded through the EU's budget (thus bypassing the Treaty's ban on using the EU budget for military operations) and funded by national contributions (Maślanka 2023). Its initial financial envelope for 2021–2027 was only €5 billion, reflecting cautious incrementalism (EEAS 2024). In essence, the EPF filled gaps left by previous arrangements, merging the Athena mechanism for operations and the African Peace Facility, and was meant to enable a "quick and flexible response" to crises (Maślanka 2023). However, its initial design did not have a high-intensity war in mind: it was primarily envisioned for small-scale training and equipment missions in Africa and the neighborhood, not for sustaining a high-intensity conflict in Europe. This incompleteness became immediately evident when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – a crisis far beyond the EPF's originally anticipated use.

Confronted with the urgency to support Ukraine, EU leaders broke historic taboos by repurposing the EPF almost overnight into an instrument for financing lethal arms deliveries. On 27 February 2022 – just days into the war – the Council agreed to mobilize €500 million from the EPF for Ukraine, including €450 million for lethal weapons and €50 million for non-lethal supplies (Maślanka 2023). This single package amounted to 90% of the EPF's entire annual budget for 2022 (Maślanka 2023). It was a dramatic but necessary improvisation: the EU had never before jointly financed the provision of weapons to a third country in a war, and doing so required unanimous consent despite some member states' hesitations. Indeed, this decision was described as a psychological "breakthrough" – the kind of leap only a severe crisis could provoke (Maślanka 2023). This initial reform fits well with what is expected form the failing forward theory. The crisis of the Russian invasion spurred the EU and its members states to deepen integration and address the limitations originally present in the EPF. By using an

incomplete institution in a novel way to address the crisis, the EU was able to further deepen integration in security policy. The EPF's mandate effectively expanded from training and peacekeeping support to outright warfighting aid, but this reform was still stopgap in nature, constrained by the EPF's ad hoc intergovernmental design.

Over the next year, the EU repeatedly upped the ante on EPF support for Ukraine through a series of incremental decisions. Between March 2022 and February 2023, the Council approved six further tranches of €500 million each to reimburse member states for military assistance to Ukraine (Maślanka 2023). By early 2023, a total of seven tranches had been allocated, exhausting the EPF's initial financial capacity. Rather than a single bold leap, this was a step-by-step process – each tranche negotiated under pressure as Ukraine's needs and the war's stakes grew. Unwilling to let Ukraine and the EU's credibility fall, yet also unwilling to create a true EU "war fund" outright, leaders took the minimal steps necessary each time to keep assistance flowing. This pattern fits the failing forward logic: incremental reforms to "save what they have accomplished" while still leaving institutions incomplete (Jones et al. 2016). Each EPF top-up was a reactive fix that deepened EU involvement in defense financing, but without establishing a permanent, fully adequate solution.

The politically fraught nature of these decisions also illustrates the intergovernmental bargaining constraints that are still present within the failing forward theory. All EPF aid required consensus, giving any reluctant state effective veto power. Notably, by mid-2022 the unanimity began to fray: Hungary, pursuing its own agenda, blocked the 8th EPF tranche in May 2023 pending unrelated concessions. This exemplifies how domestic politics and divergent priorities constrained the EU's response, forcing delays and side-deals inconsistent

with a fully coherent integration push. Even states that supported aiding Ukraine had differing preferences on how far to go and under what conditions (Maślanka 2023). Despite these frictions, EU leaders managed to agree in December 2022 to raise the EPF's financial ceiling by an additional €2 billion, and again in early 2023 to raise it by a further €3.5 billion. The EPF's total envelope for 2021–2027 was thus boosted to around €12 billion – more than double its original size. This incremental expansion of a previously modest fund represents a clear instance of "strengthening their common institutions" in response to crisis, though the lack reform to the funds structure still leaves it vulnerable to future issues crises when other nations may use its veto rights to hold EPF negotiations hostage.

In summary, the first year of the Ukraine war saw the EPF transformed from a nascent, underpowered instrument into the central vehicle for collective military aid – a dramatic leap for EU defense integration, yet one achieved through piecemeal, compromise-laden steps. The EPF's pre-existing limitations (small size, off-budget status, unanimity requirement) nearly caused the EU's response to fail at the start, but instead those limitations were overcome incrementally under crisis imperatives. Each new EPF tranche and budget increase was essentially a reactive correction to the previous insufficient response, illustrating failing forward's cycle. However, the solutions remained partial. By early 2023, the EU had not created a standing defense fund or a unified arms procurement mechanism; it had merely stretched an intergovernmental tool to its limits. This incomplete integration, in turn, generated pressure for further measures: the strain on national stockpiles and the ad hoc nature of EPF reimbursements prompted calls for joint procurement of replacements and ramping up of European arms production. Thus, the "failure" of the EPF alone to fully solve the defense supply crisis led

directly to the next two initiatives – EDIRPA and ASAP – as the EU continued to grapple with the crisis presented by the invasion.

Case 2: The Creation of EDIRPA

The European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) was born out of the recognition that EPF-funded arms transfers to Ukraine had left EU member states with depleted stocks and uncoordinated replenishment efforts. By mid-2022, as the war ground on, it became clear that merely reimbursing donations via the EPF was not enough; the EU also needed to help states jointly procure new defense equipment to both support Ukraine and replace their own inventories. The crisis exposed long-standing fragmentation in Europe's defense procurement: countries were rushing to buy ammunition, weapons, and equipment on global markets, often in competition with each other, driving up prices and favoring non-EU suppliers. This scenario created a functional pressure for a coordinated response – a spillover effect from the initial integration step (common funding of aid) to a new domain (armaments collaboration). In July 2022, the European Commission, with strong backing from the European Parliament, seized this opportunity to propose EDIRPA as an emergency instrument for 2022–2024. The proposal explicitly framed itself as a response to the war: EDIRPA would address "the most urgent and critical defence product needs, especially those revealed or exacerbated by the response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine" (Clapp 2023b). In other words, the Ukraine crisis created a window of opportunity to attempt a leap in defense integration that had been elusive in peacetime – namely, establishing an EU-level incentive for joint arms procurement.

Much like the EPF's expansion, EDIRPA's design bears the hallmarks of incremental, politically constrained logic. Rather than a bold, sweeping program, it was crafted as a time-limited fund (€500 million for 2022–2024) to encourage cooperation among member states in purchasing military equipment (Clapp 2023b). Notably, this is the first time the EU would have a joint defense procurement fund – a significant integration step – but the fund is modest in size and scope relative to the scale of Europe's defense needs (Clapp 2023b). The modesty was deliberate: many governments were only willing to accept an EU role in procurement if it remained a small-scale pilot project. In failing forward terms, EDIRPA represents the initial minimal reform that could be agreed upon to address the procurement "gap" revealed by the war. Its legal basis, once again much like the EPF, exemplifies a creative workaround to political constraints: because the EU treaties forbid using the regular EU budget for military or defense operations, the Commission anchored EDIRPA in Article 173 TFEU, the industry competitiveness provision (Clapp 2023b). By justifying the act as support for the competitiveness of the European defense industry, the EU could deploy Community budget funds in the defense arena indirectly, without needing to pass any changes to the EU treaties. This legal acrobatics underscores both the determination of member states integrate further and the incompleteness of the institutional framework surrounding EU defense integration, which necessitated such a workaround.

The proposal for EDIRPA in July 2022 kicked off inter-institutional negotiations that themselves highlight a pattern of delay and dilution characteristic of politically constrained integration. During autumn 2022, some member governments were lukewarm, perceiving the €500 million fund as largely symbolic and hesitating over the conditions. Liberal

intergovernmental bargaining logic was on full display: each state bargained for its preferences – for example, eastern states wanted freedom to buy non-EU weapons (to replace Soviet-era gear or rapidly acquire U.S. systems), while western European states with strong native defense industries (France, Germany, Italy) pushed to exclude third-party equipment in order to bolster the continent's defense industry. The result, as noted, was a compromise leaning toward the latter's position, including the EU/EEA supplier requirement, but was also time-limited so that if EDIRPA proved unsatisfactory, it would expire. By early 2023, EDIRPA was still under negotiation – a testament to the political friction even a war could not entirely erase when it comes to sovereignty in defense.

The slow pace contrasted with the rapid EPF decisions, underlining that integrating procurement, a core aspect of national sovereignty and industrial policy and hence a topic of "high politics", was more contentious than integrating funding for aid. Ultimately, political agreement on EDIRPA was reached later in 2023, with the Regulation formally adopted in September 2023. The final act maintained the key features of the proposal – a €500 million fund through end of 2024, with purchases qualifying if they are jointly made between at least three member states from a European manufacture. If one evaluates EDIRPA against the needs it was meant to address, its limitations are apparent: €500 million is a fraction of what even a single member state like Poland or Germany planned to spend on rearmament in 2022–2024, and it can only marginally influence procurement choices. Moreover, because it does not compel collaboration but merely encourages it, some larger states simply proceeded with their own procurement programs (often with non-EU suppliers), especially for urgent replacement of donated arms.

EDIRPA's case confirms the dynamics of crisis-induced integration tempered by national constraints. The war created a powerful functional imperative and political momentum to do what had been previously unthinkable – EU involvement in arms procurement. But the result was incremental: a novel policy instrument, yet narrowly tailored. In failing forward terms, the EU "muddled through" this phase by creating a halfway institution: stronger than what existed before (no EU role at all in defense purchases), but still far from a complete solution to Europe's defense capability shortfalls. This incomplete reform immediately generated feedback. By the turn of 2023, even as EDIRPA was being finalized, a new crisis manifestation – the acute shortage of artillery ammunition for Ukraine – was building. The limits of both the EPF: money was available to reimburse ammo deliveries, but there was little ammo left to buy, and EDIRPA: joint procurement takes time and industry capacity was lagging, led to calls for yet another, more targeted initiative. Thus, the sequence continued: the partial integration achieved with EDIRPA was not sufficient to meet the next challenge, prompting the EU to search for another solution, this time via the ASAP initiative in spring 2023.

Case 3: The Creation of ASAP

By early 2023, the most pressing capability gap facing the EU and its Ukrainian partner was a severe ammunition shortage. Ukraine was expending artillery shells at a rate far exceeding European stockpiles and production, and member states found themselves unable to sustain the supply over time. In March 2023, EU leaders responded with a landmark commitment to deliver one million rounds of artillery ammunition to Ukraine within a year. They formulated a three-track plan: (1) encourage member states to donate ammunition from existing stocks (with EPF reimbursement of €1 billion), (2) coordinate joint procurement of new ammunition (also backed

by €1 billion of EPF funds, through the EDA, to aggregate orders from willing countries), and (3) ramp up European ammunition production to meet both Ukraine's needs and to refill national arsenals (Clapp 2023a). While track 1 and 2 relied on reallocating existing resources, track 3 required a new policy intervention – hence the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP). The launch of ASAP was a direct reaction to the shortcomings of previous steps. Even with money on the table for joint procurement (via EPF and the forthcoming EDIRPA), it became evident that orders mean little if factories can't produce shells quickly. Europe's defense industry, optimized for peacetime demand, needed urgent scaling up. The war-induced ammo crisis thus forced the EU to confront another previously unaddressed area – industrial production capacity – pushing integration into the realm of industrial policy for defense, beyond R&D (covered by the EDF) and into manufacturing and supply chains.

The design of ASAP reveals both ambition and constraint. On one hand, it is an unprecedented move for the EU to intervene directly in the defense production sphere: ASAP proposed a regulation (albeit temporary in nature) that would mobilize €500 million to support industrial projects, fast-track regulatory measures, and coordinate supply chain monitoring (Clapp 2023a). The regulation was to expire mid-2025 (it was conceived as a 2-year emergency measure), highlighting its stopgap nature. On the other hand, the constraints are evident in how this €500 million was sourced and structured: rather than new money, it was to come from reallocation of existing EU defense funds – €260 million from the EDF and €240 million from the not-yet-implemented EDIRPA (Clapp 2023a). This reallocation underscores the political reluctance to significantly increase the EU budget for defense even under duress – money had to be scraped together from within pre-agreed envelopes. The fact that funds were diverted from the

EDF, a long-term innovation program, to ASAP, a short-term production boost, illustrates a trade-off forced by crisis: future-oriented projects were sacrificed to address immediate needs. Also telling is the use of EDIRPA's allocation – essentially cannibalizing one new initiative to feed another. This suggests that by spring 2023, policymakers recognized that EDIRPA's rollout would not by itself produce new ammunition in time, so part of its resources were better used to stimulate industry directly. This kind of adjustment mid-stream is typical of failing forward's iterative problem-solving: the earlier plan (EDIRPA) is modified on the fly when it proves insufficient, yielding a new plan (ASAP) that goes a step further (direct production support) albeit at the expense of the original plan's scope.

Unlike EDIRPA, which saw protracted negotiation, ASAP moved relatively fast through the EU's decision-making process – itself a sign of the high crisis pressure by spring 2023. The political consensus around ASAP was eased by a convergence of interests: all member governments, regardless of their stance on other defense issues, had a stake in solving the ammunition shortage. Frontline states needed ammo urgently for Ukraine's sake; Western European states saw an opportunity to inject funds into their defense industries; and even traditionally neutral or defense-averse states could justify ASAP as both a humanitarian necessity and an economic boost at home. That said, some debates did occur: for example, how to distribute the funds geographically, and how to avoid duplication with national efforts. The Commission's mapping of bottlenecks was sensitive, as it could reveal national shortfalls normally kept secret. But given the acute need, the political cost of inaction was clearly higher than the cost of compromise, which greased the wheels for ASAP's adoption, and the regulation was approved by July 2023 with overwhelming support.

ASAP represents a further advance of EU defense integration in response to the recognized failures of earlier attempts: it ventures into economic governance territory through industrial subsidies and regulation that goes beyond the foreign policy instruments initially used such as the EPF. It also illustrates the "policy feedback and experiential learning" noted by Bergmann and Müller (2021) as part of the cycle (Bergmann and Müller 2021). The experiences of 2022 – the bottlenecks in supplying Ukraine and the slow pace of ramp-up taught EU actors that without direct intervention, the crisis could not be managed. This learning curve enabled a more ambitious collective response than would have been conceivable before the war. However, ASAP also carries forward the incompleteness inherent in failing forward. It is temporary, limited to ammunition and missiles, and relies on repurposing funds rather than establishing a sustainable financing source. It does not create new EU institutions to oversee defense production long-term; it essentially entrusts the implementation to the Commission and member states working through existing frameworks. By early 2023 (when ASAP was launched), it was anticipated as a critical relief measure, but not a permanent fix to Europe's defense production woes. Indeed, questions remained as to what would happen after the €500 million and two-year period – would the capacities built under ASAP be maintained or scaled further? Would there be a permanent EU defense industrial program? Those questions were deliberately left for the future, in line with the failing forward pattern of deferring difficult decisions.

Comparing Theoretical Perspectives in the First Years of the War

The case studies of the EPF, EDIRPA, and ASAP reveal a complex interplay of drivers behind EU defense integration during 2022–2023. To deepen the analysis, it is useful to assess how well two classic theories of European integration – neofunctionalism and

intergovernmentalism – explain these developments, and how the failing forward framework synthesizes elements of both while better capturing the observed outcomes. Each theory offers a lens emphasizing different forces (supranational vs. national, functional spillover vs. state interests), and the failing forward narrative can be seen as bridging them (Jones et.al. 2021).

How does the first year of EU defense integration in the Ukraine war fit the neofuntional theory? There are certainly elements of spillover and supranational activism evident. The initial use of the EPF led to recognizing shortcomings in defense procurement and production, which "spilled over" into initiatives that involve industrial policy and internal market competencies – areas closer to the Commission's traditional remit. The Commission capitalized on the situation, proposing both EDIRPA and ASAP. This aligns with neofunctionalism's prediction that supranational actors will leverage crises to expand integration into new functions. Furthermore, the logic of functional spillover is apparent: to make the policy of aiding Ukraine via EPF succeed, the EU found it necessary to coordinate procurement (EDIRPA) and bolster production (ASAP). One could argue, as neofunctionalist accounts would, that integration in defense became necessary for the success of already-integrated policies (e.g., foreign policy unity, economic sanctions against Russia, etc.), thus creating a "functional imperative."

Neofunctionalism also highlights the role of supranational leadership and expertise in shaping outcomes. In these cases, the European Commission. Especially the Commissioner for Internal Market Thierry Breton, and High Representative Josep Borrell in his Commission Vice-President role were vocal in diagnosing the problems. They acted as policy entrepreneurs, drafting legislative proposals and brokering compromises. The European Parliament, for its part, advocated for ambitious measures, with MEPs often called for larger budgets and more

permanent tools for joint defense. These actions reflect a supranational push consistent with neofunctionalist dynamics. Indeed, one study characterized the creation of the EDF pre-war as "a neofunctionalist account of European defense integration," noting how the Commission managed to carve out a role in defense by framing it as industrial policy (Haroche 2019). The war arguably accelerated this trend, giving the Commission a central role in coordinating defense industrial mobilization – something unthinkable in years prior.

However, neofunctionalism alone doesn't fully explain the pattern we observed. First, progress was not automatic or smooth; it required political deals and was often delayed, which neofunctionalism tends to underplay. For example, while spillover prompted the need for EDIRPA and ASAP, their final shape was heavily influenced by intergovernmental bargaining (e.g., eligibility rules favoring national industry, the limited budget due to unanimity needed for any extra funding, etc.). Supranational actors did push, but they had to operate within the boundaries set by member states' consensus. Neofunctionalism might have anticipated a more self-reinforcing integration – perhaps an ever-larger budget or a permanent fund quickly emerging – but in reality, each step was hard-won and consciously temporary. Additionally, neofunctional theory has historically struggled with "high politics" areas like defense, where the political will of member states is the ultimate gatekeeper. The Ukraine war period shows neofunctional mechanisms at work, but also demonstrates their limits: no supranational institution could force a state like Hungary to drop its veto quickly, nor could the Commission simply allocate new money without Council approval. In short, neofunctionalism captures the momentum and direction of integration – the way problems in one realm led to proposals in another – but it is less equipped to explain the piecemeal, constrained nature of the outcomes.

The events of 2022–2023 also have a strong intergovernmental imprint. Most obviously, defense has long been an intergovernmental domain in the EU, and the key decisions – using the EPF for Ukraine, raising its budget, launching a joint procurement fund, etc. – were made in the Council by unanimity or qualified majority, often after intense bargaining. The EPF itself is an intergovernmental instrument entirely controlled by member states, a result consistent with what intergovernmentalists would predict: states set up an instrument that they control and can opt out of if needs be. During the initial response to the war, we indeed saw that national preferences shaped the scope of integration. For instance, the requirement in EDIRPA and ASAP that funds benefit EU-based industry clearly reflects the influence of states with strong native defense industries like France in the bargaining. The compromise outcomes in the structure of these measures bear the hallmark of intergovernmental incrementalism, i.e., doing just enough that all can agree on. Each country retained a veto or at least a decisive voice in these initiatives: Hungary wielded it by blocking an EPF tranche, while Poland and others leveraged their frontline status to push for more aid, France leveraged its position to attach industrial conditions, and so on. Intergovernmentalism would not be surprised that no single institution moved without the big member states' buy-in. For example, Germany's turnaround on military aid and France's support for EU instruments were prerequisite EU action in 2022.

Moreover, national security considerations and sovereignty concerns remained paramount, which intergovernmentalism emphasizes. The hesitant pace of EDIRPA's adoption, despite war urgency, underscores that states do not easily relinquish control over defense procurement. The design of these policies avoided any supranational decision-making power in defense: the EU did not get authority to direct member states' military acquisitions or

deployments. In fact, one could interpret the integration steps as enhancing national capabilities through EU coordination, rather than building an EU defense per se. Arguably, EDIRPA and ASAP, while involving the Commission, were tightly constrained by member-state-defined parameters. Intergovernmental theory would interpret this as states using the EU framework instrumentally, only to the extent that it serves their national interests.

However, taken alone, intergovernmentalism might struggle to explain why states agreed to any collective EU action in defense at all, especially actions that set historic precedents such as funding arms with EU money, or jointly investing in defense production. Pure intergovernmental logic might have expected states to prefer purely national or NATO solutions: e.g., each country buying arms individually, or relying on the US via NATO for security, rather than the complex process of EU coordination. The Ukraine war, though, shifted those calculations. The war created powerful incentives for cooperation through the benefits of cost-sharing, the need to present a united front, and the threat that the collapse of Ukraine could threaten all of Europe. Intergovernmental bargaining explains the form of the cooperation (small funds, unanimity preserved, etc.) but not necessarily the fact that even reticent states went along. This is where the idea of crisis-induced integration adds nuance. Intergovernmentalism tends to see states' preferences as exogenous (pre-set by domestic interests), but the failing forward theory instead suggests that preferences can evolve through crises, leading previously opposed states to accept new integration as a lesser evil in a crisis. Indeed, prior to 2022, many EU countries would have opposed something like EDIRPA on principle; the war altered preference structures enough to make a joint fund palatable.

Comparatively, failing forward has greater explanatory power than both neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism for the sequence and timing of defense integration in the first years of the war. Neofunctionalism might have anticipated integration but not necessarily in such a stuttering, crisis-propelled way; intergovernmentalism might have anticipated cautious inter-state cooperation but not its gradual expansion. Failing forward correctly predicts a cycle of crisis leading to minimal integration, leading back to crisis and once more to further integration. We saw exactly this from within the war's first year: a major crisis led to unprecedented yet structurally minimal integration in the form of the EPF; the minimal solution generated follow-on crises in the form of the arms supply crunch, prompting further integration through EDIRPA, then ASAP. Notably, failing forward also sheds light on the normative outcome – the EU integrated "forward," i.e., deeper than before, but also "failed" to create a fully adequate policy, leaving it vulnerable to the next challenge. This seems apt: by early 2023, despite all these innovations, the EU still did not have a truly unified defense policy or a strong enough defense capacity to support Ukraine alone. It had simply moved from almost zero collective defense tools to a handful of new tools – a considerable leap by historical standards, but circumscribed by political compromises.

One area where failing forward especially adds value is highlighting the role of institutional gaps and unintended consequences. It was the incompleteness of prior arrangements (no EU budget for defense, fragmented industries, etc.) that both necessitated and limited the integration responses. Failing forward theory explicitly focuses on how initial institutional design flaws set the stage for crisis, which then forces change. Indeed, the Ukraine war painfully exposed the cost of decades of under-integrated EU defense structures. Low munition stocks,

dependence on U.S. and disparate procurement were all potentially lethal vulnerabilities for the EU in the face of the return of high-intensity warfare to Europe. The EU's answer was not to fix everything overnight, but to start a path-dependent process of fixes that gradually address some flaws while leaving others for future resolution. Neither neofunctionalism nor intergovernmentalism alone articulate this path-dependent aspect as clearly as failing forward does. Intergovernmentalism typically doesn't frame earlier EU choices as "failing" or causing future crises – it just sees them as reflecting preferences of the time. Neofunctionalism acknowledges spillover, but failing forward specifically emphasizes incomplete spillover – partial integration that causes new problems. This nuance is critical in defense: for example, integrating finance through the EPF without integrating procurement created a new tension, and integrating procurement through EDIRPA without also considering production fully created another tension, and so on. Failing forward predicts that unless the EU fully addresses the root issues, each step will only temporarily alleviate pressure. The comparative evidence up to early 2023 suggests exactly that – each initiative was quickly followed by calls for the next.

As this chapter has shown, the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine catalyzed a series of unprecedented steps in EU defense integration, yet each move remained constrained, partial, and reactive—hallmarks of the failing forward dynamic. While the scale-up of the EPF, the proposal of EDIRPA, and the launch of ASAP each marked significant departures from past limits, they were not the result of coherent strategic planning but rather improvised responses to crisis-induced pressure points. Classic theories like neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism help illuminate certain aspects—spillover dynamics and member state bargaining, respectively—but they fall short of fully capturing the iterative, gap-ridden, and

path-dependent nature of EU defense integration as it unfolded in 2022–2023. Failing forward theory, by contrast, offers a more compelling lens: it accounts for the EU's capacity to adapt under duress while emphasizing the structural incompleteness and political constraints that make such adaptations partial, self-limiting, and crisis-contingent. With that said, the failing forward theory would predict that the process is not finished. The war's continuation should see further cycles of crisis and resolution, and the following chapter will aim to further apply the failing forward theory to the EU's newest initiatives in the realm defense integration.

THE WAR THREE YEARS ON: CRISIS DRIVEN INTEGRATION

The period from mid-2023 through early 2025 saw the European Union launch a new wave of defense integration initiatives in response to the ongoing war in Ukraine and shifting geopolitical pressures. Key among these were the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) unveiled in March 2024 as well as the late-2024 EU Defence Readiness 2030 White Paper, which introduced the ReArm Europe Plan. This chapter analyzes these developments through the lens of the "failing forward" theory of European integration – the idea that integration often advances via crisis-driven, incremental steps that leave unresolved gaps requiring further action (Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2021). It assesses whether EDIS, and the Readiness 2030 package continue the pattern of partial, politically constrained integration observed in earlier initiatives (e.g., the EPF, EDIRPA, and ASAP), or whether they signal a learning process toward greater coherence and ambition beyond "failing forward." This chapter also will continue to compare the explanatory power of failing forward with neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism to shed light on the nature of EU defense integration at this juncture. This chapter, like the one preceding, is structured in three main sections covering each initiative, followed by a theoretical discussion. Throughout, official EU documents serve as primary sources of facts on what was decided, while think-tank and academic assessments help evaluate implementation challenges and political trade-offs.

Case 1: The European Defence Industrial Strategy

On 5 March 2024, the European Commission, together with the High Representative and the EDA, presented the first-ever European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS). This strategy responded to the radically changed security environment after Russia's full-scale invasion of

Ukraine in 2022. Despite a combined €290 billion in EU member-state defense spending in 2023, Europe's defense industrial base remained fragmented, with limited collaborative procurement and heavy reliance on non-European suppliers. EDIS was formulated as a broad policy roadmap to boost the EU's defense readiness by 2035, principally by strengthening Europe's defense technological and industrial base and fostering more joint European efforts (Clapp 2024).

The baseline motto of EDIS is for Europeans to spend "more, better, together and European" on defense (Bergmann et.al. 2024). In practice, this means encouraging EU countries not just to spend more on their militaries, but to spend more efficiently, jointly, and on European-made equipment, to avoid previous pitfalls of duplication and overreliance on outside providers. The strategy highlighted persistent problems: over 78% of recent European defense acquisitions had been with non-EU suppliers, 63% of which were with U.S. firms, all while Europe as a whole lack the soldiers and equipment needed, along with the industrial capacity to produce them at scale (Barna et.al. 2024). EDIS calls for a paradigm shift to reverse these trends (Barna et.al. 2024). Notably, the strategy set several non-binding targets for 2030 to gauge progress: intra-EU defense trade to reach at least 35% of EU defense market value, at least 50% of member states' defense procurement budgets should go to EU-based industry by 2030 (rising to 60% by 2035), up from roughly 20% in 2022, and at least 40% of defense equipment acquisitions should be conducted jointly by multiple member states (Barna et.al. 2024). The EDIS also proposes a voluntary "Structure for European Armament Programme" (SEAP) to facilitate cooperative armament projects throughout the life-cycle, from development to acquisition and maintenance. The idea being to provide ready-made legal and organizational

templates that member states can use to form ad hoc consortia to jointly procure equipment, complementing the more permanent PESCO framework (Barna et.al. 2024).

Another pillar of EDIS is strengthening the EDTIB's supply side. The strategy calls for financing "ever-warm" production lines that can sustain capacity in peacetime (Bergmann et.al. 2024), and for establishing a Defence Industrial Readiness Board within the Commission, supported by a high-level industry group, to monitor and coordinate industrial preparedness (Barna et.al. 2024). It also floated the creation of a European Military Sales Mechanism – essentially a European analogue to the U.S. Foreign Military Sales program – to help partner governments purchase European weapons (Clapp 2024). Although inspired by the success of the U.S. FMS, the EU's proposal is far less ambitious: it would mainly offer coordination and modest financial incentives, such as VAT exemptions or bonuses under EDIP, rather than a unified foreign military aid policy (Clapp 2024). As one analysis noted, the EU's mechanism "cannot be considered a 'fundamental tool of foreign policy', unlike the FMS," underscoring the limits of the EU's approach (Fiott 2024).

While EDIS marked a significant step by articulating a long-term EU vision for defense industry, it was also constrained by political realities. The Commission's proposals in EDIS largely avoided supranational enforcement or massive new EU funding, reflecting what member states were believed to "stomach" (Clapp 2024). For example, the strategy did not include the bold idea of EU-wide defense bonds or a €100 billion fund that had been floated by Commissioner Thierry Breton and supported by the European Parliament (Clapp 2024). Instead, it relied on a relatively small EU budget contribution and on coordinating national spending. Commentators criticized the absence of a big common fund as a lost opportunity, calling the €1.5

billion injection “modest” (Schickler 2024). Likewise, analysts immediately pointed out that €1.5 billion over 2025–2027 was meager relative to the ambitions – “not enough to meet the fundamental shift in defence readiness touted by the Strategy” (Fiott 2024). It was also unclear what resources would sustain these efforts beyond 2027, and there was skepticism that calls for a future €100 billion program would ever materialize (Fiott 2024). In essence, EDIS was seen as necessary but not sufficient: it “asks many more questions than it currently solves” (Fiott 2024b).

Continuing in much of the same vein as initial EU post-war instruments, the EDIS exemplifies the EU’s crisis-driven yet cautious integration style. The continuation of war pushed the Union to aim towards deeper cooperation, all while shifting away from dealing with immediate crises and into more long-term strategy, though still fell short of fully resolving the underlying problems (Youngs 2025). The strategy itself candidly acknowledges the gap between rhetoric and reality: it’s a roadmap that “needs to be realistic” about its limits, as no single strategy can revolutionize the defense industry overnight (Fiott 2024). Behind the scenes some governments were wary of a Commission “power grab” in defense (Fiott 2024). The final strategy reflects those political limits: it relies on voluntary frameworks and earmarked national contributions rather than supranational authority. Intergovernmentalism would emphasize that states remain in control – and EDIS’s dependence on member-state buy-in and funding confirms this. For example, the target of 50% European procurement is non-binding, and does not include a mechanism to incentivize states to choose European suppliers over American ones.

On the other hand, through the EDIS there is evidence that the Commission (notably Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton) was able to act as an entrepreneurial actor, leveraging internal market competencies to push defense integration into the EU sphere.

Functional pressures created by the war's continuation provided a spillover rationale for EU action. The European Parliament and experts amplified this push, calling for ambitious EU-level solutions like eurobonds for defense (Clapp 2024). EDIS can be seen as the result of these supranational pressures constrained by intergovernmental consensus – a classic failing forward pattern. It advanced integration but did so in a politically palatable, incremental way rather than a leap to federalism. As one analyst observed, "contrary to much official rhetoric, the boost to cooperation in defense does not yet entail any strong push for a more general [institutional] advance" in European integration (Youngs 2025). In other words, EDIS strengthened the EU's role within existing structures, using the Commission's economic toolkit and the EDF/PESCO framework without altering the core intergovernmental nature of defense policy. This is in line with the failing forward theory – crises nudge the EU forward, but only to a point, often using ad hoc or temporary mechanisms that bypass deeper reform (Youngs 2025).

In summary, the European Defence Industrial Strategy laid crucial groundwork for greater defense industrial coherence in Europe. It represents institutional learning by addressing regulatory and coordination gaps, and it reflected increased urgency for defense integration. Yet its impact ultimately hinges on follow-through: securing funding, implementing the new tools, and – most critically – member state buy-in (Clapp 2024). Recognizing this, the Commission published a white paper for EU Defence Readiness 2030, introducing the ReArm Europe Plan, which the following section will analyze.

Case 2: The EU Defence Readiness 2030 White Paper and the ReArm Europe Plan

Late 2024 introduced several new challenges within Europe's security environment. The war in Ukraine is extending into its third year, demanding further sustained military support, and

the prospect of a less reliable United States after the 2024 U.S. election loomed large. European leaders increasingly proclaimed that the continent must "step up more assertively to protect its interests" and that a "historic change" was needed in defense (Youngs 2025). It is against this backdrop that the European Commission and the High Representative unveiled the White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030 on 19 March 2025. This White Paper, accompanied by a suite of proposals dubbed the ReArm Europe Plan, represents the most far-reaching EU defense package to date. It lays out a comprehensive approach for the EU and member states to achieve full military readiness by 2030, and it provides new financial "levers" to drive an investment surge in defense capabilities (European Commission 2025a). In essence, Readiness 2030/ReArm Europe seek to move the EU from ad hoc short-term fixes toward a more robust defense posture ready to continue a long term, high intensity conflict. This section examines the White Paper's strategic lines of action and the concrete measures under ReArm Europe, and evaluates them in light of failing forward, neofunctional, and intergovernmental dynamics.

The Readiness 2030/ReArm Europe plan provides a high-level blueprint for what Europe needs to do by the end of the decade to credibly defend itself. It identifies three lines of action for the EU and member states): closing critical capability gaps urgently and supporting the defense industry, and preparing for future long-term defense needs and pushing for a more integrated defense market, ensuring full readiness by 2030 for extreme contingencies, such as an expansion of the current conflict in Ukraine (European Commission 2025). The White Paper also situates itself in a broader policy continuum: it will be followed by a "Preparedness Union Strategy" covering all hazards (not just military) and an Internal Security Strategy, to ensure coherence between external defense and internal security preparedness (European Commission 2025).

Notably, the White Paper highlights specific capability gaps Europe must address, echoing analyses by the European Defence Agency and other. For example, the white paper specifically points towards shortages in air and missile defense, heavy weaponry, ammunition, and high-end enablers (intelligence and surveillance, cyber defenses, etc.)

Alongside the strategic vision, the Commission introduced actionable components as a part of ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030. As Commission President von der Leyen described, this "ambitious defence package" is about providing financial levers to propel the needed buildup (European Commission 2025). ReArm Europe is structured around giving countries more money and flexibility to invest in defense. Its major elements include:

1. Security Action for Europe (SAFE) – €150 billion joint borrowing for defense loans: The headline proposal is for the EU to raise up to €150 billion on capital markets and lend this to member states to finance defense projects (European Commission 2025). This mirrors the NextGenerationEU model used by the EU to fund recovery from the COVID pandemic, with one crucial difference: SAFE would include only loans and not grants (Strupczewski and Gray 2025). By using the EU's credit rating and borrowing capacity, states would get favorable financing with lower interest and, ideally, an impetus to invest jointly.
2. National Fiscal Flexibility & "Defence Escape Clause" – The Commission also proposed to relax EU fiscal rules to accommodate higher defense spending. Specifically, it "invited Member States to activate the national escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact" for defense investments (European Commission 2025). This aims to remove the strict

constraints that are currently placed on the debt to GDP ratio of EU members states, removing defense spending from the ratio's calculation and allowing for higher spending.

3. European Investment Bank (EIB) Lending Reform – The EIB, often called the EU's bank, historically has been restricted from investing in any defense project. Under pressure from member states and the Commission, the EIB moved to lift its self-imposed limits on defense financing as part of the ReArm Europe agenda (Strupczewski and Gray 2025). On 4 March 2025, EIB President Nadia Calviño proposed significant changes: allowing unlimited loans for non-lethal defense capacities, encouraging commercial banks to do the same, and treating defense akin to sustainability or cohesion in importance (Clapp et.al. 2025).

In sum, the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 Plan leverages financial integration in service of defense goals, while also outlining what those defense goals are. It aims to mobilize the oft-cited figure of "€800 billion" for European defense, this number is arrived at by adding the potential €650 billion in extra national spending (if all member states use the fiscal escape clause fully) to to the €150 billion in EU loans (Beetsma et.al. 2025).

The proposals triggered considerable debate. Leaders broadly acknowledged this was an important first step but opinions diverged on the funding model (Strupczewski and Gray 2025). Countries like Poland and the Baltic states, who feel the most acute threat from Russia, argued that grants (direct EU funding) would be more effective than loans. The worry being that loans add debt and may not entice all governments – Poland's defense minister flatly said grants "would be more effective" (Strupczewski and Gray 2025). France, too, had advocated a solidarity-based fund (reflecting President Macron's calls for European "defence bonds" earlier)

(Smith-Meyer 2024). Germany and the Netherlands, historically advocates of more frugal European economic policy, however, opposed joint grants or a fully mutualized fund, wary of setting a precedent for EU debt for military spending (Strupczewski and Gray 2025). The compromise – loans only – clearly reflects German influence, given Germany's aversion to perpetual transfers and its preference that each state remain responsible for its debt. Southern countries with high debt (e.g. Italy, Greece) had mixed views: they welcome flexibility on deficits but may be hesitant to take on more loans. Greek PM Mitsotakis, while welcoming the plan, emphasized ensuring fairness for all states regardless of current spending (Strupczewski and Gray 2025). This implies negotiations are likely ahead on how loans are allocated or possibly subsidized.

The Readiness 2030 and ReArm Europe initiatives, perhaps more than any prior EU defense effort, blur the lines between traditionally separate policy areas. Clearly, these measures are crisis-driven. The immediate triggers were Russia's escalation and the shock of a U.S. retreat. The EU responded not by treaty change or structural reforms that move towards a defense union, but by creatively stretching existing frameworks a hallmark of failing forward theory. The use of Article 122 TFEU is instructive: it avoids both national vetoes and the normal legislative process, allowing action despite political/legal constraints, but it is by nature an emergency, temporary device (Youngs 2025). This is reminiscent of the Eurozone crisis response, where Article 122 was used for financial stability mechanisms before eventually formalizing some in treaties. In defense, failing forward suggests the EU is again taking steps that solve an immediate coordination problem but do so incompletely. As some analysts argue, the plan lacks enforcement mechanisms, it doesn't ensure countries will coordinate or that outcomes will be

optimal for collective defense (Beetsma et.al. 2025). If some states don't invest or coordinate, Europe could face another crisis scenario originating from this partial integration that leads to new gaps or imbalances, prompting another cycle of fixes later. In other words, ReArm Europe might stave off a short-term collapse of defense effort, but the deeper problem of establishing a sustainable, collective defense capacity could remain unresolved, setting the stage for future reforms (perhaps a true EU defense fund or permanent capability arrangements) if crises persist. We already see hints: experts call for planning a next step where common borrowing finances genuine European projects, not just national ones (Beetsma et al. 2025). Failing forward thus captures the iterative nature of what is happening – each crisis pushes integration a bit further but stops short of a complete solution, requiring another push later.

Comparing the EU's New Developments with its Initial Response

Comparing the EU's initial defense integration responses to the Ukraine war with the post-2023 initiatives first reveal a shift from improvised, stop-gap measures toward more structured, ambitious projects. The early-war measures, exemplified by the EPF's use for Ukraine, the EDIRPA joint procurement act, and one-off efforts like the ASAP regulation, were characterized by urgency and pragmatism more than long-term design. In 2022, as war erupted, the priority was to enable immediate military aid and shore up unity. However, many of the expected results and outcomes of the EU's policies did not come to manifest. By mid-2023, for example, it became clear that Europe would miss the 1-million shells target it promised to Ukraine; only about half could be delivered by the original deadline, forcing the deadline to be pushed to end-2024 (Khalilova 2024). In other words, the initial response, though bold, overpromised relative to Europe's capacity. These early initiatives shared common traits: short

time horizons, relatively small budgets (especially compared to the scale of the war), and a somewhat piecemeal approach. Each addressed a specific gap (financing donations, coordinating orders, boosting production) rather than providing a holistic strategy. Political coordination was ad hoc: largely through the Foreign Affairs Council (for the EPF and ASAP) and hurried Commission proposal. Strategic coherence was secondary to getting agreements in Council. In essence, the initial phase of 2022–early 2023 was about "plugging leaks" in Europe's defenses under crisis conditions.

In contrast, the post-2023 initiatives (EDIS, Defence Readiness 2030/ReArm Europe) reflect a more deliberate and institutionally ambitious turn in EU defense integration. By late 2023, EU actors recognized that ad hoc fixes were not enough to address deeper structural problems, and that a more forward-looking framework was needed. The European Council's December 2023 conclusions explicitly called for boosting the Union's defense readiness and strengthening the European defense industry in light of lessons from Ukraine (Clapp 2024). This political guidance set the stage for the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS), unveiled by the Commission in March 2024 as a comprehensive blueprint for the next decade (Khalilova 2024). EDIS differs markedly from the initial war measures in scope and ambition. It not only diagnoses Europe's defense-industrial shortfalls but also sets clear quantitative goals for improvement – such as raising joint procurement to 40% of total defense acquisition by 2030 and dramatically increasing the share of European-made equipment in national arsenals (Scazzieri 2025). These targets signal a move toward deeper integration: if met, they would indicate a significant convergence of defense planning and a partial "Europeanization" of military supply, far beyond what was contemplated pre-2022. Rather than let EDIRPA and ASAP lapse in 2025,

EDIS would extend such support through 2027 and build on it with new mechanisms (Scazzieri 2025). It seeks to create enduring structures, like the Defence Industrial Readiness Board to coordinate planning and identify common capability needs (Scazzieri 2025). It also innovates with incentives: for example, EDIS's idea for SEAP would allow groups of countries to form legal entities for joint procurement, rewarded by EU funding top-ups and tax exemptions (Scazzieri 2025). Such institutional creativity was absent in the frantic first-year response; it indicates learning and a willingness to tackle underlying disincentives that historically kept countries from co-procuring weapons. Additionally, EDIS proposes a security of supply regime – ensuring that in crises, European industry can prioritize EU orders – which had been too politically sensitive to agree on during the initial ASAP talks (Scazzieri 2025). Now, with more time and reflection, even this thorny issue is on the table. In short, the post-2023 agenda is about consolidating and deepening integration: turning emergency measures into permanent policy and addressing long-term readiness. Finally, the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 Plan pushed the envelope further by tackling the question of resources on a grand scale. While EDIS/EDIP focus on industrial coordination and modest EU budget funds, the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 Plan grapples with financing the massive investment gap in European defense. Proposing to leverage over €800 billion in defense spending by the end of the decade through a mix of national and EU-level measures (Clapp et.al. 2025).

Key differences between the initial responses and the post-2023 initiatives can therefore be summarized as follows. First, institutional ambition and coherence have grown. Early measures were disparate and largely reactive, whereas newer initiatives form part of a coherent strategy (EDIS) and plan (ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030) – aligning industrial policy,

capability development, and financial tools toward a common vision of a more autonomous European defense by 2030. Second, political coordination has deepened: what began as primarily intergovernmental crisis management is evolving into a hybrid governance structure involving the Commission, Council, and even the Parliament to some extent (through co-legislation on industrial programs and oversight debates). The establishment of coordination bodies like the planned Defence Industrial Readiness Board in EDIP illustrates a more institutionalized coordination, supplanting the ad hoc "task forces" of 2022 (Scazzieri 2025). Third, the scale of resource allocation has increased exponentially. The EU went from mobilizing a few billion euros via the EPF and a few hundred million via new instruments, to discussing tens of billions in joint funds and enabling hundreds of billions in national spending. For example, the European Defence Fund (EDF) for research – €8 billion over 2021–27 – was topped up by €1.5 billion in 2024, and EDIS would add €1.5 billion more for procurement support (Clapp 2024); these sums, while still modest relative to national budgets, dwarf the initial EDIRPA pot. Even more dramatically, the €800 billion figure in the Readiness 2030 plan signals a recognition that order-of-magnitude larger investment is needed for credible defense. Fourth, the strategic coherence and scope of integration have broadened. The new initiatives, while certainly prompted by Ukraine, also look beyond it: they aim to prepare the EU for any future conflict scenario by 2030, to reduce strategic dependencies, whether on the U.S. or third-country defense supplies, and even to integrate Ukraine itself into Europe's defense ecosystem (Gilli et.al. 2025). This is a move beyond the here-and-now, toward deeper integration and strategic autonomy for its own sake.

Do these newer initiatives show evidence of learning or moving past the "failing forward" dynamic? In many respects, yes – they suggest that EU policy-makers drew lessons from the initial war response and are attempting to address root causes rather than just symptoms. For instance, one clear lesson was that Europe's defense industrial base lacked surge capacity; instead of waiting for another crisis to force another scramble, the EU is now investing upfront in resilient supply chains and spare production capacity through ASAP and proposed follow-ons (Scazzieri 2025). Another lesson learned was the importance of joint planning: the fragmented approach of each country fending for itself in arms procurement led to duplication and inefficiency, which the task forces of 2022 highlighted (Scazzieri 2025). The EDIS's creation of a permanent planning board and encouragement of joint projects directly responds to that, indicating institutional learning and a bid to escape the cycle of uncoordinated national responses. Furthermore, the shift to a more proactive strategy is itself a sign that the EU is trying to get ahead of the next crisis, rather than simply react. This could mark a tentative step beyond pure failing forward, towards a more intentional integration. The fact that the EU is developing indicators to track progress and linking defense with broader EU policies by inviting the European Investment Bank to adapt its lending policy for defense shows a degree of forward planning that goes beyond crisis management. That said, it is premature to declare the failing forward dynamic overcome. Many of these post-2023 initiatives are nascent or proposals; their implementation will test whether the EU truly moves into a new phase of deeper integration or falls back into familiar patterns. Skeptics might argue that ReArm/Readiness 2030, for all its ambition, still relies on intergovernmental earmarking (national spending commitments, loan instruments) rather than a fully communitarized defense budget – meaning the fundamental

constraint of state control remains. Indeed, concerns in the European Parliament about being sidelined echo the classic dilemma: when push comes to shove in high politics, member states prefer arrangements that limit supranational authority (Clapp et.al. 2025). In that sense, the dynamic of incrementalism under state oversight persists. Moreover, the true test of "deeper integration" will be whether these plans actually deliver capabilities and changes on the ground by 2030. If they fall short – for example, if countries still fail to meet the cooperative procurement targets or if industrial ramp-up lags – then the EU may find itself in another crisis (perhaps a future conflict or security emergency) with lingering gaps, prompting yet another cycle of reactive reforms. This would confirm that failing forward is still at work. On the other hand, if by anticipating needs and acting collectively now the EU manages to significantly strengthen its defense capacity, it will have broken the vicious cycle and moved toward a more sustainable integration model.

In conclusion, failing forward continues to provide a strong explanatory framework for the sequence of events: the EU learned by failing, each shortfall giving rise to a new, somewhat more integrated solution – from EPF to EDIRPA, from EDIRPA to ASAP, and from those to EDIS and Readiness 2030. There are signs of genuine institutional learning and a desire for deeper integration. If these seeds take root, the EU's response to the next security crisis may not need to be another case of "failing forward" but could instead be the result of having failed forward enough in 2022–2025 to finally succeed when it truly counts. The coming years, particularly the implementation of EDIS and the realization of the Defence Readiness 2030 vision, will determine whether Europe's defense integration remains a story of crisis-driven catch-up or becomes one of sustained strategic consolidation. The evidence so far tilts toward

cautious optimism: Europe has never been more integrated in defense than it is now, and the trajectory set in 2023–2025 suggests an EU increasingly capable of "learning forward" – turning past failures into a platform for a more united and prepared future.

CONCLUSION

The Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine fundamentally reshaped the European security environment, acting both as a catalyst and a stress test for the European Union's long-fragmented defense integration project. This thesis has undertaken a comprehensive analysis of the EU's evolving role in defense integration from 2022 through early 2025, applying the "failing forward" theory of European integration as its primary analytical framework. Through case studies ranging from the rapid expansion of the European Peace Facility (EPF), to the creation of EDIRPA and ASAP, and finally to the more strategic proposals embodied by EDIS and the Readiness 2030/ReArm Europe Plan, the research traces a clear pattern: the EU's defense integration has advanced, often in unprecedented ways, but largely through incremental, crisis-driven, and politically constrained steps.

The findings of this thesis confirm that the EU's initial post-invasion responses were highly reactive and piecemeal, in line with classic failing forward dynamics. The EPF, though dramatically expanded to finance lethal aid to Ukraine, remained structurally fragile, reliant on intergovernmental contributions and unanimity. The EPF's ad hoc nature meant that each additional tranche of funding had to be negotiated separately, often exposing divisions among member states and introducing delay. These shortcomings generated new pressures for reform, leading to the creation of EDIRPA and ASAP—each designed to address the immediate gaps but themselves constrained by modest funding, temporary mandates, and legal workarounds to sidestep treaty limitations on defense spending. The post-2023 initiatives analyzed in this thesis, particularly EDIS and the Readiness 2030/ReArm Europe Plan, mark a significant shift toward greater strategic ambition and coherence. EDIS laid out the EU's first industrial strategy for

defense, while Readiness 2030 mobilized financial instruments on a far larger scale, proposing joint borrowing and fiscal flexibility for defense investments. Yet despite their broader vision, these initiatives still bear the hallmarks of failing forward: they rely on voluntary participation, preserve national sovereignty over key decisions, and are built on ad hoc legal and financial foundations rather than fundamental treaty reforms. A central insight of this research is that the failing forward framework offers a particularly powerful lens for understanding not only the sequence of EU defense initiatives but also their persistent structural limitations. Failing forward captures the EU's tendency to respond to crises with incomplete reforms, which in turn sow the seeds of future problems, necessitating further rounds of crisis-driven integration. This model explains why, despite historic advances since 2022, the EU continues to struggle to build a fully coherent and autonomous defense capacity.

Critically, this thesis has also highlighted the deep-seated structural constraints that prevent the EU from adopting more comprehensive solutions—constraints that have repeatedly shaped and limited defense integration efforts both before and after the Ukraine war. First among these is the persistent fragmentation of European defense production along national lines. As noted throughout the thesis, the absence of a unified defense market has led to duplication of capabilities, inefficiencies in procurement, and competition among member states for limited industrial resources. National preferences for preserving domestic defense industries have repeatedly undercut efforts to pool procurement and standardize equipment, as seen in the limited scope and slow rollout of EDIRPA and the cautious design of the SEAP framework proposed under EDIS. Further, treaty-based legal constraints severely limit the EU's ability to finance defense integration directly. As analyzed in the thesis, the EU treaties prohibit the use of

the regular EU budget for military expenditures, forcing policymakers to resort to creative workarounds like the off-budget EPF, the industrial competitiveness justification for EDIRPA, and the emergency Article 122 basis for the ReArm Europe Plan. These legal gymnastics have enabled incremental progress, but at the cost of institutional coherence and political sustainability. Without treaty changes—which would require unanimous agreement and likely national referenda—the EU will continue to face severe restrictions on its ability to act as a unified defense actor. Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, defense remains a domain of high politics where national sovereignty is strongly guarded. The requirement for unanimity on key decisions, the voluntary nature of most joint initiatives, and the tendency for member states to prioritize national procurement and strategic interests over collective goals have all acted as brakes on deeper integration. Even in the face of a major security crisis, efforts to create joint defense funds, procurement programs, and production capacities have been carefully circumscribed to avoid any perception of supranational control. The political compromises embedded in EDIS and Readiness 2030 illustrate the enduring strength of intergovernmentalism in shaping EU defense policy.

Despite these formidable obstacles, the trajectory of EU defense integration since 2022 shows signs of institutional learning and adaptive capacity. The shift from ad hoc emergency responses like ASAP to more strategic frameworks like EDIS and Readiness 2030 suggests a growing recognition among EU actors of the need for long-term planning and permanent structures. The establishment of coordination mechanisms like the Defence Industrial Readiness Board, the proposal for joint borrowing through SAFE, and the push for joint capability development under SEAP all indicate that lessons are being drawn from the failures and

limitations of earlier initiatives. Nevertheless, whether these efforts can move the EU beyond the failing forward cycle remains uncertain. The upcoming negotiations for the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) will be a crucial test. If the EU can secure dedicated, long-term funding for defense initiatives and institutionalize mechanisms for joint procurement and capability planning, it may finally begin to consolidate its defense integration efforts. If, however, political divisions, national industrial interests, and legal constraints continue to dominate, the EU risks perpetuating a pattern of incomplete reforms that leave it vulnerable to future crises.

In conclusion, this thesis has demonstrated that while the EU's defense integration since 2022 has been remarkable in speed, ambition, and scope, it remains fundamentally shaped by the logic of failing forward: reactive, partial, and politically constrained. The Union has moved farther than ever before toward a coordinated defense posture, but it has done so through crisis-induced improvisation rather than cohesive strategic planning. Structural barriers—fragmented defense industries, NATO dependency, legal constraints, and sovereignty concerns—continue to limit the depth and coherence of integration. Sustained progress will depend not only on the continuation of external pressures but also on the EU's willingness to confront and overcome these internal structural obstacles. Only by doing so can the EU move from a pattern of failing forward toward a more sustainable and autonomous defense integration model.

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