



Rearming Europe: Non-linear Dynamics and the Future of EU Defence Integration

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Abstract

European defence integration has long been constrained by institutional fragmentation and slow intergovernmental coordination. Recent geopolitical shocks, most notably Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, have disrupted this pattern, creating political urgency and exposing capability gaps. This study examines how two core EU defence instruments, the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), have responded under conditions of non-linear politics. Using a comparative case study approach and document analysis, the study finds that the EDF offers supranational financial flexibility but reacts slowly to crisis, while PESCO enables political engagement but lacks binding coordination. The analysis shows that crisis-driven momentum can trigger institutional adaptation, yet structural asymmetries and voluntary participation remain key constraints. Readiness 2030, the EU's latest defence initiative, emerges as a strategic recalibration that seeks to address these limitations through conditional joint procurement, fiscal flexibility, and aligned defence planning. The findings suggest that non-linear political dynamics can accelerate reform, but long-term effectiveness depends on political commitment and institutional learning.

Keywords: non-linear politics, European Defence Fund, PESCO, strategic autonomy, Readiness 2030

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1. Introduction

“EU leaders hail 'historic' decision to boost defence” (Rankin, 2025). This headline captures the significance and urgency of Readiness 2030, the European Commission’s latest initiative to strengthen the European Union’s (EU) defence in response to rising geopolitical instability (European Commission, 2025). For decades, EU security and defence policy was characterised by fragmentation and slow progress constrained by intergovernmental bargaining and the absence of sustained political momentum (Bickerton, Hodson & Pieter, 2015). Yet, recent developments suggest a possible turning point (Wolff, 2024).

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 served as the immediate catalyst for renewed defence efforts, however, it did not occur in isolation (European Union, 2022a). It accelerated pre-existing moves toward a more autonomous defence policy. Earlier political shocks such as Brexit, the Trump administration's unpredictability, and the U.S. pivot to the Indo-Pacific, had already strained reliance on external security guarantees (Fiott, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the EU’s internal vulnerabilities, while concerns over dependence on non-EU defence suppliers continued to grow (Dowd & Cook, 2022). Ukraine’s invasion thus acted less as a singular cause than as an accelerator of deeper geopolitical shifts.

Strategic autonomy, the EU’s ability to define and implement defence policies independently, is at the core of Readiness 2030 (European Commission, 2025; European Parliament, 2022; ESDC, 2022). It represents the EU’s most ambitious initiative yet, combining joint defence financing¹ and operational capability². However, whether this political momentum will translate into real defence capacity remains uncertain. This uncertainty is shaped by non-linear politics, where unexpected crises, shifting alliances,

¹Joint defence financing refers to a system where multiple entities, such as countries or organizations, pool resources and share the costs of defence-related activities, like research, development, or procurement of equipment rather than each entity funding these activities independently (NATO, 2024).

²Operational capability refers to a system’s ability to effectively perform its intended functions in a real-world operational environment, encompassing readiness, training, and available resources to achieve military objectives (Wu, Melnyk, & Flynn, 2010).

and external pressures simultaneously disrupt and accelerate defence integration, challenging the EU's ability to establish a cohesive and sustainable defence framework (Bickerton, 2015; Houdé & Wessel, 2023).

This research uses the concept of non-linear politics to understand recent developments in European defence policy, particularly the rearmament efforts following geopolitical shocks. Unlike linear models, which assume that change follows a predictable path based on long-term planning and political consensus, non-linear politics is shaped by disruption (Hagh, 2017; Zandee et al., 2025). External shocks and rapidly evolving security environments demand reactive decision-making, often bypassing established procedures. While this unpredictability can challenge institutional stability, it also enables strategic improvisation and adaptive policy responses (Dowd & Cook, 2022). In this context, non-linear politics captures a shift toward more ad-hoc, event-driven policymaking in European defence.

Recent political shocks have pressured EU defence institutions to act faster than their usual pace. Initiatives like Readiness 2030 respond to urgent threats, within an institutional environment not designed for rapid action (European Commission, 2025). EU defence governance remains slow by design: complex, multi-level, and shaped by long-standing procedures (Smith, 2017). This creates a mismatch: non-linear politics demands flexibility and rapid action but EU defence institutions often rely on consensus and coordination. The result is a growing tension between political urgency and institutional capacity. Scholars have noted that political disruption can open windows of opportunity for rapid change, but it also reveals the structural limits of EU defence governance (Houdé & Wessel, 2023; Wolff, 2024). To examine how this tension plays out, this study focuses on two key mechanisms of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP): the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).

The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), established under the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, provides the institutional foundation for EU defence. It allows the EU to conduct peacekeeping missions, military operations, and capacity-building efforts either independently or in cooperation with NATO and the United Nations (European Parliament, 2025; Smith, 2017). Through the CSDP, member states coordinate defence policies and contribute resources to joint missions while maintaining national sovereignty (Houdé & Wessel, 2023). The CSDP thus embodies the EU's ambition for a cohesive and autonomous security framework (European Parliament, 2025). Central to this framework are two instruments, the EDF and PESCO, which aim to strengthen EU defence capacity through financial and operational coordination respectively, reflecting the EU's evolving approach to defence integration (European Parliament, 2025; European Security and Defence College, 2022; Sweeney & Winn, 2024).

The EDF is the EU's main financial instrument for supporting defence research and capability. It funds joint military projects and technological advances to reduce reliance on external actors and enhance strategic autonomy. Its shifting funding priorities reflect how external shocks influence EU strategic choices (Håkansson, 2021). PESCO facilitates operational and strategic coordination between member states. Unlike the centrally managed EDF, PESCO relies on direct cooperation between members to enhance readiness and develop shared military capabilities, reinforcing the EU's ability to respond collectively to security challenges (European Parliament, 2025).

Readiness 2030 was formally launched in early 2025 as the European Commission's response to persistent capability gaps exposed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and wider geopolitical instability. It was launched in *The White Paper for European Defence - Readiness 2030*, which is the strategic document that outlines the framework and priorities of what was initially called *ReArm Europe* and later rebranded as *Readiness 2030*. The White Paper serves as a foundational policy framework, guiding the implementation of Readiness 2030's objectives and providing Member States with a structured approach

to align national defence efforts with EU-level ambitions. The priorities include accelerating joint procurement³, enhancing industrial resilience, and coordinating national defence spending with EU-level objectives (European Commission, 2025). Readiness 2030 is not a standalone funding instrument, but a strategic policy package that builds on existing tools like the EDF and PESCO. ReArm Europe was rebranded to Readiness 2030 to better reflect its long-term vision and to avoid the more militaristic tone of the original title, which some member states considered politically sensitive (Euronews, 2025; European Commission, 2025b).

The rebranding came with a phased implementation. As part of it, the Commission introduced the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument, offering up to €150 billion in low-interest loans for joint procurement by at least two Member States. Unlike the EDF's multi-annual R&D grants, SAFE supports rapid, large-scale acquisition of urgently needed military equipment. It was designed to bridge the gap between long-term capability planning and short-term operational readiness (European Commission, 2025a). Complementing this, the Commission activated the Stability and Growth Pact's general escape clause for defence spending in 2025. This allows Member States to exceed the 3% deficit threshold when investing in military readiness, unlocking up to €650 billion in additional national spending capacity over four years (European Parliament, 2025a). Together, these developments show that Readiness 2030 is already evolving into a broader institutional framework, combining political ambition with concrete financial tools.

While politically framed as a turning point for European defence, Readiness 2030's design remains contested. Smaller member states have raised concerns about industrial concentration and unequal access to procurement opportunities (Santopinto, 2025). Fiscal debates have also emerged, with several governments advocating for exemptions from EU budget rules for defence-related spending

³Joint procurement refers to the collective acquisition of military equipment by EU member states, often through coordinated planning or pooled financial instruments, to reduce costs and foster interoperability." (Fiott, 2019)

(European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025). The initiative is still evolving, with proposals for stronger institutional governance and long-term integration with the European Defence Industrial Strategy (Wolff, 2024). Understanding how EDF and PESCO have handled similar pressures and how these initiatives interact with the unpredictable forces of non-linear politics is essential for assessing whether Readiness 2030's current trajectory is sustainable or needs to be reframed, as well as for evaluating the broader prospects and limitations of EU defence integration. Figure 1 below summarizes the core functions of CSDP, EDF, PESCO, and Readiness 2030, and their institutional interconnections.

Institution/Instrument	Type	Purpose / Function	Relation between bodies
CSDP	Institutional Framework	Legal and operational basis for EU defence and security activities. Enables civilian and military missions, often with NATO or UN cooperation.	Umbrella under which EDF and PESCO operate. Sets the strategic and legal context for EU-level defence initiatives.
EDF	Financial Instrument	Funds joint defence R&D and capability development among EU members to strengthen the European defence industry and reduce dependence on third countries.	Supports PESCO and other projects financially. Encourages industrial collaboration to meet CSDP goals.
PESCO	Collaborative Operational Framework	Allows groups of EU states to cooperate more closely on defence. Focuses on joint projects, interoperability, and military readiness.	Enables practical implementation of defence goals. Can be supported by EDF funding. Contributes to CSDP objectives.
Readiness 2030	Strategic Policy Initiative	Aims to accelerate defence procurement, refill military stockpiles, and strengthen the EU's industrial and operational readiness in response to urgent security challenges.	A political and funding accelerator. Complements EDF and PESCO by pushing faster implementation under CSDP coordination.

Figure 1: Key EU Defence Bodies and Their Functions

Source: Author's own illustration based on European Commission (2025); European Parliament (2025); Smith (2017); Houdé & Wessel (2023).

1.1 Research Gap and Theoretical Relevance

Existing research covers the institutional development of the CSDP (e.g., Smith, 2017), the role of the EDF in financing defence innovation (e.g., Håkansson, 2021), and the operational outcomes of PESCO (e.g., Rutigliano, 2023). But most studies treat these mechanisms in isolation. Their interaction, especially how financial support (EDF) might reinforce operational coordination (PESCO), or vice-versa remains underexplored.

Debates on strategic autonomy, particularly regarding NATO and US security guarantees (Fiott, 2018), have gained visibility. Yet little attention has been paid to how shocks under conditions of non-linear politics, disrupt or accelerate EU defence governance. Existing literature assumes that integration follows a slow, incremental path (Smith, 2017). This research addresses that gap by analysing how geopolitical shocks have shaped the behaviour of EDF and PESCO.

While the EU operates several defence-related instruments, such as the European Peace Facility (EPF) and the European Defence Agency (EDA), these mechanisms primarily support external crisis management or internal coordination without directly generating financial investment or operational military integration (European Defence Agency, n.d.; European Union External Action Service, 2020). In contrast, EDF and PESCO translate political momentum into concrete financial and operational outputs, making them central to this study (Blockmans & Crosson, 2021; Håkansson, 2021). EDF channels supranational funding into joint research and capability development. PESCO enables member-state cooperation in planning and readiness.

Understanding how these instruments respond to non-linear shocks reveals how different institutional logics condition the EU's capacity to act strategically under pressure. This analysis provides lessons for (re)designing new initiatives like Readiness 2030. In particular, it remains unclear whether

successful EDF-funded capability development can reinforce political momentum for PESCO, or whether underperformance in PESCO could undermine confidence in future EDF allocations. By evaluating these dynamics, this study offers an early assessment of how Readiness 2030 can better align incentives, reduce fragmentation, and sustain defence integration under non-linear conditions.

This research applies non-linear political theory and feedback dynamics to analyze recent developments in EU defence integration, arguing that EU defence policy evolves unpredictably in response to political shocks. Unlike linear theories of integration, this framework suggests that sudden events like war or geopolitical pressure can push existing institutions to adapt in unexpected ways. These disruptions create brief windows of opportunity for change, with the outcome largely depending on how effectively current mechanisms like the EDF and PESCO respond (Kingdon, 2002). By examining these cases, this thesis explores whether these instruments became more effective under pressure or simply continued along predetermined paths, highlighting how political urgency can reshape institutional roles and decision-making in EU defence policy.

1.2 Research Focus and Structure

This study investigates how non-linear political dynamics, characterised by unpredictability and driven by external shocks, influence the course of EU defence integration. It selects the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) as core instruments through which political momentum is translated into financial investment and operational cooperation. Examining their responses to non-linear pressures offers critical insights for the future design and strategic coherence of initiatives such as Readiness 2030.

The central research question is:

“How do non-linear political dynamics shape the EU’s defence integration instruments, and what institutional lessons from EDF and PESCO can inform the improvement of both existing tools and the design of a more resilient Readiness 2030?”

Two sub-questions will guide the analysis:

1. How have the EDF and PESCO responded to recent geopolitical shocks under conditions of non-linear politics, and what does this reveal about the institutional strengths and weaknesses of EU defence integration mechanisms?
2. How can lessons from EDF and PESCO be applied to improve the institutional design and strategic impact of Readiness 2030?

The remainder of the thesis proceeds as follows. First, the theoretical framework outlines key concepts, including non-linear politics, strategic autonomy, and feedback dynamics. Second, the methods section explains the comparative case study approach. Then, the case studies analyse EDF and PESCO’s responses to political shocks before the section on the comparative analysis identifies patterns across the cases. Finally, the conclusion summarises the findings and offers recommendations for the strategic development of Readiness 2030.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Non-Linear Politics

Non-linear politics describes frameworks that change not through gradual reform but through shocks and sudden realignments. Unlike linear models, where policy evolves through long-term planning and consensus, non-linear politics reflects political systems that are sensitive to disruption. External and internal events, crises, war, or strategic surprises trigger fast and sometimes disproportionate change (Hagh, 2017; Zandee et al., 2025).

This unpredictability creates space for institutional adaptation but also exposes structural limits. Systems shaped by non-linear pressures tend to be reactive, relying on ad-hoc decision-making rather than pre-established frameworks. In the EU, where defence governance traditionally follows slow, consensus-based processes, there is a mismatch between political urgency and institutional capacity (Dowd & Cook, 2022; Wolff, 2024).

A key insight from non-linear theory is Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET). PET explains why long periods of policy stability are interrupted by sudden, transformative shifts. According to PET, political systems tend to go through extended phases of stability, where institutional inertia and path dependency dominate policymaking. These periods are then punctuated by abrupt and dramatic changes when external shocks or political realignments disrupt the existing equilibrium.

Kingdon's (2002) Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) similarly explains how change depends on the convergence of problem, policy, and political streams. Crises can align these independent streams and create temporary "policy windows" for major change. Non-linear politics activates these windows. Simultaneously, institutional resistance often slows or reverses change. Early policy choices create path

dependencies and self-reinforcing dynamics. As Pierson (2000) argues, once a path is taken, the political and financial costs of changing course increase. This creates “lock-in” effects that constrain flexibility, even in the face of clear shocks.

Non-linear shocks can temporarily break these patterns. In such moments, strategic recalibrations and political agency become crucial. Banda (2024) identifies political willingness as the capacity of political leaders to push for policy change even when institutional or geopolitical constraints are present. Leaders must seize moments of uncertainty to push through reform. These are windows where institutional inertia can be challenged, and defence integration can move forward (Albright, 2011; Banda, 2024; Collier & Collier, 2002).

In fragmented systems like the EU, the effects of non-linear politics are uneven. Multi-level governance⁴ introduces competing interests and coordination problems among actors operating at different institutional levels. As a result, political momentum may not lead to coherent outcomes (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Positive feedback loops, where early success generates further support, can accelerate change, but fragmented authority and divergent national preferences can also produce contradictions, delay or backlash (Pierson, 2000; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010)

Readiness 2030 illustrates how non-linear politics can work in practice. Instead of following traditional planning cycles, it mobilized around 800€ billion in funding, bypassing usual procedures to fast-track procurement and capability development (European Commission, 2025).

Overall, non-linear politics can push the EU to act faster than its institutions are designed for. As Smith (2017) and Wolff (2024) argue, it also reveals the limits: even when political momentum is high,

⁴Although Multi-Level Governance (MLG) is a core concept in EU decision-making, it is not central to the analysis presented in this paper. As such, references to MLG are limited, and a deep understanding of the theory is not required for the purposes of this study. In brief, MLG describes a governance structure where political authority is distributed across multiple interconnected levels: local, regional, national, and supranational. It emphasizes the involvement of diverse actors and institutions in policy-making processes, reflecting the complexity and interdependence of modern governance systems within the EU (Hooghe & Marks, 2003)

the EU must navigate budget rules, intergovernmental bargaining and institutional complexity. In this sense, non-linear politics not only explains recent patterns of institutional change but also provides a useful framework for assessing how future initiatives, such as Readiness 2030, can be structured to better navigate strategic uncertainty.

2.2. Strategic Autonomy

Strategic autonomy refers to the European Union's ability to act independently in security and defence while remaining open to cooperation with partners when necessary (Damen, 2022). In defence policy, it emphasizes reducing reliance on NATO and the United States, and enhancing the EU's capacity for independent operations (EEAS, 2016).

The concept gained traction after repeated disruptions to the transatlantic alliance. The Lisbon Treaty (2009) institutionalized the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), providing the legal framework for EU-level cooperation. However, operational dependence on NATO structures and U.S. capabilities persisted (Borrell, 2020). The 2013 European Council report identified strategic autonomy as a political priority, especially in strengthening the European defence industrial base (Damen, 2022; European Council, 2013). The 2016 EU Global Strategy further formalised this, calling on the EU to "act autonomously when and where necessary, and with partners wherever possible" (EEAS, 2016).

Several events turned this concept from theory into political urgency. The Trump presidency and Brexit raised doubts about the reliability of traditional transatlantic security guarantees (Damen, 2022). Besides, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 revealed major gaps in Europe's defence capacity. These shocks pushed EU leaders to reassess the bloc's ability to act without external support (Borrell, 2020; Damen, 2022; European Parliament, 2025).

These developments signal a shift from a crisis management focus toward collective defence and deterrence, accelerated by Readiness 2030. Strategic autonomy has also reinforced the EU's defence industrial base by reducing dependency on third-country suppliers (Berg et al., 2025; Csernaton, & Oliveira Martins, 2019). Readiness 2030 linked national and EU defence spending, creating new financial incentives and aligning funding priorities with urgent military needs. EDF allocations were increased for technologies such as counter-drone systems and missile defence, while PESCO launched projects focused on logistics and munitions (European Commission, 2025; European Defence Agency, n.d.; European Union, 2022b).

Strategic autonomy thus repositions the EU as a more capable and independent global security actor. While maintaining coordination with NATO and the United States, the EU is building the capacity to act independently when needed. This dual-track approach, balancing autonomy with cooperation, reflects the EU's strategic ambition to assert itself more confidently in an increasingly multipolar and uncertain world. Readiness 2030 is becoming the clearest manifestation of this ambition. It not only aims to fill immediate gaps but to also inject urgency into the defence integration process. Crucially, Readiness 2030 is reshaping the implementation of strategic autonomy by aligning national spending with EU-level instruments (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025). This initiative moves the debate from abstract autonomy to concrete coordination. Strategic autonomy now means more than long-term aspiration, it shapes real decisions about how and where the EU acts in global security.

2.3 Political Spillover and Feedback Dynamics

Defence integration refers to the process by which EU member states increasingly coordinate, align, and jointly develop their defence capabilities, operational planning, and procurement. It aims to reduce fragmentation and strengthen the EU's collective security capacity through both supranational funding and intergovernmental cooperation (European Parliament, 2025).

Political spillover occurs when progress in one policy area pressures other sectors to integrate further. In EU defence policy, it helps explain how initiatives like the EDF and PESCO can spark further integration across financial and operational domains (Niemann & Schmitter, 2009).

Unlike the predictable progression suggested by early neofunctionalist⁵ theory, spillover in defence policy is shaped by non-linear dynamics. Integration happens unevenly, often triggered by shocks (Banda, 2024; Niemann & Schmitter, 2009). Strategic disruptions can amplify positive feedback loops: successful outcomes in EDF or PESCO build trust and create momentum for deeper cooperation (Blockmans & Crosson, 2021; Cozar Murillo, 2022). For example, improvements in joint procurement or interoperability⁶ can encourage member states to align defence planning. EDF funding may strengthen shared capabilities, which then feed into PESCO operations. This creates a cycle where financial investment and operational coordination reinforce each other.

Spillover can also produce negative effects. Failed initiatives or political disagreement can lead to backlash or disengagement. Diverging threat perceptions, imbalances in industrial capacity, and disputes over funding distribution may weaken trust. Fragmented participation in PESCO, or uneven EDF allocations, can stall integration rather than support it (Center for American Progress, 2019; Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Going back to Kingdon's (2002) Multiple Streams Framework, it helps to clarify how political spillover interacts with non-linear conditions. Policy change happens when problem, policy, and political streams align to open a "window of opportunity." Positive spillover can facilitate this convergence by aligning institutional capacity, political support, and strategic urgency. Conversely, in fragmented governance systems, failed initiatives or geopolitical divergence can prevent this alignment, closing the window for integration and causing momentum to fade.

⁵Neofunctionalism, developed by Ernst B. Haas, explains European integration as a gradual process driven by economic cooperation and the "spillover effect," where integration in one sector creates momentum for integration in others. Supranational institutions like the European Commission play a central role in deepening cooperation, often pushing for further unification beyond the original scope. This theory suggests that once integration begins, it tends to expand across sectors, reinforcing political and economic ties among member states (Haas, 1958).

⁶"The ability of military equipment or groups to operate in conjunction with each other" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.).

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This research adopts a comparative case study approach to examine how two institutional mechanisms, EDF and PESCO, respond differently to similar political pressures within the same political framework. By analyzing two distinct but related cases, the study aims to identify patterns of institutional behavior and strategic adaptation under non-linear political developments and derive insights to guide the future development of Readiness 2030. The comparative element will highlight both converging and diverging institutional responses, contributing to a deeper understanding of how EU defence policy evolves under political uncertainty.

The research will be qualitative in nature, focusing on understanding and interpreting political and institutional behaviors, which is well-suited to this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the political and strategic dimensions of EU defence policy. Qualitative research captures the fluidity and complexity of institutional processes and political responses. It enables the study to assess how political pressures influence decision-making, institutional alignment, and strategic outcomes within EDF and PESCO (Curry, 2017).

3.2 Data Collection

The research will rely on secondary data sources including European Commission communications and press releases, European Defence Agency (EDA) reports, Council of the European Union conclusions, and policy documents from the European External Action Service (EEAS). Policy briefs and analyses from EU-affiliated think tanks provide contextual insights and expert evaluations of EDF and PESCO's development. Peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly analyses further support the research, particularly regarding EU defence cooperation, strategic autonomy, and non-linear political

processes. Reports from reputable media outlets and specialised defence analysts are used to capture broader political narratives and recent developments.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis will proceed in two stages: thematic analysis followed by comparative analysis (Naem et al., 2023). This analysis follows a deductive approach, based on existing research on EU defence integration and institutional responses to political shocks. The analysis begins with established concepts and theories about how political pressures influence strategic adaptation and institutional alignment in EDF and PESCO. The deductive approach used starts with predefined ideas and tests their applicability to EDF and PESCO. However, elements of abductive reasoning are also incorporated, allowing for adjustments when findings deviate from theoretical expectations (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007).

Thematic analysis will identify patterns in how EDF and PESCO respond to political pressures. Themes such as political influence, strategic adaptation, and institutional alignment were pre-defined based on the theoretical framework. These themes will be used as analytical lenses to classify and interpret information from the aforementioned sources. Relevant data will be grouped under each theme and compared across the two case studies. Political influence will assess how recent geopolitical shocks have shaped institutional behavior, measured through shifts in official EU communication. Strategic adaptation will examine changes in funding priorities and operational objectives. Institutional alignment will explore whether EDF and PESCO have converged or diverged in their responses to political challenges, with increased coordination, streamlined decision-making, and shifts in defence procurement indicating higher adaptability.

The comparative analysis will highlight differences and similarities between EDF and PESCO in

terms of institutional responses, political sensitivity, and strategic outcomes, identifying key lessons for strengthening future initiatives such as Readiness 2030. Institutional responses will examine differences in funding, operational priorities, and decision-making. Political sensitivity will assess how each mechanism responds to shifting political pressures, while strategic outcomes will evaluate differences in policy results and capability development. This will isolate the political and institutional factors shaping strategic adaptation in EU defence policy.

3.4 Limitations

Some limitations and challenges are anticipated. Data accessibility may be restricted, as some internal decision-making processes within EDF and PESCO are not publicly documented. Political sensitivity may restrict the availability and accuracy of information, given the highly politicized nature of defence policy. Thematic analysis involves subjective interpretation, which will be mitigated by cross-referencing multiple sources to enhance objectivity and reliability. To address these challenges, and the potential bias in media or political commentary, data will be cross-verified with official reports and academic research. Cross-referencing among sources will help validate findings and reduce interpretation bias.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

All sources will be properly cited in accordance with academic standards, and intellectual property rights will be respected. Data handling will comply with institutional guidelines on research integrity, ensuring transparency and confidentiality where applicable.

4. Defence Integration: Comparative Case Study

The following section examines the responses of EDF and PESCO to geopolitical shocks. It is framed by the concepts of non-linear politics and the EU's quest for strategic autonomy. Each case study evaluates changes in funding, priorities, and cooperation and highlights major political or operational challenges. The case studies provide the empirical foundation for the comparative analysis, which will identify broader lessons for the development of Readiness 2030.

4.1. Case Study 1: European Defence Fund (EDF)

4.1.1 Background and Purpose

The European Defence Fund (EDF) is the EU's main financial instrument for supporting joint defence research and capability development among member states. Created in 2017 and officially launched under the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, the EDF is centrally managed by the European Commission (Håkansson, 2021). It provides up to 100% of funding for collaborative research and 80% for development, requiring cross-border industrial cooperation (Brehon, 2025). Its goal is to reduce fragmentation, promote interoperability, and bolster the EU's strategic autonomy in the defence sector.

While supranational in design, EDF programming still depends on consensus among member states, making it a hybrid form of governance: it combines central coordination with a need for political alignment. This makes it responsive to EU-level initiatives, but also sensitive to national vetoes and budget politics. This hybrid design, central coordination with national veto power, illustrates the kind of multi-level structure that reacts unevenly to non-linear shocks (Håkansson, 2021; Hooghe & Marks, 2003).

4.1.2 Response to Non-Linear Shocks

EDF's trajectory was altered by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Brehon, 2025). Although the fund had already been operational, the war exposed critical capability gaps and triggered an unprecedented political shift in EU defence policy. In that sense, the EDF's transformation is an example of reactive institutional adaptation, a response not planned but implemented under pressure.

As part of the early reaction, the Commission coordinated with member states to increase EDF funding by €1.5 billion on top of its initial €8 billion (Brehon, 2025). At the same time, other new instruments, such as the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) and the Ammunition Support Programme, were launched in parallel. These were designed to address short-term gaps particularly in ammunition stockpiles and joint procurement and while technically separate, they shared governance linkages and priorities with EDF (European Commission, 2024a, 2024b).

The EDF's evolution reflects how non-linear political shocks can produce initial ad-hoc adaptations, followed by more structured institutional responses. In the wake of the Ukraine war, the Commission increased EDF funding and shifted priorities toward critical shortfalls, such as ammunition, air defence, and cyber technologies. This reactive expansion reflects a punctuated response rather than long-term planning, suggesting institutional learning but not structural readiness (Brehon, 2025; Capano & Woo, 2017).

4.1.3 Shifting Priorities under Readiness 2030

The European Defence Agency's 2023 Capability Review identified critical shortfalls in air defence, cyber resilience, and ammunition stockpiles, revealing persistent gaps across EU member states. The EDF's priorities were already shifting in response to capability shortfalls identified in the EDA's

2023 review. Readiness 2030 later formalised this evolving agenda into a broader long-term strategy. The EDF responded by launching fast-track calls in these priority areas, while continuing to support innovation in emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and space surveillance (CER, 2025; European Defence Agency, 2023; European Commission, 2025; Ferguson & Sochacka, 2025).

This led to a dual-track structure; EDF now supports both long-term innovation and short-term procurement, combining structural capacity building with crisis responsiveness. The Commission also promoted EU-made defence systems to reduce reliance on non-EU suppliers, particularly the U.S. and Israel, and aligned EDF investments with the goals of the Strategic Compass⁷ which is essential to avoid fragmentation (European Commission, 2025; European External Action Service, 2022; European Union, 2022a). However, these efforts were not always mirrored at the national level. Some states, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, continued to prioritise bilateral procurements, often with non-EU defence industries (Santopinto, 2025; Wolff, 2024). This shift, while coordinated at EU level, continued to be undermined by national spending choices beyond EU instruments, highlighting the persistent asymmetry between EU ambition and member state autonomy.

4.1.4 Impact on Industrial Cooperation

The EDF's structure incentivises multinational industrial consortia, requiring participants from at least three different member states (European Commission, 2025; Håkansson, 2021). This supports transnational defence ecosystems and echoes the broader goals of industrial integration. In the context of Readiness 2030, these requirements took on renewed significance as the Commission sought to align national rearmament efforts with EU-level priorities (European Commission, 2025).

⁷"The Strategic Compass provides a shared assessment of the strategic environment in which the EU is operating and of the threats and challenges the Union faces" (European External Action Service, 2024)

EDF funding helped catalyse new cooperation among mid-sized defence firms, particularly in countries like Portugal, Sweden, and Romania (Brehon, 2025). However, imbalances persisted. Major players like France and Germany continued to dominate project leadership, while others struggled to secure meaningful roles. Some member states, especially Poland, remained largely outside EDF-supported projects, preferring bilateral arms deals with the U.S. or South Korea (Brehon, 2025; Santopinto, 2025).

This uneven participation shows the limits of institutional incentives when national interests diverge. The EDF provides a stable platform for coordination, but cannot override sovereignty or strategic culture. Still, it has contributed to strengthening the R&D intensive sectors like radar, secure communications, and AI-enabled targeting systems (Brehon, 2025).

4.1.5 Distributional and Political Challenges

EDF funding allocation is a site of political contestation. Large contributors like Germany and France have pushed for returns proportional to their inputs, while smaller and peripheral states demand broader access (Brehon, 2025). The Commission has attempted to balance these demands by encouraging geographically diverse project leadership and by setting aside funding for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).

Despite these efforts, leadership remains concentrated. France, for instance, has received 11% of EDF funds while contributing around 17%, and Germany coordinates relatively few projects despite being the largest contributor (Brehon, 2025). The result is a distributional imbalance that reflects wider asymmetries in industrial capacity and political influence. In response, Readiness 2030 introduces limited fiscal incentives like allowing EU defence funding exemptions from national deficit calculations, to encourage convergence. However, early reactions suggest that these measures may have uneven results,

particularly in states with limited absorptive capacity or entrenched bilateral preferences (European Commission, 2025; Santopinto, 2025).

More broadly, the EDF has become a site of negotiation over the nature of EU defence integration; whether it should be guided by efficiency, equity, or strategic necessity (Csernatoní & Oliveira Martins, 2019; Santopinto, 2025). These tensions shape how political momentum is institutionalised and whether positive feedback from crisis adaptation can be sustained. In this sense, the EDF also offers insights into the institutional tensions Readiness 2030 must navigate as it evolves: between equitable access and performance-based coordination (Brehon, 2025; Csernatoní & Oliveira Martins, 2019). Besides, smaller Member States have expressed concerns that recent EU defence initiatives, particularly SAFE and EDF expansions, risk disproportionately benefiting large defence producers in countries like France, Germany and Italy. Without mechanisms to guarantee equitable participation and industrial balance, there is a risk of deepening asymmetries within the internal market for defence (Lazarou et al., 2025).

4.1.6 Interim Assessment

The EDF has shown significant institutional adaptability in the face of non-linear shocks. The war in Ukraine triggered an immediate expansion of defence funding and a shift in EDF project priorities toward urgent capability gaps. Readiness 2030 builds on these changes by proposing a structured long-term strategy to coordinate investment, industrial policy, and strategic planning across the EU. However, the fund's ability to support deep integration is still limited by political fragmentation and unequal capacity across member states. Its dual-track structure has allowed it to balance short-term responsiveness with long-term planning, but its impact remains conditional on national alignment.

This case shows that flexible supranational tools can respond quickly to crisis but without consistent national buy-in, their transformative potential remains partial. EDF's evolution demonstrates how political shocks can open a policy window, but whether that window leads to systemic change depends on broader structural convergence. As such, the EDF provides important lessons for how Readiness 2030 might be designed to balance speed and cohesion under pressure from future geopolitical disruptions.

4.2. Case Study 2: Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)

4.2.1 Background and Purpose

Launched in 2017 under the Treaty on European Union (Article 42(6) and Protocol 10), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) provides a treaty-based framework for structured defence cooperation among EU member states (Brehon, 2025). It was created to reduce fragmentation, foster collective capability development, and enable member states to jointly plan, invest, and act in defence. PESCO introduced a formal set of twenty binding commitments, including goals related to joint procurement, interoperability, and force readiness. However, in practice, PESCO remains an intergovernmental platform: projects are led by member states, decisions are taken by consensus, and implementation relies heavily on national budgets and defence planning cycles (Brehon, 2025; EEAS, 2023; Treaty on European Union, 2016). The absence of direct EU funding further limits the Commission's role in shaping outcomes. As such, while PESCO represents a more structured form of defence cooperation than earlier voluntary initiatives, its ability to drive integration remains dependent on national willingness.

4.2.2 Non-linear Political Momentum

PESCO's political relevance had declined by 2021, with several early projects stalled or underperforming. The non-linear shocks of 2022 reversed this trend (Biscop, 2020; Blockmans & Crosson, 2021). PESCO gained renewed attention as existing projects, such as Military Mobility and the EUFOR Crisis Response Operation Core (CROC), were revitalised in response to the war (Rutigliano, 2023). This reactivation was not the result of institutional change, but of political momentum aligning temporarily with instruments already in place. The crisis produced a short-term feedback loop in which political urgency amplified the perceived utility of already existing but dormant mechanisms (Rutigliano, 2023). However, PESCO's voluntary governance model remained untouched, which limited the depth and sustainability of integration (Santopinto, 2025).

4.2.3 Institutional Design and Adaptation

In 2023, an EDA strategic review was conducted to streamline PESCO's scope and focus. It consolidated or discontinued underperforming projects and approved 11 new initiatives targeting high-end capabilities, including precision munitions, cyber defence, undersea infrastructure, and space situational awareness (EDA, 2023; EEAS, 2023). France and Italy led several of these efforts, reflecting their industrial capacity and political leadership. To improve practical integration, PESCO also adjusted its project approval cycle to better align with national budget timelines (European Council, 2022). This technical adaptation helped defence ministries plan more effectively, but it did not alter the underlying institutional logic. PESCO still lacks enforcement power or automatic mechanisms for compliance. Participation remains voluntary, and performance depends on national preferences and resources.

4.2.4 Operational and Financial Coordination

One area of progress was the improved coordination between PESCO and the EDF. Several PESCO projects, such as the European Secure Software-defined Radio, were encouraged to apply for EDF co-financing. This dual-track model, intergovernmental project leadership with supranational financial support, offered new momentum and incentives (Brehon, 2025; EEAS, 2023). However, the coordination remains informal. There is no alignment of timelines, evaluation metrics, or conditionality between the EDF and PESCO (Brehon, 2025). Strategic projects like the German-led tank procurement group still operate on a largely national basis, and major initiatives such as the European Sky Shield proceed outside the PESCO framework under NATO coordination. As a result, integration across EU tools remains opportunistic rather than systemic.

4.2.5 Challenges and Limitations

PESCO continues to face institutional and political constraints (Blockmans & Crosson, 2021). The consensus-based model slows decision-making and dilutes accountability. Many early projects were hampered by vague objectives, insufficient funding, and weak administrative follow-up (Biscop, 2020). Although the Ukraine war revived interest, structural barriers persist. Diverging national defence priorities are a key obstacle: eastern member states focus on deterrence and NATO interoperability, while southern states emphasise crisis management beyond EU borders (CER, 2025). Industrial preferences vary as well, with some countries favouring EU-made systems and others, like Poland, relying on bilateral deals with the U.S. or South Korea (Santopinto, 2025). These divisions complicate joint procurement and reduce incentives for shared development. Moreover, concerns about duplicating NATO structures continue to limit some governments' engagement (CER, 2025; Santopinto, 2025).

4.2.6 Interim Assessment

PESCO's experience illustrates both the potential and limitations of institutional cooperation under non-linear political pressure. The Ukraine war reactivated dormant projects and temporarily aligned national interest with EU-level tools. Reforms such as the 2023 Strategic Review and budget-cycle alignment reflect modest adaptation. However, without deeper institutional change, PESCO remains a fragile structure. Political momentum has generated short-term activation, but long-term effectiveness still depends on the convergence of strategic cultures, industrial policy, and national commitment. PESCO reflects the EU's broader defence dilemma: it has the formal capacity for collective action but lacks the centralised authority to ensure delivery. As with the EDF, non-linear shocks can stimulate cooperation, but lasting integration requires more than urgency. It depends on institutional feedback, strategic coherence, and consistent political investment.

5. Comparative Analysis

The analysis is structured around three key dimensions: (1) Responsiveness to non-linear shocks, (2) Strategic Alignment and Institutional Learning, and (3) Political and Operational Integration. Readiness 2030 is then examined as a recalibration to address these gaps, institutionalising lessons learned and creating a more resilient EU defence architecture.

5.1 Responsiveness to Non-Linear Shocks

Comparing EDF and PESCO through the lens of institutional responsiveness reveals how governance design conditions the EU's ability to convert crisis into adaptive reform. Compared to PESCO,

EDF's supranational framework under the Commission allows for a higher degree of central coordination but lacks flexibility in crisis adaptation.

5.1.1 EDF: Supranational Flexibility, Temporal Constraints

The EDF, managed by the European Commission, was established to channel EU funding into joint defence research and development. It has shown limitations in rapidly adapting to sudden geopolitical shocks. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine exposed the EDF's structural misalignment with immediate readiness needs, revealing a temporal lag between political urgency and financial execution. In contrast to PESCO, which politically reactivated dormant projects, EDF's response was mainly through temporary funding adjustments. The Commission shifted to temporary instruments, such as the Joint Procurement Task Force and the European Peace Facility, to fill urgent gaps. This reactive adjustment illustrates Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) concept of punctuated equilibrium, where significant policy shifts follow periods of stability. The EDF thus served as a foundation for capability development, but lacked agility. Some projects were tactically accelerated, but the EDF's budgetary structure constrained large-scale reallocation. This "timing mismatch" created a policy window (Kingdon, 2002) that Readiness 2030 aims to institutionalise via the SAFE instrument and enhanced fiscal flexibility, thereby reinforcing the EU's strategic objectives.

5.1.2 PESCO: Intergovernmental Stability, Political Uptake

PESCO, rooted in intergovernmental cooperation, showed a different pattern of responsiveness. PESCO lacked institutional agility, but retained high levels of national legitimacy and buy-in. Rather than structural change, PESCO's short-term response consisted of political reactivation. Dormant projects such as Military Mobility regained salience, exemplifying how crisis-induced feedback loops (Rutigliano, 2023), can temporarily boost institutional relevance. Unlike the EDF, PESCO's intergovernmental nature allowed

for a quicker political engagement, albeit without structural reform. Crucially, the shock functioned as a political trigger: Denmark reversed its opt-out position, and Poland expanded participation by joining additional projects. Such changes exemplify ‘punctuated equilibrium’ where political urgency overrides institutional stasis. Yet PESCO’s formal rules and voluntary logic remained untouched, limiting the sustainability of this momentum.

5.1.3 Readiness 2030: from Ad-Hoc to Embedded Responsiveness

Readiness 2030 represents a deliberate institutional response to the functional gaps revealed by the “shock response phase” that had relied heavily on temporary mechanisms like the Joint Procurement Task Force and short-term increases in EDF funding. By explicitly addressing the limitations identified in both EDF and PESCO, although without explicit acknowledgement, Readiness 2030 integrates flexibility and strategic alignment within a more permanent framework. While these ad hoc measures addressed immediate needs, they revealed critical weaknesses in the EU’s capacity for coordinated, large-scale defence action. In contrast, Readiness 2030 was framed as a long term institutional solution, formalising key priorities such as a 65% EU sourcing target, introducing permanent tools like the €150 billion SAFE loan mechanism for joint procurement, and proposing planning reforms to align national and EU-level defence efforts. This shift marks a paradigmatic recalibration from reactive improvisation to embedded readiness, with SAFE bridging the structural lag between EDF’s planning cycles and PESCO’s project implementation. While Readiness 2030 clearly addresses many of the structural and capability gaps observed in EDF and PESCO’s operations, there is no clear indication that this alignment resulted from a deliberate review of these previous mechanisms. Instead, its institutional design appears to have coincidentally resolved long-standing issues that inhibited defence coordination and procurement in the past. This observation highlights an emergent alignment rather than an engineered policy response to

EDF and PESCO's limitations. In PET terms, Readiness 2030 transforms crisis-driven feedback into a lasting policy shift, aiming to make EU defence governance more prepared and resilient for the future.

5.2 Strategic Alignment and Coordination

It is becoming clearer that the key differences between EDF and PESCO lay in their governance models. In this case, EDF's supranational governance allowed for direct alignment with EU strategic goals, while PESCO's intergovernmental model led to fragmented project cycles and varying levels of national commitment.

EDF and PESCO were conceptually designed as complementary instruments under the CSDP. EDF addresses supply-side industrial innovation and PESCO focuses on operational coordination. In practice, this synergy remained aspirational. Strategic planning was fragmented, and their respective governance logics, supranational vs intergovernmental, pulled in different directions. The Commission introduced alignment incentives, most notably a 10% EDF co-funding bonus for PESCO-linked projects, but implementation remained inconsistent. Small member states expressed concern that vertical integration around major defence economies like France and Germany marginalised peripheral actors, threatening cohesion. Compared to EDF's centralised funding mechanism, PESCO's voluntary logic led to uneven participation, which Readiness 2030 addresses through coordinated planning.

5.2.1 Shock as a Catalyst for Convergence

The 2022 invasion acted as a functional convergence accelerator. Member States had to rethink how they approach defence procurement. Crisis-induced political momentum enabled alignment between capability planning (PESCO) and financial execution (EDF). The crisis also led to more coordination across EU and NATO efforts, with PESCO projects like Military Mobility linking up with NATO logistics. But the EU's defence system stayed divided. Major projects like the Franco-German fighter jet

and the European Sky Shield still operated outside the EDF-PESCO framework, showing that national control and fragmentation remain strong. This divergence underscores the limitations of EDF's financial mechanism to influence strategic alignment and PESCO's political activation without formalised coordination.

The alignment between EDF and PESCO under Readiness 2030 is not merely structural but also reactive to geopolitical shocks. These shocks serve as accelerators for defence initiatives, demonstrating the potential for political urgency to create positive spillover effects. In this context, Readiness 2030 illustrates how geopolitical disruptions can activate these spillover mechanisms within EU defence frameworks, amplifying the scope and scale of joint procurement and capability development.

The urgency triggered by the Ukraine war led to accelerated EDF calls and new PESCO projects focused on logistics and mobility. These initiatives, politically supported and partially co-financed, generated a feedback loop: financial action justified further operational engagement, which then legitimised additional funding (European Commission, 2025; European Defence Agency, n.d.). However, this loop remains fragile, as PESCO's voluntary structure and EDF's consensus-based funding mechanisms still inhibit rapid progress. The sustainability of positive feedback will depend largely on political consistency and institutional reform. Should coordination weaken or outcomes fall short of expectations, the same dynamics could reverse, eroding support for EU-level defence integration (Wolff, 2024; Houdé & Wessel, 2023). This illustrates the double-edged nature of non-linear political momentum: while shocks can accelerate defence integration, the fragility of institutional frameworks like EDF and PESCO may still hinder long-term strategic cohesion unless political commitment and structured reforms are sustained.

Interestingly, Readiness 2030's approach to structured instrumental coupling addresses many of the fragmented coordination issues that EDF and PESCO struggled with. However, there is no official

acknowledgment that these improvements are the result of systematic analysis of EDF and PESCO's weaknesses. This coincidental alignment, though unplanned, fortifies Readiness 2030's potential to streamline EU defence initiatives where previous mechanisms faltered.

5.2.2 Readiness 2030: Toward Structured Instrumental Coupling

The Readiness 2030 framework seeks to formalise previously informal links between EU defence instruments. The SAFE instrument introduces conditionality by requiring participation from multiple Member States and minimum EU-based content, thereby incentivising deeper cooperation. The Commission is beginning to take on a coordinating role, with a proposed 'Defence Semester' aimed at aligning national defence planning across the EU. This marks a shift from voluntary coordination to material interdependence, where strategic alignment is increasingly necessary to access funding. While smaller Member States generally support stronger coordination, concerns remain about industrial imbalances and the risk of centralisation. Readiness 2030 institutionalises coordination, addressing the structural gaps that inhibited previous joint capability planning.

5.3 Political and Operational Outcomes

This section assesses whether political ambition under non-linear conditions has translated into tangible defence integration outcomes. It evaluates material progress and institutional consolidation before and after Readiness 2030. By 2021, PESCO had produced modest outputs (e.g. cyber response teams, military mobility projects), while EDF supported collaborative R&D in key dual-use technologies. These were primarily foundational rather than transformative. However, the war in Ukraine exposed the gap between what the EU says about defence integration and what it can actually do in practice. The EU's fragmented procurement landscape and limited readiness capacity failed to match its strategic ambition. This divergence generated political pressure and created a self-reinforcing feedback loop

(Pierson, 2000), where failure to deliver outcomes increased demand for institutional reform. Compared to EDF's focus on R&D and project-based funding, PESCO's voluntary and intergovernmental nature limited its capacity for rapid procurement, exposing its dependence on national political will.

5.3.1 From Symbolic to Operational Integration

Before 2022, EU defence initiatives focused mainly on procedural convergence, such as rule harmonisation and policy learning, but produced few direct capability outcomes. The 2022 shock shifted this trajectory from symbolic alignment to practical implementation. Member States increased defence spending and launched joint procurement cycles. Readiness 2030 builds on this momentum through instruments like SAFE, which supports joint stockpile acquisition and shared logistics. The €800 billion projected under the fiscal exemption clause marks not only an unprecedented level of investment, but also a shift in EU defence spending, from nationally controlled decisions to coordinated, scaled efforts. In this way, Readiness 2030 leverages EDF's industrial base while addressing PESCO's limitations in operational cohesion, signalling a shift from parallel development to integrated defence governance.

5.3.2 Institutional Feedback and the Role of Smaller States

Positive feedback loops have begun to emerge, as initial policy success (e.g., coordinated 2023 ammunition procurement) has strengthened political support and legitimacy for EU-level defence tools. Yet these loops remain fragile. Smaller Member States have warned that without equitable access and transparent governance, integration risks reproducing core-periphery dynamics. SAFE's eligibility criteria, including cross-national participation and SME quotas, seek to structurally counterbalance market concentration. Such safeguards are not merely procedural but essential to maintaining the political coalition supporting integration. Compared to the large-member-state dominance of EDF and the voluntary logic of PESCO, Readiness 2030 introduces mechanisms to balance participation and prevent

marginalisation, particularly of smaller states. If successful, Readiness 2030 could catalyse a shift from parallel instruments to an integrated defence governance system characterised by instrumental alignment and shared readiness targets.

5.4 Concluding the Analysis

The comparative analysis of EDF, PESCO, and Readiness 2030 highlights the non-linear and layered nature of EU defence integration. Rather than progressing through planned institutional design, integration has advanced through crisis-induced adaptation and feedback. The Ukraine war exposed the limitations of existing instruments: the EDF's strategic value was undercut by timing constraints, while PESCO's political legitimacy was not matched by institutional flexibility. These gaps created a window for reform, enabling new instruments like SAFE and policy tools such as the fiscal escape clause⁸. Readiness 2030, as a response to EDF's timing delays and PESCO's limited coordination capacity, represents not a break with past initiatives but their consolidation and reorientation toward operational readiness.

Although EDF and PESCO were conceptually designed to be complementary, their distinct governance logics have continued to shape their responsiveness and integration potential. The current trajectory, shaped by Readiness 2030, reflects a gradual shift toward structured instrumental coupling, where financial incentives and planning mechanisms increase alignment without full institutional fusion. Strategic coherence is increasingly required to access EU-level funding, and instruments like SAFE introduce structural conditions that encourage more inclusive and coordinated procurement. Yet concerns from smaller Member States over industrial asymmetries and governance centralisation illustrate that integration remains politically contingent.

⁸ The fiscal escape clause is a temporary suspension of EU fiscal rules under the Stability and Growth Pact, allowing Member States to increase public spending during severe economic shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine (European Commission, 2020).

Ultimately, the EU's evolving defence governance architecture reflects a pattern of punctuated equilibrium, where external shocks disrupt stasis and generate space for institutional recalibration. This analysis has demonstrated that non-linear political dynamics have shaped the EU's defence integration instruments by triggering reactive adaptation and strategic shifts in governance. In the case of the EDF, geopolitical shocks accelerated funding mechanisms that prioritized collaborative research and capability development, reinforcing strategic autonomy and collective security. Similarly, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) emerged as a platform for targeted military cooperation, driven by political momentum and flexible project-based integration, which allowed member states to engage selectively while enhancing collective readiness. These findings suggest that the institutional innovations observed in EDF and PESCO's responses can inform the design of a more adaptive and resilient Readiness 2030, institutionalizing flexibility, shared planning, and conditional cooperation. Whether this momentum can be sustained will depend not only on political will but on the EU's capacity to balance strategic ambition with equitable implementation. The success of this model may determine whether the current phase marks a step toward deeper integration or merely a temporary convergence driven by crisis.

6. Main Findings and Recommendations

This section summarises the main findings, addresses the research questions, and presents strategic recommendations derived from the analysis of EU defence mechanisms and the proposed Readiness 2030 framework.

6.1 Addressing the Research Questions

The central research question posed in this study was: "How do non-linear political dynamics shape the EU's defence integration instruments, and what institutional lessons from EDF and PESCO can inform the improvement of both existing tools and the design of a more resilient Readiness 2030?" This

was explored through two sub-questions. Sub-question one stated: “How have the EDF and PESCO responded to recent geopolitical shocks under conditions of non-linear politics, and what does this reveal about the institutional strengths and weaknesses of EU defence integration mechanisms?”

The EDF and PESCO responded differently to geopolitical shocks, particularly Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Within the non-linear politics framework, such shocks accelerated institutional adaptation, exposing both strengths and vulnerabilities. The EDF, managed by the European Commission, mobilised substantial financial resources towards joint defence projects. Following the invasion, its budget grew by €1.5 billion to address shortfalls in ammunition, air defence, and cyber technologies. This showed the EDF’s financial adaptability but bureaucratic delays and rigid planning cycles limited its speed, highlighting a mismatch between urgency and execution.

Conversely, PESCO benefited from political reactivation. The crisis revived projects like the Military Mobility and CROC, as national interests aligned temporarily with EU defence priorities. PESCO’s intergovernmental design allowed for quicker mobilisation but lacked enforcement power and consistent funding. Its voluntary structure enabled participation but limited coherence and strategic follow-through. While both mechanisms adapted under pressure, EDF’s financial strength was offset by inflexibility, and PESCO’s responsiveness was weakened by fragmentation.

The responses reveal broader institutional asymmetries in EU defence governance. Effective adaptation depends on political cohesion and strategic coordination, conditions that non-linear politics often disrupt. This confirms the research’s main claim: shocks can drive institutional change but often do so in fragmented and unsustainable ways.

The second sub-question asked: “How can lessons from EDF and PESCO be applied to improve the institutional design and strategic impact of Readiness 2030?”

Readiness 2030 is the Commission’s attempt to respond structurally to recent defence challenges. Without directly referencing EDF and PESCO, it addresses their key limitations by introducing

new tools like the SAFE loan mechanism and conditional joint procurement. A key lesson from EDF is the need for flexible funding, SAFE offers €150 billion in low-interest loans, enabling quicker joint procurement while staying within fiscal rules.

PESCO's weaknesses are reflected in the new strategic alignment efforts. Readiness 2030 proposes the 'Defence Semester' to coordinate national and EU-level planning. This shift toward structured coupling acknowledges that voluntary cooperation was insufficient. Binding planning cycles and conditional funding aim to fix the fragmentation that previously hindered integration.

6.2 Strategic Recommendations

Building on the analysis, this section outlines key recommendations to enhance the EU's defence integration mechanisms. These recommendations aim to address identified structural gaps, improve strategic alignment, and strengthen institutional resilience against future geopolitical shocks. They are intentionally forward-looking and reflect the political ambition of Readiness 2030. While some may face institutional or political constraints, they are meant to offer concrete starting points for improving the EU's defence governance. The goal is not to prescribe fixed solutions, but to suggest strategic directions that respond to the structural gaps identified in the case studies.

1. Institutionalising flexible financial mechanisms

The EDF's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine highlighted its capacity to mobilise substantial financial resources, but also exposed limits in its budgetary flexibility. While multi-annual financial frameworks provide long-term stability, they lack the agility needed during sudden geopolitical shifts. Readiness 2030's SAFE loan mechanism marks a key step toward greater financial adaptability. However, to institutionalise this flexibility, the EU should consider establishing a dedicated 'Crisis Response Fund' within the EDF, separate from its regular allocations, to enable rapid deployment of resources without compromising long-term planning.

Further, reinforcing the conditionality model, similar to that used in SAFE, within EDF-funded projects could enhance compliance with EU strategic goals. While cross-border cooperation is already required, more targeted conditions could support deeper industrial integration. Mechanisms that promote balanced project leadership and dedicated roles for smaller Member States could help address structural imbalances between major defence producers and peripheral countries.

2. Enhancing strategic alignment through a Defence Semester

One of PESCO's structural weaknesses is the fragmentation of national defence planning, which undermines coordination and strategic alignment. Readiness 2030's proposed 'Defence Semester' aims to address this by aligning national and EU-level defence strategies. For maximum impact, the Defence Semester should go beyond coordination and include binding strategic targets for Member States. These targets should be aligned with EU capability priorities and monitored through annual evaluations. If commitments are not met, corrective mechanisms should be applied. This process would improve coherence and allow EDF and PESCO to operate within a more synchronised planning framework.

3. Strengthening conditionality and joint procurement

PESCO's voluntary participation model has often resulted in fragmented and inconsistent project execution. To address this, Readiness 2030's SAFE mechanism should be expanded to include performance-based incentives for Member States that meet capability and procurement targets.

Additionally, the establishment of a centralised EU Procurement Agency under the Readiness 2030 umbrella could help streamline joint acquisitions. While the EDA already plays a coordinating role, a specialised agency could manage multinational procurement projects, align them with EDF and PESCO priorities, reduce duplication, and foster economies of scale.

4. Promoting equitable participation and industrial diversification

Case studies of EDF and PESCO show persistent disparities in project leadership and resource access, favouring Member States with advanced defence industries. To correct this, Readiness 2030

should ensure equitable participation by implementing quotas for SMEs and regional consortia in project selection. This would encourage wider industrial engagement and enhance the resilience of EU defence supply chains.

A model similar to the European Innovation Council, providing dedicated funding streams for start-ups and emerging technologies, could further diversify the defence landscape, reduce reliance on dominant suppliers, and foster technological sovereignty across the EU.

5. Avoiding redundant overlaps with NATO and strengthening complementarity

Overlaps between EU and NATO capabilities, especially in logistics and mobility, remain a concern. Readiness 2030 should prioritise projects that enhance NATO interoperability and explicitly support transatlantic defence efforts. The Defence Semester could serve as a coordination platform for aligning EU and NATO planning cycles. Embedding NATO benchmarks into EU-level assessments would further ensure strategic complementarity and reinforce the EU's position as a reliable transatlantic partner.

6. Building institutional resilience through strategic autonomy

Achieving strategic autonomy is a core aim of Readiness 2030, but it requires more than improved capabilities—it demands institutional resilience and political cohesion. Readiness 2030 should establish a 'Strategic Autonomy Council' tasked with monitoring EU defence dependencies and recommending actions to reduce reliance on external suppliers. This body could help the EU anticipate disruptions, speed up policy responses, and ensure that defence efforts align with long-term strategic objectives.

Together, these proposals aim to go beyond incremental adjustments, offering a roadmap for a more integrated, responsive, and equitable EU defence framework. Their success, however, will depend on continued political commitment and a shared vision across all Member States

6.3 Summary of the Main Findings

This research has demonstrated that non-linear political dynamics, triggered by sudden geopolitical shocks, can accelerate institutional adaptation within EU defence governance. The analysis of the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) reveals distinct strengths and structural limitations. While the EDF's supranational structure enabled rapid financial mobilisation, its responsiveness was constrained by bureaucratic procedures and multi-annual planning cycles. PESCO, on the other hand, benefitted from political flexibility and intergovernmental legitimacy but struggled to convert temporary momentum into long-term strategic alignment due to its voluntary and fragmented nature.

Readiness 2030 emerged as an institutional recalibration that integrates lessons from both mechanisms. It introduces permanent instruments, like the SAFE loan facility and the Defence Semester, that aim to bridge the strategic, operational, and temporal gaps previously exposed. In doing so, it reflects a broader EU ambition: to transition from fragmented, reactive defence policy to a proactive framework grounded in strategic autonomy and coordinated planning.

The findings confirm that while crisis-driven momentum can unlock reform, lasting integration depends on institutional design, equitable participation, and sustained political commitment. In this light, non-linear politics is not merely a challenge but a driver of adaptive governance in EU defence policy.

7. Conclusion and Future Outlook

The EU's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has triggered important changes in its defence architecture, but it may only be the beginning. As this research has shown, crises can unlock reform, but long-term strategic capacity depends on more than reactive momentum. Readiness 2030 marks a major policy shift, integrating lessons to improve flexibility and coordination. Still, the EU now faces wider challenges, such as energy insecurity, technological dependence and industrial capacity, which go beyond defence alone.

The boundaries between security, economy, and industry are dissolving. The EU cannot credibly defend itself if it remains reliant on external actors for essential technologies like microchips, AI systems, and raw materials. As efforts toward renewable energy and nuclear independence advance, similar progress will be needed for critical sectors such as electric vehicles or cyber defence. In this environment, strategic autonomy means being able to act independently not only in defence, but also in critical industries.

Looking forward, the challenge lies in transforming this current momentum into a governance model that endures beyond emergencies. The EU must find ways to distribute responsibilities and benefits more equitably, ensuring that smaller Member States also benefit and contribute, for example by hosting defence production or sharing technological knowledge. At the same time, difficult questions remain. What happens if future threats arise not from Russia, but from instability elsewhere, be it North Africa, the Middle East, or the Indo-Pacific? Can the current institutional framework adapt to cascading disruptions: migration surges, energy embargoes, cyberattacks, or a breakdown in global trade? And what if the next catalyst is internal like another major member state's exit or democratic backsliding from within?

Further research should explore how to build flexibility into EU defence planning without reducing democratic accountability. This includes evaluating whether mechanisms developed under Readiness 2030 could be expanded to other strategic domains, and whether the EU's governance model is equipped to handle simultaneous cross-border crises.

In the end, the EU's ability to respond to future challenges will depend not just on how quickly it can act, but on how well it can learn, adapt, and stay united. Readiness 2030 could be an important step in that direction, but only if it leads to long-term change, not just a short-term reaction.

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