EUROPEAN DEFENCE AGENCY

CARD 2026

Coordinated Annual Review on Defence



2026 CARD Report

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2026 CARD Report confirms that Member States' defence efforts have accelerated significantly, cooperation has expanded, and new instruments have emerged to support implementation. Despite this momentum, significant capability shortfalls persist and collective delivery has not kept pace, undermining expected readiness gains. To address this, the Report identifies how cooperative efforts could be conceived, reinforced and implemented to strengthen Europe's defence readiness and safeguard Europe's freedom of action through the following conclusions. Member States should:

1. **Systematically consider cooperation as a priority delivery option for defence readiness**, by bringing collaborative planning and coordination forward in early stages of national programmes and investment, and by anticipating cooperation projects that could take advantage of EU incentives in short- to mid-term, in full coherence with NATO.
2. **Sustain capability development beyond immediate readiness needs:** ensure that medium- and long-term defence needs are reflected in national planning alongside accelerated 2030 deliveries, and maintain visibility on the related investment for sustainable force development beyond 2030. Furthermore, ensure that these needs also drive the setting-up of EU instruments.
3. **Deliver strategic enablers together:** ensure EU's freedom of action by addressing the development of strategic enablers through a structured collaborative approach, in coherence with NATO, building on the Agency's work and addressing these challenges in relevant Priority Capability Areas (PCAs).
4. **Address all lines of capability development:** Develop capabilities across all fundamental lines of development, notably personnel, training, and interoperability, rather than focusing on equipment alone, taking full advantage of EDA supporting structures and of PCAs.
5. **Turn innovation into operational effect:** accelerate the transition of defence innovation into operational capability by coordinating around shared operational challenges, common requirements, multinational experimentation and follow-on cooperative acquisition, using available EDA and Commission instruments.

Several of these recommendations build on those put forward in the 2024 CARD Report, while sharpening the focus on their practical implementation. Their reaffirmation in the 2026 CARD Report underscores their criticality to ensure enhanced cooperation and capability delivery at EU level.

Based on engagements with Member States in this CARD cycle, the Report also presents collaborative opportunities for Ministers of Defence's endorsement: **Family of Cruise Missiles, Long-Range Artillery (MLRS), Modular and Interoperable Unmanned Ground Vehicles, Layered C-UAS for Critical Infrastructure and Force Protection, Family of Long-Range Air Defence Interceptors, Space Early Warning, Detection and Tracking, European Secure Defence Cloud**, and **European Approach to Strategic Air Mobility.**

INTRODUCTION

1. Faced with a rapidly deteriorating security environment, as demonstrated most visibly by the ongoing war in Ukraine and related hybrid activities across Europe, and the resulting imperative to strengthen Europe's defence readiness by 2030, Europe has entered a new phase in its defence efforts. This CARD cycle shows substantial progress in Member States' (MS) spending, planning and cooperation. Defence spending continues to grow, with €418 billion or 2.2% of EU GDP spent in 2025 including €134 billion or 32% in defence investment. Projections for 2026 see this upward trend sustained with €454 billion (2.4% of GDP) and €163 billion (36%) respectively. Defence planning is increasingly converging on common priorities and the 2030 readiness objectives.
2. Nonetheless, despite unprecedented efforts by MS, critical capability gaps exist across all domains including, notably, strategic enablers in anticipation of the likely drawdown of US capabilities from Europe. Current momentum therefore remains insufficient to respond to military needs and ensure Europe's defence readiness, as highlighted in the 2026 Annual Defence Readiness Report (ADRR).
3. While capability development remains a national responsibility, defence cooperation is more than ever essential to address these critical capability challenges. It maximises the combined impact of national efforts and ultimately ensures Europe's defence readiness. Yet, national approaches remain dominant. Rather than relying on them, Member States should further leverage PCAs to address critical capability gaps and foster EDPCIs activities.
4. Beyond the 2030 EU defence readiness objective, sustained investment in longer-term capability development remains essential. Focusing solely on today's urgent gaps may undermine Europe's ability to meet future security challenges.
5. CARD emphasises the importance of extending the focus beyond an equipment or materiel-centric approach to consider the other fundamental lines of development in an ever-evolving battlefield. Concepts and doctrine, personnel availability, training and education as well as interoperability with international partners must be accounted for– in addition to other critical elements such as industrial capacity, including resilient supply chains and innovation. In doing so, ensuring coordinated collaborative or even collective approaches remains essential.
6. The principal challenge is therefore to translate increasingly aligned priorities, cooperative initiatives and EU instruments into coordinated capability delivery that strengthens Europe's defence readiness and safeguards Europe's freedom of action now and into the future. CARD supports this effort by identifying collaborative opportunities, enabling EU Allies to meet their capability targets and contributing to strengthening the European contribution to NATO. Improving the exchange of information between EU and NATO, including classified information, would contribute to that objective.
7. This CARD Report helps Ministers of Defence not only to acknowledge the progress made since the 2024 CARD Report, assessing how previously identified areas for cooperation have advanced, but also provide guidance on how cooperative efforts should be conceived, reinforced, accelerated or implemented. The ADRR assesses progress towards the 2030 defence readiness objective, including the closure of the most pressing capability gaps. In line with these findings, CARD provides the framework to ensure coherent capability development across the full set of EU Capability Development Priorities over the short, medium and long term. Ultimately, the report aims to translate relevant MS decisions on Europe's defence readiness into concrete collaborative action, while ensuring that capability development priorities and challenges not fully addressed under the broader 2030 defence readiness objective remain visible and duly considered.

A. MAKE COOPERATION THE DELIVERY MODEL FOR EUROPE'S DEFENCE READINESS

8. This CARD cycle confirms that MS converge on acquiring what Europe needs and that they increasingly mobilise to address critical capability gaps, notably through Member State-led capability coalitions in Priority Capability Areas (PCA) defined by EUCO last year. While cooperation is considered as an obvious necessary condition to achieve the 2030 defence readiness objective, acquisition remains largely national, with 68% of investment done nationally.[1] Higher investment is very unlikely to close shared gaps unless it is spent together, consistently in a coordinated approach among Member States., so that the combined effect of efforts is greater than the sum of its parts.

9. Benefits of cooperative capability delivery extend beyond efficiencies and economies of scale to increased interoperability, which is more than ever required to train, deploy, sustain and operate together in increasingly demanding operational environments. Yet, defence cooperation continues to be driven by pragmatism and not treated as a default pathway: operational and economical advantage at national level remain the primary factors. Organisational and industrial barriers further limit the scale, speed and coherence of collaborative approaches.

10. With misaligned planning cycles and industrial interests, cooperation continues to be pursued on an ad hoc basis after national decisions are taken, as previously reported in 2024. Embedding cooperation in national planning from the earliest stages is therefore crucial, using established intergovernmental frameworks such as the European Defence Agency (EDA), PCAs or the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). The growing role of EU incentives in capability development further reinforces the need to address cooperation systematically from the outset. To maximise their leveraging effect, national plans and budgets should be structured from the outset to support collaborative projects. More systematic cooperation would also provide industry with greater visibility and predictability of demand, supporting production at scale and reducing dependencies in supply chains. Through aggregation of needs and harmonisation of requirements, EDA can support MS in this regard.

11. The need to compensate for a possible reduction in United States' capabilities declared available for NATO purposes adds to the challenge. Cooperation is especially required for those strategic enablers which are needed for the whole of Europe yet are insufficiently addressed in national plans.

12. Beyond identifying *what* Europe needs, the challenge is organising *how* Europe delivers collectively. In addition to accelerating delivery, earlier synchronisation, including through CARD, could reduce the cost of cooperation, improve interoperability and lessen pressure on scarce personnel and industrial resources. To this end, and based on engagement with MS, collaborative opportunities have been identified, which go beyond identifying what to collaborate on, by setting out how shared gaps can be addressed. A common planning and delivery framework could support transforming converging needs into collaborative programmes.

13. As defence initiatives proliferate and pressure on national planning communities grows, the challenge is no longer only to identify opportunities for cooperation, but to strengthen the capacity to cooperate. For cooperation to become the preferred delivery model, a sustainable cooperation infrastructure is

[1] See EDA Defence Data Publication 2025-2026.

required, including structures, staffing, expertise and processes needed to deliver it at scale.[2] Intergovernmental functions to further support MS in joint acquisition, collaborative capability development, research, technology and innovation are currently being reinforced through the strengthening of EDA. Adapting national planning processes could add to this effect. Existing EU defence initiatives, including CARD and PESCO, can then support implementation, incentivised by EU financial instruments, notably the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP).

14. Reporting on progress, including since the last CARD Report in 2024, reinforces the credibility of CARD as a tool to support cooperation by demonstrating continuity between cycles and maintaining visibility on the implementation of previously identified areas for cooperation.

Conclusion: Systematically consider cooperation as a priority delivery option for defence readiness, by bringing collaborative planning and coordination forward in early stages of national processes on programmes and investment, and anticipating cooperation projects that could take advantage of EU incentives in short- to mid-term, in full coherence with NATO.

B. SUSTAIN CAPABILITY DEVELOPMENT BEYOND IMMEDIATE READINESS NEEDS

15. Making cooperation the delivery model by design requires being able to apply this approach across different time horizons. This CARD cycle confirms that MS pursue a broader range of capability development activities than those captured by immediate readiness requirements alone, notably in the air domain. Political attention, reporting mechanisms and cooperative frameworks are increasingly concentrated on shorter-term priorities, notably the Priority Capability Areas (PCA) or accelerating capability delivery through the Security Action For Europe (SAFE). Many capabilities, however, are medium- to long-term in nature and go beyond immediate readiness requirements. They depend on complex system-level architectures and early investment decisions, and risk losing the cooperative momentum they need. Underinvestment in these areas may become visible only after several planning cycles. Recovery would then risk becoming significantly more expensive and time-consuming, and increasingly dependent on industrial capacity. Accelerating capability delivery towards 2030 should not create gaps beyond 2030: the cooperative approach set out in this Report has to cover both short-term readiness and long-term capability development.

16. Most of the EU Capability Development Priorities require a longer-term planning perspective. The CARD analysis shows that MS only partially address this, with investment concentrated on near-term gap-filling. System-level architectures remain fragmented and largely national. However, coordinated efforts are needed to define such architecture for space operations, advanced C4ISTAR, networked and multi-domain electromagnetic spectrum operations (EMSO).[3] In future combat capabilities, more attention is needed on future air combat architectures, addressing gaps in platform-weapon integration, collaborative combat, SEAD/DEAD[4] functions, the broader transformation of land warfare beyond platform modernisation, notably through unmanned and digitally enabled operations, integrated maritime and underwater surveillance architectures. Sustainment and other force-

[2] This includes planning staff; dedicated project or programme teams; technical expertise; legal and contracting support; programme management structures; requirement harmonisation bodies and liaison personnel.

[3] Command, Control, Communications, Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance; Electromagnetic Spectrum Operations.

[4] Suppression of enemy air defences/destruction of enemy air defences.

multiplying functions such as logistics, medical support and CBRN are not keeping pace with investment in combat capabilities.

17. Coherent capability development therefore depends on preserving visibility and cooperative momentum across the full set of EU Capability Development Priorities and planning horizons. While the 2030 defence readiness objective provides an essential focus for accelerating capability delivery, CARD captures this broader capability perspective needed to guide development of future capabilities beyond 2030, including through coordinated R&T activities. This is particularly important for capability areas that depend on sustained technological maturation and early convergence of requirements. R&T cooperation would feed future cooperative capability programmes more effectively were it organised as programmatic, multi-annual efforts rather than isolated projects.

18. Collaborative opportunities identified as an outcome of this CARD cycle are designed to guide a possible reinforced cooperation along such a multi-horizons approach. These are possible EU cooperation programmes building upon MS' intents and plans, and enabling various complementary projects addressing diverse time horizons.

Conclusion Ensure that medium- and long-term [long-lead] defence needs are reflected in national planning alongside accelerated 2030 deliveries and maintain visibility on the related investment for sustainable force development beyond 2030. Furthermore, ensure that these medium- and long-term defence needs also drive the setting-up of EU instruments.

C. A COMMON EUROPEAN APPROACH TO DELIVER STRATEGIC ENABLERS

19. Among the capability areas requiring sustained attention, strategic enablers stand out: this CARD cycle confirms the persistent gaps identified in previous cycles, as highlighted in the ADRR.

20. Strategic enablers can be understood as critical capabilities and supporting elements that make it possible to decide and act autonomously, by collecting intelligence and commanding operations at the strategic level, as well as to deploy combat forces at the speed and range of relevance and sustain them at scale. In short, strategic enablers truly enhance effectiveness, allowing modern platforms to express their full combat potential and ensure operational superiority.

21. When addressing multinational objectives, such as Europe's defence readiness, strategic enablers are typically over and above what individual nations can independently develop, procure, support, and operate, therefore requiring international cooperation. While MS have been increasing investments across the land, air and maritime domains, they recognise that the ability to generate operational effects together is increasingly constrained by shortfalls in the enablers needed to deploy, employ and sustain forces.

22. In addition, access to certain strategic-level enablers cannot be presumed in all future contingencies, and recent U.S. reprioritisation has laid bare the urgency of filling gaps in these areas. The EU cannot act autonomously if it depends on others for the functions that allow it to make informed decisions and employ its forces.

23. Because many of these enablers depend on interoperable architectures, networks, services and industrial capacity beyond individual platforms, assured access, integration and reliability are as important as ownership: individual systems, services and collaborative projects should operate as part of a coherent whole.

24. Dependencies create renewed urgency for collective delivery. The most pressing strategic enablers are those where operational dependence, limited European capacity and reliance on external providers create the greatest constraints on Europe's freedom of action. Their relevance extends beyond military operations to deterrence and the security and resilience of European societies.

25. Building on the growing political focus on strategic enablers at European level, including recent Commission announcements in this area and EDA's ongoing conceptual work, CARD findings point to the need for a common European approach to strategic enablers. Related collaborative opportunities provide an important starting for such a structured approach, identifying opportunities such as: European Approach to Strategic Air Mobility, European Secure Defence Cloud, Space Early Warning, Detection and Tracking. In addition, these capability areas require further analysis and stronger MS engagement beyond the cooperation programmes proposed in this report which build upon current MS' intents and plans. Addressing these long-term strategic challenges will require dedicated roadmaps and additional planning and development activities. A necessary first step is for MS to engage in a structured discussion on the strategic choices and investments needed to shape the EU's future defence posture related to strategic enablers.

    Conclusion: Ensure EU's freedom of action by addressing the development of strategic enablers through a structured collaborative approach, in coherence with NATO, building on the Agency's work and addressing these challenges in relevant PCAs.

D. ADDRESS ALL LINES OF CAPABILITY DEVELOPMENT

26. Addressing remaining gaps will require not only investment in equipment, but also greater attention to the essential elements of military capabilities that determine operational effectiveness. MS have consistently highlighted throughout this CARD cycle that personnel, training, sustainment, logistics and infrastructure are becoming a key constraint to generating deployable and sustainable capabilities. Higher equipment investment will not automatically translate into greater readiness, as capability development extends beyond acquiring platforms and systems to encompass all lines of development: doctrine, organisation, training, personnel, and interoperability (DOTMLPFI)[5] as well as sustainment.

27. Whether new capabilities can be brought into service effectively is largely determined by personnel availability, force structure adaptation, training capacity, costs related to operations and maintenance, infrastructure and stockpiles. Personnel shortages are particularly acute in specialised fields while training, infrastructure, maintenance and logistics are struggling to keep pace with the growing scale and complexity of military capabilities. Strengthening these elements is therefore increasingly urgent to achieve European defence readiness by 2030 and beyond.

28. As already reported in 2024, persistent divergences in force organisation, doctrine and training continue to fragment the European defence landscape, often more than equipment differences themselves. Multinational cooperation offers an underexploited means of mitigating personnel shortages, while generating broader benefits for interoperability and force organisation, doctrines and concepts. Shared training infrastructure and increased use of simulation could help expand training capacity, reduce pressure on scarce personnel and resources, and improve interoperability. Cooperation in logistics, maintenance and sustainment can increase the availability and endurance of forces. Examples such as multinational helicopter training, the European Medical Command, shared

[5] Doctrine, organisation, training, materiel (platforms and systems) leadership, personnel, facilities and interoperability.

facilities and multinational training initiatives demonstrate the benefits of pooling expertise, infrastructure and training resources.

29. Cooperative capability development activities, however, still tend to be framed around equipment, with implications on other lines of development remaining under-addressed. As short-term political guidance focused on materiel priorities, the PCAs do not fully capture these elements. While EDPCIs under EDIP can help address the materiel dimension, the full set of capability lines of development can be advanced through EDA working bodies and EU intergovernmental initiatives such as CARD and PESCO, and should be systematically addressed through PCA efforts.

30. Recognising this challenge, collaborative opportunities identified in this cycle focus on delivering the often-overlooked elements, beyond equipment, and are designed to inform discussions on future EDPCIs. Addressing gaps in doctrine, interoperability and integrated surveillance providing a common picture requires digital integration, coordinated information sharing, the development of architectures for information sharing, sensor and command & control integration.[6] In addition, persistent gaps in training for specialised capabilities may also be overcome by collective training capacities.[7] Beyond military capabilities, readiness requires societal preparedness, institutional resilience and continuity of essential functions under stress.[8] These activities may be implemented more rapidly than large acquisition programmes and generate immediate readiness benefits.

Conclusion: Deliver readiness by developing capabilities across all fundamental lines of development, notably personnel, training, and interoperability, rather than focusing on equipment alone, taking full advantage of EDA supporting structures and of PCAs.

E. TURN INNOVATION INTO OPERATIONAL EFFECT

31. Bilateral dialogues with MS show that innovation is progressing, but promising results are often slow to become fielded military capabilities. Innovation adoption suffers from fragmented timelines, inconsistent involvement of operational users, and weak links between experimentation and procurement. Requirements, experimentation and acquisition are still managed too sequentially, limiting continuous feedback between operational users, developers and procurement authorities. As technology moves faster than doctrine, training, personnel and infrastructure can adapt, technological edge does not easily translate into operational advantage. Uncrewed systems illustrate this: MS are increasingly investing in experimentation and development, yet the path from operational lessons and experimentation to fielded capability remains uneven.

32. The instruments to connect innovation, experimentation, acquisition and capability development exist at EU level. MS point to cooperative RT&I mechanisms such as EDA CapTechs, R&T Ad Hoc projects and HEDI operational experimentation activities (OPEX) as valuable in this regard. In that respect, strengthening EDA will further reinforce interlinkages. What is missing is a European experimentation-to-fielding pathway to better structure and scale the connections they already provide. which allows promising technologies to be identified, tested, validated and scaled into operational capability more rapidly and systematically. Such approach should allow MS with similar capability gaps to jointly

[6] Layered C-UAS for Critical Infrastructure and Force Protection; Space Early Warning, Detection and Tracking; Space Defence Architecture and Governance; Artillery Fire Control Architecture, CBRN Robotic Capabilities; Federated AI Cyber Defence Network, Family of Interoperable Unmanned Maritime Systems.

[7] Extended Reality for Multinational Simulation & Training of Land Forces; Battle Management System.

[8] Cognitive Warfare.

formulate operational challenges, harmonise requirements and establish multinational innovation projects under existing frameworks.

33. Recent operational experience, stemming in particular from the battlefield in Ukraine shows that innovation advances through continuous experimentation and feedback from the field. A more iterative approach between the involved end-users could thus help ensure that innovative solutions are developed against validated military requirements and scaled into operational capability.

34. Identified collaborative opportunities could serve as practical test cases for such pathway from experimentation to fielded capability: Modular and Interoperable Unmanned Ground Vehicles, Extended Reality for Multinational Simulation and Training of Land Forces, Battle Management System.

Conclusion: Accelerate the transition of defence innovation into operational capability by coordinating around shared operational challenges, common requirements, multinational experimentation and follow-on cooperative acquisition, using available EDA and Commission instruments, and building on Ukraine's lessons identified and best practice