

NEW DEFENCE CONCEPTS OF EUROPEAN STATES IN THE UAS ERA

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Abstract: *The European security environment has entered a phase of accelerated transformation, driven by the return of high-intensity conventional warfare combined with the widespread use of emerging technologies. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that military superiority is no longer defined exclusively by mass, firepower, or maneuver, but by the ability to rapidly integrate information, technology, and action across all operational domains. In this context, Europe has begun to develop new defence concepts, often generically described as „defensive lines”. However, these initiatives cannot be properly understood through simple historical analogies, but must be analyzed as adaptive, multi-domain systems in which UASs, distributed sensors, and digital networks play a central role. The fundamental question is not whether Europe is building „new lines of defence”, but whether these concepts are sufficient to counter a determined adversary capable of waging hybrid and attrition warfare.*

Keywords: *UAS, defensive lines, European Defence Readiness, drone wall, C-UAS*

1. INTRODUCTION

The transition from classic concepts of territorial defence to defence models based on a systemic approach, integrating military, economic, technological, and informational dimensions, represents a fundamental doctrinal shift in how Europe perceives security in the medium and long term. In the 20th century, defensive structures were built around fortifications, defensive depth, and force concentration, elements designed to slow down and defeat conventional attacks, based on the idea of relatively stable fronts and extended campaigns. These models required centralized control and a predictable operational rhythm, in which fortifications functioned as static „shields”, conceptually separated from the manoeuvring of forces. The new European initiatives, on the other hand, are oriented toward systematic defence, characterized by the integration of technological, doctrinal, and operational capabilities into a coherent and adaptive system. This involves early and continuous detection of threats, deterrence and delay of the adversary, precision strikes at low cost, and conservation of friendly forces for the decisive phases of the conflict. In this model, physical fortifications and traditional infrastructure are no longer central elements, but multipliers of the effects generated by UAS (Unmanned Aircraft System), distributed sensors, and high-precision fire systems.

Obstacles are not designed to permanently stop an attack, but to create favourable time windows for operational response, increasing the overall resilience of the defensive system.

In this way, defence is no longer conceived as a set of passive structures designed for static protection of the territory, but as an active component of the operational system, capable of generating information and decisive effects in an environment characterized by speed, uncertainty, and constant challenges. The transition from static fortifications to dynamic architectures is based on the integration of defence systems such as radars, C-UAS capabilities, and electronic warfare means as elements that support the decision-making process and enable the engagement of the adversary through coordinated fire in multiple operational domains [1].

This evolution reflects not only a technological change, but also a conceptual one: defence is no longer linear or static, but is becoming a multidimensional and reactive system, capable of integrating data collected by autonomous platforms, prioritizing threats, and optimizing the use of resources in real time. Faced with this reality, Europe has launched programs to strengthen its ground and air defence, often presented in public discourse as „*new lines of defence*” [2]. These initiatives include both physical elements: obstacles, fortifications, and military infrastructure, as well as advanced technological components, such as UAS, distributed sensors, C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) networks, and electronic warfare capabilities. In this way, the new „*lines of defence*” are no longer just walls or fortifications, but adaptive architectures that combine physical, digital, and technological tools to support rapid decision-making and coordinated action in a rapidly changing, sophisticated, and unpredictable operational environment.

However, the proliferation of emerging technologies and the multiplication of national initiatives raise fundamental questions about the strategic coherence and operational effectiveness of these efforts. The integration of UAS and autonomous systems promises a significant increase in surveillance, response, and force economy capabilities, but at the same time introduces new vulnerabilities related to network dependency, the electromagnetic spectrum, and industrial resilience.

Based on these premises, the article aims to analyse new European defence concepts from the perspective of the transformation of modern warfare, with a focus on the role of UAS and associated technologies. The main objective is to assess the extent to which these initiatives contribute to credible deterrence and real defence capabilities. In this sense, the paper does not seek to provide an exhaustive overview of all existing programs, but rather to identify structural trends, advantages, and limitations of the current European strategic direction.

Therefore, the research is based on a qualitative, conceptual and doctrinal analysis, using open sources and official documents relevant to the field of defence and security. NATO and European Union doctrinal documents, institutional reports, specialized academic studies, as well as analyses published by security think tanks are analysed. This approach is complemented by an analysis of the main defence initiatives developed by various European states, with the aim of highlighting the main directions and concepts that will form the basis of a defence system adapted to the requirements of contemporary warfare.

The methodology adopted does not seek to provide a detailed assessment of the technical performance of individual systems, but rather to examine how they are integrated into broader defence architectures, particularly within C4ISR structures. The emphasis is on the relationship between technology, doctrine, and organizational adaptability, which are considered essential factors for the effectiveness of new defence concepts in a constantly contested and multi-domain operational environment.

2. EUROPEAN INITIATIVES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As the European security environment continues to evolve under pressure from conventional and hybrid threats, EU member states have begun to outline strategic programs that serve not only to strengthen their defensive posture, but also to create real mechanisms for deterrence and long-term operational resilience.

In order to move from fragmented and reactive initiatives to a coordinated, multi-domain strategy focused on real, interoperable, and sustainable capabilities, the EU has come up with legislative proposals to increase the level of European defence readiness: European Defence Readiness 2030. This commitment aims to strengthen the response capacity and resilience of European states by 2030. The document responds to the strategic challenges posed by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the changing global security environment, emphasizing the need for Europe to become „*more sovereign, more responsible for its own defence and better equipped to act and deal autonomously and in a coordinated way with immediate and future challenges and threats*” [3]. This strategic framework also highlights the importance of a strong European defence industrial base capable of producing and supplying equipment at a scale and pace appropriate to operational needs and deterrence objectives for 2030. Strengthening technological and industrial capabilities is considered essential to reduce external strategic dependencies and support European defence cooperation projects.

This plan to enhance European defence readiness proposes four main strategic projects designed to strengthen the European Union's ability to anticipate and respond to emerging security threats by 2030. The first initiative: European network of anti-drone measures („*drone wall*”), renamed the European Drone Defence Initiative, aims to develop a state-of-the-art interoperable system for both countering and operational use of unmanned aircraft systems. It aims to create a multi-layered network capable of detecting, tracking, and neutralizing hostile drones, while integrating advanced UAS platforms to enable precision strikes. The initiative is based on lessons learned from the conflict in Ukraine and is closely related to the proposal to create a drone Alliance with Ukraine, designed to support technological and industrial cooperation in this field. At the same time, the initiative has another use, allowing the capabilities developed to be applied in civilian contexts, such as border protection or emergency and disaster management. The program is expected to be launched in the first quarter of 2026, reach initial operational capability by the end of that year, and become fully operational by the end of 2027 [4].

A second project, Eastern Flank Watch, is designed to strengthen land defence capabilities, counter-UAS, border and critical infrastructure protection, military mobility, and strategic support capabilities, thereby creating a rapid response mechanism and coordinated resilience at the EU level. The leaders of the countries located on this border: including Finland, Sweden, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Bulgaria, have called for the prioritization of European funding for this initiative, arguing that they are „*on the front line*” of direct and long-term threats posed by Russia and that a coordinated, multi-domain operational approach is essential for common security [5].

Air Defence Shield (European Air Shield) is the third priority project of the EU for European Defence Readiness 2030 and represents a collaborative effort by EU member states to create an integrated air and missile defence shield covering the entire spectrum of air threats: ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, aircraft, UAS, and drone swarms, creating a layered and interoperable architecture to protect the Union's territory against conventional and complex air threats. This project aims not only to strengthen sensors and kinetic systems, but also to ensure interoperability with NATO structures, thus addressing both traditional gaps and issues highlighted by recent conflicts [6].

The Defence Space Shield project, recently renamed European Space Shield (ESS), is the fourth European initiative to strengthen situational awareness and protect critical space infrastructure. Its main purpose is to protect the EU and its member states against emerging threats in space: from jamming communications and navigation signals to intercepting or disrupting civilian and military satellites. ESS integrates orbital object monitoring, satellite communications protection, and interoperability with command and control systems, providing real-time data for decision support and coordination of multi-domain operations. In addition, the project aims to maintain Europe's technological and strategic competition in space by developing autonomous capabilities and reducing dependence on external suppliers. This initiative reflects lessons learned from the conflict in Ukraine, where space has become a decisive domain for intelligence gathering and precision strike coordination [7].

These strategic projects are designed to function as a coherent set of capabilities covering land, air, sea, cyber, and space domains, and are planned to include both technological components and collaborative procurement and production mechanisms between member states. Overall, the strategic framework aims not only to close capability gaps, but also to strengthen Europe's strategic autonomy through joint deterrence and defence projects.

There are other defence initiatives, such as the Polish Eastern Shield project, launched in 2024, which involves fortifying a 700 km stretch of the border with Belarus and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad with anti-mobility obstacles (anti-tank ditches, dragon's teeth, 5 m smart fences), over 100 bunkers and fortifications, minefields, fortified bridges, and integrated C-UAS systems, with completion planned by 2028 [8]. Key components of this upgrade should include UAS detection and classification systems, such as low-altitude radars, optoelectronic systems, and passive sensors for receiving UAS data transmissions. Counter-UAS (C-UAS) measures must cover stationary/mobile jamming, kinetic and non-kinetic neutralization, and at the same time, integration with command and control must be achieved to enable real-time situational assessment and transnational data sharing with other Baltic states [9].

Another relevant example of a regional defence initiative is the Baltic Defence Line (BDL), a coordinated system of fortifications and defensive capabilities on the border of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Designed as a set of multi-layered positions, it includes anti-vehicle obstacles, trenches, reinforced bunkers, observation posts, and sensors, as well as integrated ISR systems such as UAS. The BDL aims to slow down and channel the advance of an attacking force, providing crucial time for the arrival and deployment of NATO forces under Article 5. Compared to the traditional defensive system, this line functions as a „*battlefield shaping*” mechanism, extending operational depth and increasing the costs of an invasion for the aggressor. With three planned echelons of resistance and integrated interoperability with allied command structures, the BDL reflects both the need for deterrence through denial and adaptation to the geographical constraints of NATO's eastern flank, where short distances and proximity to Russian borders require proactive and flexible defensive solutions. [10].

The United States Army Europe and Africa (USAREUR-AF) command has also initiated the Eastern Flank Deterrence Line (EFDL), a new US-NATO concept for countering Russian threats through improved land capabilities and military-industrial interoperability. Initially focused on the Baltic states, the EFDL defines precise requirements for common launchers (offensive/defensive, optionally autonomous), low-cost standardized ammunition, universal fire control systems, and online coordination augmented by AI (artificial intelligence) systems with the ultimate goal of launching the most cost-effective ammunition relative to the target [11].

We must also mention Operation Eastern Sentry, a NATO activity launched on September 12, 2025, as a direct response to repeated incursions by Russian drones into Polish airspace (September 9-10, 2025), invoked under Article 4 and continuing Operation Baltic Sentry (January 2025). Announced by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte and SACEUR Gen. Alexis G. Grynkewich, the operation integrates fighter jets, helicopters, transporters, anti-aircraft systems, surveillance aircraft, and frigates, plus innovative anti-drone technologies with the primary goal of enhancing NATO's (air, sea, ground) to intercept Russian drones entering allied airspace, moving from separate national efforts to a unified operational policy across the entire eastern flank, from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea [12].

Overall, the defensive architecture taking shape on the eastern flank is not a mosaic of disparate initiatives, but rather the expression of a systemic transformation in the way Europe conceives its security. The programs brought together under European Defence Readiness 2030: European Drone Defence Initiative, Eastern Flank Watch, European Air Shield, and European Space Shield represent the foundation of the new European approach, focused on early detection, sensor-effector integration, and information superiority. They are complemented, without confusion, by parallel initiatives such as the Eastern Shield, the Baltic Defence Line, and the NATO Eastern Flank Deterrence Line concept, each with its own distinct role: national defensive infrastructure, regional fortifications, and multi-domain deterrence architecture. Together, these projects mark the transition from static defence to a distributed, adaptive, and digitally connected defence capable of responding not only to a conventional attack but also to the dynamism of hybrid and attrition warfare.

3. THE ROLE OF UAS IN NEW DEFENCE CONCEPTS

Unmanned aircraft systems are a central element of new European defence concepts, constituting one of the main sources of innovation and operational efficiency in contemporary conflicts. Their integration into the defensive architecture reflects a fundamental paradigm shift, in which superiority is no longer determined exclusively by large and expensive platforms, but by the ability to quickly process and exploit information in support of decision-making and action.

Some of the most important missions of UAS remain surveillance and reconnaissance, which substantially reduce operational uncertainty and maintain an accurate overall picture at both the tactical and operational levels, as demonstrated by the widespread use of ISR drones in the war in Ukraine, where they have become a central component of modern military operations and have been used in record numbers for continuous monitoring of the battlefield.

At the same time, integrating data collected by unmanned aerial platforms into C4ISR networks helps shorten the sensor-to-shooter information flow, decisively reducing the time between detection and engagement and facilitating accelerated decision-making under operational pressure. The integration of multi-sensor fusion into C-UAS architectures is one of the essential developments in modern drone defence, as small, slow, and low-signature drones are increasingly difficult to detect with a single type of sensor. The effectiveness of current air defence depends on the real-time correlation of data from radar, RF sensors, and electro-optical systems, each with distinct advantages and limitations, which means that using them in isolation can lead to both delays and high false alarm rates. In this context, an adequate infrastructure for interoperability is needed, allowing C-UAS systems to process and merge data from multiple sources into a single, coherent, and actionable picture.

Such approaches are already being applied in Ukraine, where the „Delta” ecosystem combines diverse sources of information to accelerate the detection, classification, and engagement of enemy drones, reducing errors and increasing operational response speed in complex combat conditions [13]. Therefore, multi-sensor fusion is not just a technical optimization, but the basis of a modern defensive architecture that allows C-UAS systems to respond quickly to a wide range of threats.

At the same time, the significant increase in drone threats has necessitated the development of defensive solutions that use UAS themselves in counter-UAS roles as part of a layered air defence. The operational experience gained in Ukraine, where MEROPS shot down over a thousand Russian Shahed drones and other similar systems, has reinforced the platform's reputation as an effective tool for countering asymmetric air attacks, highlighting its cost-effectiveness in the context of a conflict characterized by the intensive use of inexpensive air munitions. The rapid acquisition of the system by Poland and Romania, as well as the implementation of an accelerated multinational training program, reflect the adaptation to the lessons learned from the Ukrainian conflict and the inclusion of these types of systems in the regional defence architecture, where they complement the Eastern Flank Deterrence Line concept by providing a scalable and effective low-altitude air defence capability [14].

In addition to these established functions, new European defence concepts attribute to UAS an expanded set of complementary roles, transforming them into a structural element of these defensive architectures. Thus, UAS are increasingly used as aerial communications nodes, extending coverage and providing redundancy to tactical networks in contested environments or areas where ground infrastructure is vulnerable. In many cases, UAS platforms are equipped with electronic warfare capabilities, enabling them to jam, disrupt, or identify enemy electromagnetic sources, thereby helping to protect their own systems and degrade enemy command and control capabilities. The evolution of loitering drones and the adaptation of FPV (First Person View) drones have also expanded the role of UAS in executing low-cost precision strikes, providing the ability to generate rapid lethal effects adapted to tactical needs. Logistically, drones can be used to transport ammunition, medical equipment, or critical packages to dispersed units, reducing the exposure of supply lines.

In conclusion, in Europe's defensive architecture, UAS cannot be used simply as surveillance tools or as sensors integrated into the rapid engagement chain, but as multifunctional platforms that increase operational resilience, accelerate decision-making, multiply tactical options, and contribute to the creation of a distributed, adaptable defence capable of progressively degrading the adversary's potential across the entire spectrum of conflict.

4. THE DEFENCE INDUSTRY AND SUSTAINABILITY

A long-term conflict cannot be sustained by advanced prototypes or isolated initiatives, but requires robust, scalable, and resilient industrial capabilities able to produce large volumes of equipment at a pace compatible with the intensity of modern operations. Europe still faces structural difficulties in this area. Although the European Union has launched programs dedicated to increasing the production of ammunition and missiles, such as the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), these were designed primarily as a response to the urgent need to replenish depleted stocks and support Ukraine, not as a tool for a profound transformation of the industrial base.

ASAP has allocated over €500 million to expand production capacities for explosives, powders, projectiles, and missiles, with the goal of reaching an annual volume of 2 million shells by the end of 2025, but the Commission's report acknowledges that supply bottlenecks and external dependencies remain significant [15].

Independent assessments show that the problem runs deeper than production rates. According to analysis by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, European industrial capabilities suffer from market fragmentation, lack of standardization, chronic underinvestment since the Cold War, and bottlenecks in supply chains, from powders and explosives to microelectronics and critical subassemblies. Even where technological expertise exists, production rates are limited by the reduced capacity of small suppliers and external dependencies for strategic raw materials [16].

Furthermore, although Eastern European countries have embarked on ambitious industrial expansion programs, their growth is insufficient given the nature of contemporary conflicts, which are characterized by massive consumption of ammunition, drones, and counter-UAS systems. The experience in Ukraine shows that modern warfare involves the daily use of thousands of drones, millions of cartridges, and tens of thousands of shells, levels that European industry cannot yet sustain autonomously and consistently. In this context, recent EU programs, such as the Readiness Roadmap 2030, highlight the need to strengthen supply chains, integrate the European defence market, and create a permanent mechanism for scale production capable of supporting both current operations and preventive rearmament [17].

Thus, the issue of European defence sustainability is not only technological, but primarily industrial: Europe can innovate, but it struggles to produce. In the absence of scalable production capacity for UAS, ammunition, and C-UAS systems, the conceptual advantages of new defensive architectures are likely to remain incomplete, and dependent on external suppliers such as the United States, Israel, or South Korea, which compromises the goal of European strategic autonomy.

CONCLUSIONS

Europe's new „*lines of defence*” do not represent a return to the defensive models of the past, but rather an attempt to adapt the lessons of modern warfare into a credible defensive architecture. UAS and associated technologies are not miracle solutions, but they are essential multipliers in an operational environment dominated by speed, information, and precision.

At present, Europe cannot be considered fully prepared for a high-intensity conflict with a militarily comparable adversary. However, the continent is clearly moving in the right direction, both conceptually and doctrinally, integrating the changes that contemporary warfare has brought with it.

The fundamental change lies in recognizing that modern defence can no longer be static, linear, or exclusively conventional. New European concepts emphasize adaptability, distributed technology, economy of force, and the integration of humans, machines, and artificial intelligence, reflecting a shift from a logic of massing forces and equipment to one of connectivity, resilience, and rapid decision-making.

However, although the strategic direction is clearly the right one, the current level of coherence, interoperability, and capabilities remains insufficient to guarantee credible deterrence. Most C-UAS and defence modernization projects are still in the early stages of implementation, dependent on medium and long-term funding, and are constrained by European industrial and doctrinal fragmentation.

In the absence of accelerated integration within NATO IAMD and C4ISR, as well as clear command and control mechanisms at the allied level, there is a risk that these initiatives will remain means of strengthening local defence rather than decisively changing the balance of power in a large-scale confrontation.

Therefore, Europe is not prepared for a high-intensity conflict on its eastern flank, but for the first time since the Cold War, it is on a realistic strategic path to adapt to modern warfare. The success of this transition will depend on the ability of European states to transform these „*new lines of defence*” from fragmented and predominantly national initiatives into an integrated, interoperable, and credible at the allied level, capable of combining emerging technology with increased industrial capacity alongside political will and effective military coordination within the EU, but also within NATO.

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