



*Building European capacity to meet
the challenges of the 21st century*

WHAT FUTURE FOR EUROPEAN DEFENCE? *Views and Recommendations from the ELN Caucus*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Earlier this year, the European Leadership Network sought the opinions of some of its membership about the future of the European defence project. The ELN Caucus represents a diverse group of 45 individuals from 16 countries and all the major regions of the Euro-Atlantic area. Its members are former, present and emerging political, military and diplomatic leaders. They responded to our questionnaire and the following is an analysis of their views.

The key findings of the ELN Caucus reveal a wide diversity of opinion among Europeans on several issues:

- ❖ There is no common view on the greatest threats facing Europe;
- ❖ Disagreement persists over the level of ambition for EU-NATO relations and the meaning of EU 'strategic autonomy'.

At the same time, we found greater convergence of views on a number of topics:

- ❖ There is significant backing for the increases in national defence investment and closer collaboration on military-related research and development;
- ❖ The Caucus sends a clear message of support for better EU-NATO coordination;
- ❖ A clear majority supports the EU developing limited capabilities for external crisis management, while relying on NATO and national militaries for defence; and
- ❖ Strong support exists across the entire continent for Theresa May's vision of a "deep and special" security and defence relationship between the UK and the EU after Brexit.

Political events across Europe and beyond in 2016 gave Europeans much needed impetus to examine and engage with the issues threatening the security and defence of Europe from within and outwith the continent. Even though the sense of urgency has increased in parallel with the developing threats and dangers, the way forward remains unclear. Questions about the role of the two main security stakeholders in Europe, the European Union (EU) and NATO, have been at the forefront of policy discussions, alongside such issues as the division of labour between the two organisations and the various priorities of individual member states and Allies. The complexity and fluidity of current domestic and international politics on the European continent, uncertainty about US foreign policy following the election of Donald Trump and the increased wariness about Russia's activities in Europe and the USA present both a challenge and an opportunity to transform and improve the architecture of Europe's security and defence.

To obtain a better understanding of the key dynamics characterising the security landscape, we reached out to ELN members for their advice and recommendations.¹ This brief presents the findings of a short questionnaire distributed among a group of senior former and current European statesmen and stateswomen from countries that are members of either the EU or NATO, or both.

The key messages below are based on information provided by 45 respondents from 16 countries across the continent: Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.²

The questionnaire followed the main actionable points that the EU and NATO have been considering since the publication of the [Global Strategy](#), the complementary [European Defence Action Plan](#) and the [EU-NATO declaration](#). The data collected from the responses provides an insight into the intricacies of the effects of recent European defence initiatives and highlights the critical tensions and opportunities that leaders of all European states have yet to address.

Our conclusions shed some light on how the operational issues and implementation of the recommendations in the above documents are perceived across the continent. In our analysis, we identify the most pragmatic ways for extracting benefit from the proposals currently being reviewed and determine the points of convergence which are likely to receive greatest support.³

¹ In line with the ELN's core mission to foster collective capacity, by mobilising the experience and expertise of our members, our objective is to steer policy making towards more effective, practical action that results in the improved security of all Europeans.

² The insights we have collected do not necessarily represent national positions, nor do they reflect any governmental policies. The participants answered the questions in their personal capacity drawing on their experience, knowledge and principles.

³ All percentages were rounded up to the decimal point and may not total 100%.

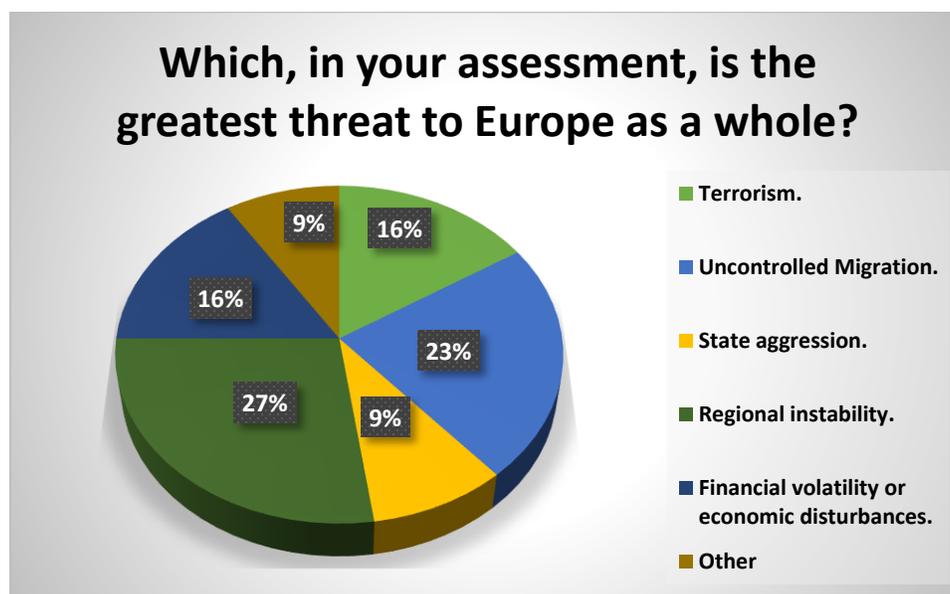
DIVERGENT VIEWS ON WHICH WAY EUROPEAN DEFENCE SHOULD GO

1.1 No common view on the greatest threat

If Europeans want to improve their own security, one of the biggest challenges they will have to overcome is bridging divisions over what constitutes the greatest danger to the continent. Without consensus on the main priority (or priorities), it will be difficult to adopt and implement policies that deliver meaningful change.

The largest group among our respondents cited **regional instability** as the single biggest danger to Europe. **Uncontrolled migration** followed closely in second place. Each of these issues collected over and under a quarter of all responses respectively. **Financial volatility** and **terrorism** each shared just over a sixth of the votes. It is important to note that all these phenomena pose significant risks to the entire Euro-Atlantic space and may be interrelated. However, the ways in which they must be addressed require different strategies and tools, dependent on the capability and resources of individual states. Such multidirectional splits on priorities will permeate decision-making across such critical areas as the strategic direction of EU-NATO collaboration, investment in defence and technological development. As a result, consensus will be more difficult to achieve.

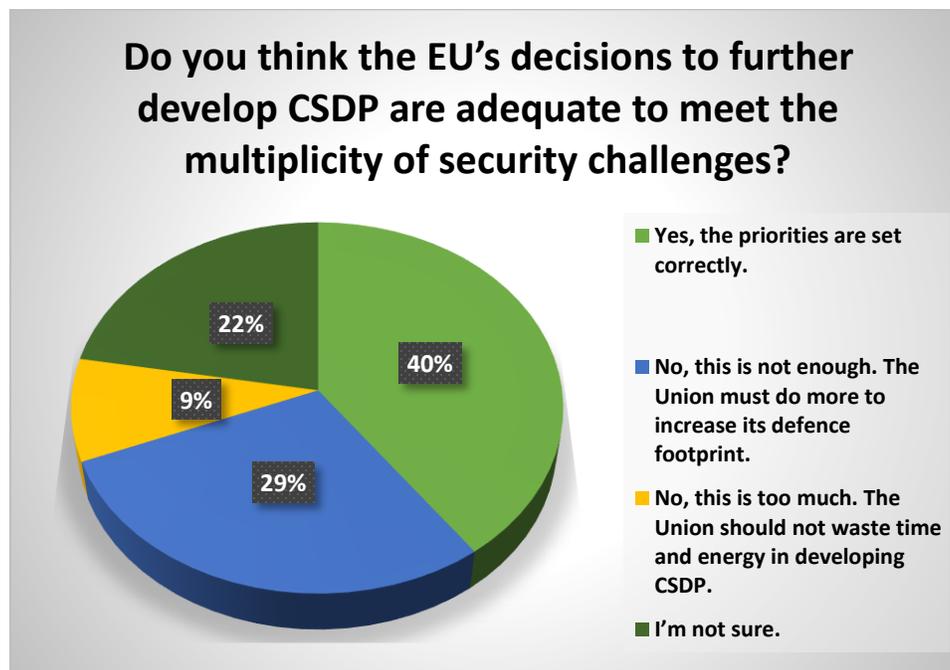
The threat of state aggression in Europe was highlighted in a small portion of the overall responses, which illustrates further nuances in European perceptions of the gravest dangers to their security.



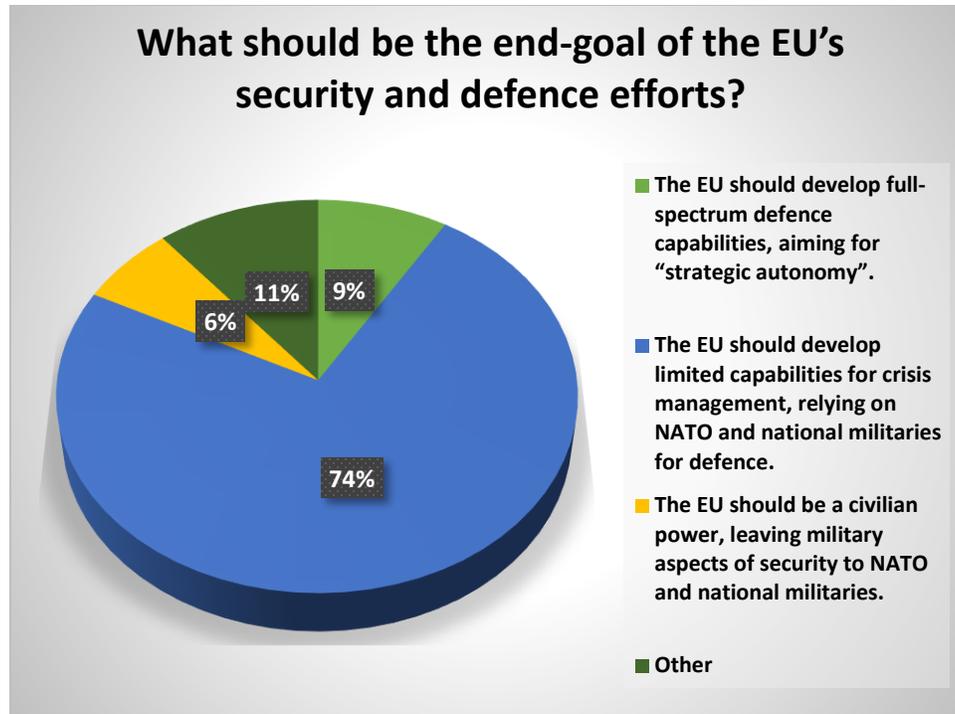
1.2 Support for developing CSDP further, but no backing for full EU strategic autonomy

Over the past nine months the EU has articulated a view of security that directly stems from the concept of strategic autonomy as its stated level of ambition. Part of the proposed implementation plans designed to meet this level of ambition encompass greater defence investment, restructuring of institutional arrangements, engagement with the European Commission and the re-evaluation of the forces and capabilities that the Union can utilise.

When asked about the relevance and sufficiency of such measures, **nearly half the respondents agreed that these priorities were set correctly. A further third supported the spirit of the initiative**, but regarded it as not ambitious enough. Importantly, only a small group rejected the need for EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as such. Just over a fifth of the people surveyed did not take a position on the matter, which may indicate that more effort should be directed at explaining the current developments and plans for the CSDP to European publics and politicians.

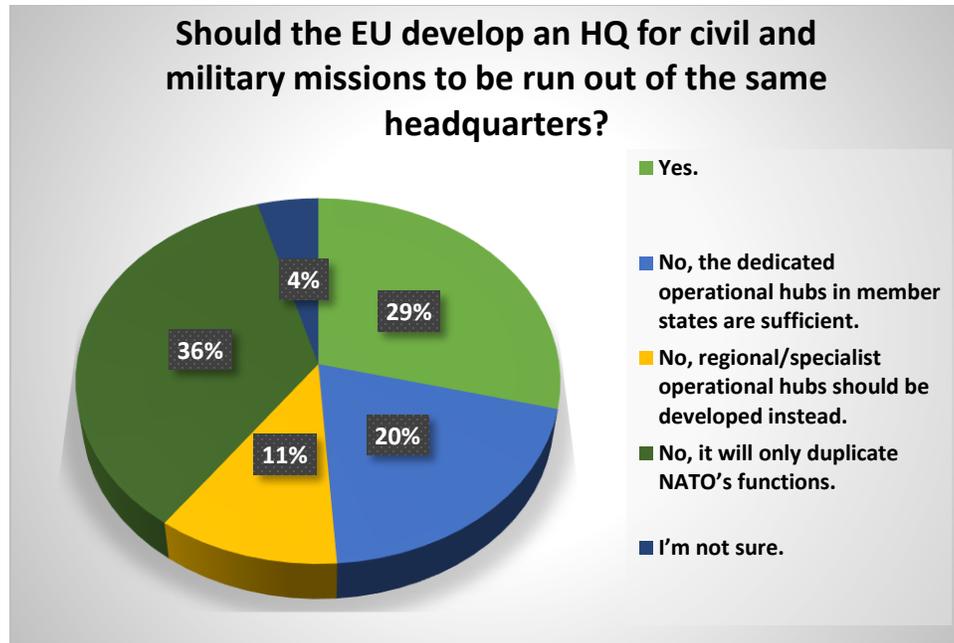


Further, when prompted to elaborate on their vision for the EU's contribution to security and defence, three quarters of all respondents expressed the opinion that the Union should only develop limited capabilities for external crisis management. Such a majority shows a clear preference for the EU to focus its ambitions towards external crisis management, not defence.



Comparing the overwhelming majority in favour of increasing Europe's crisis management capabilities to those who saw the EU's current priorities as correctly set, **it becomes clear that there is a tension between the EU stated level of ambition ('strategic autonomy') and the rather narrow set of the military tasks (crisis management) that a significant number of respondents would endorse.**

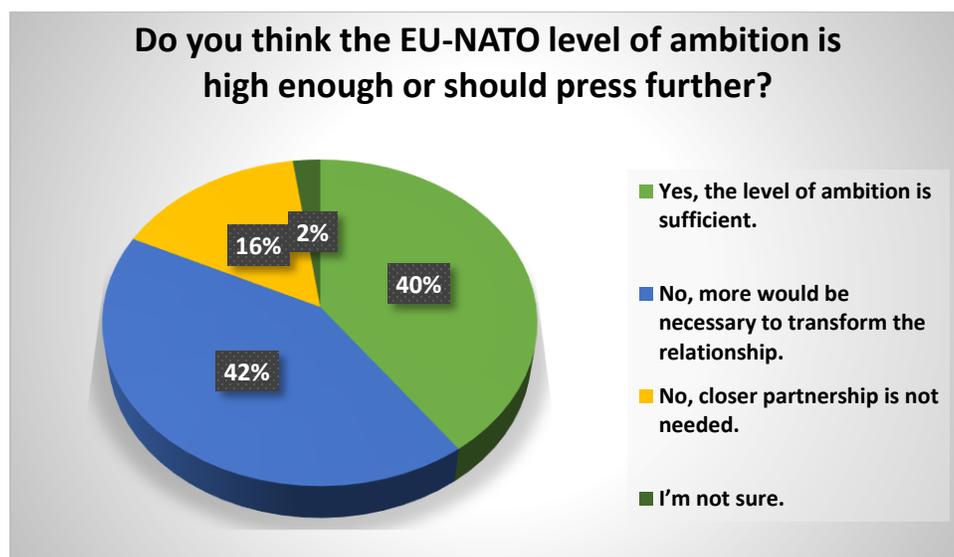
An even more **controversial issue is the proposal to develop joint EU civil-military headquarters.** Despite the fact that the Union recently agreed to establish the military planning and conduct capability, it appears that the more ambitious suggestion to run EU operations from a single commanding structure may not be accepted. Only a third of the respondents supported this proposal and a critical majority did not agree with its suitability, for a variety of reasons: some saw the current set up as sufficient, some favoured establishing new regional structures, and others feared it would duplicate NATO's functions.



1.3 Disagreement over the level of ambition for EU-NATO relations

Central to all issues of European security and defence are questions about the shape and scope of EU-NATO collaboration. When assessing the level of ambition established by the [42 points of the EU-NATO joint declaration](#), bearing in mind current political limitations, **respondents were almost evenly split** between a pragmatic vision of cooperation and a more ambitious vision of even closer partnership.

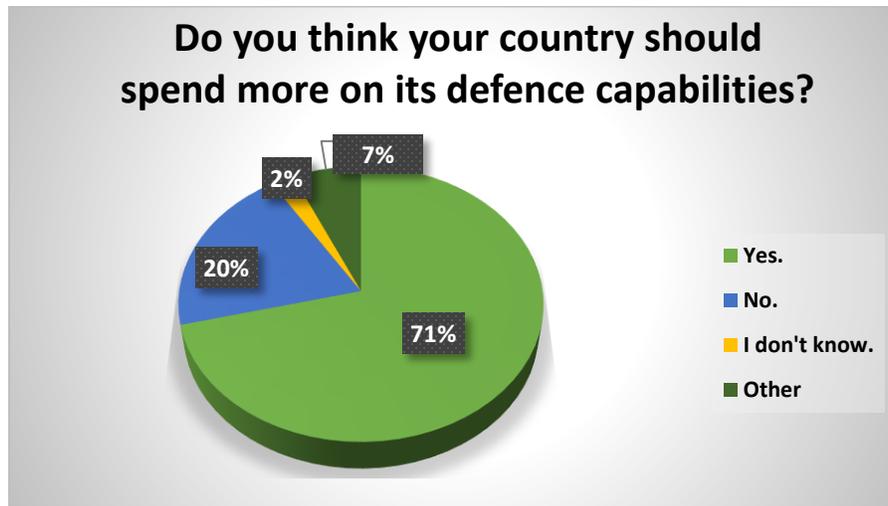
While this division indicates a generally positive attitude towards EU-NATO collaboration, it also brings the discussion back to the fundamental questions of what Europe's security should look like and how the EU and NATO would in future share the responsibilities of security as well as defence.



SUPPORT FOR PRACTICAL STEPS FOR IMPROVING EUROPE'S SECURITY

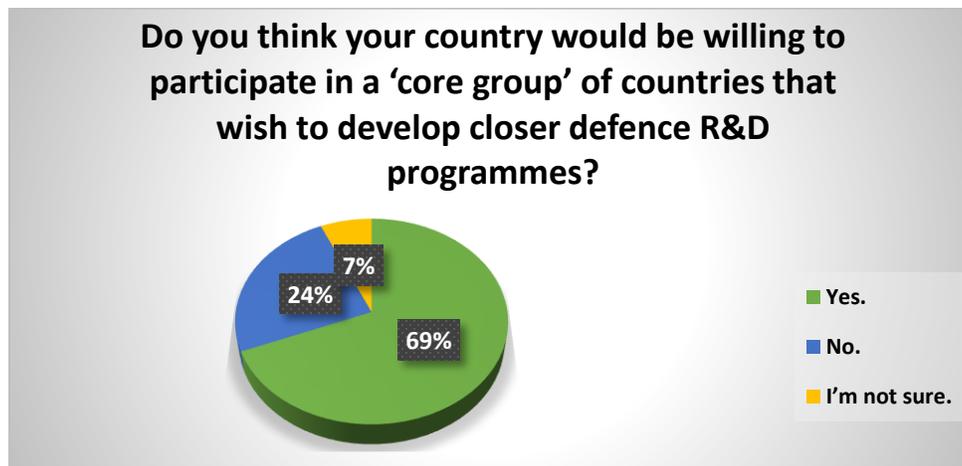
2.1 Strong backing for increased defence investment and closer collaboration on research and development

A topical theme for discussion across the majority of European countries is the increase of their defence spending. Our respondents expressed strong support for such an increase:



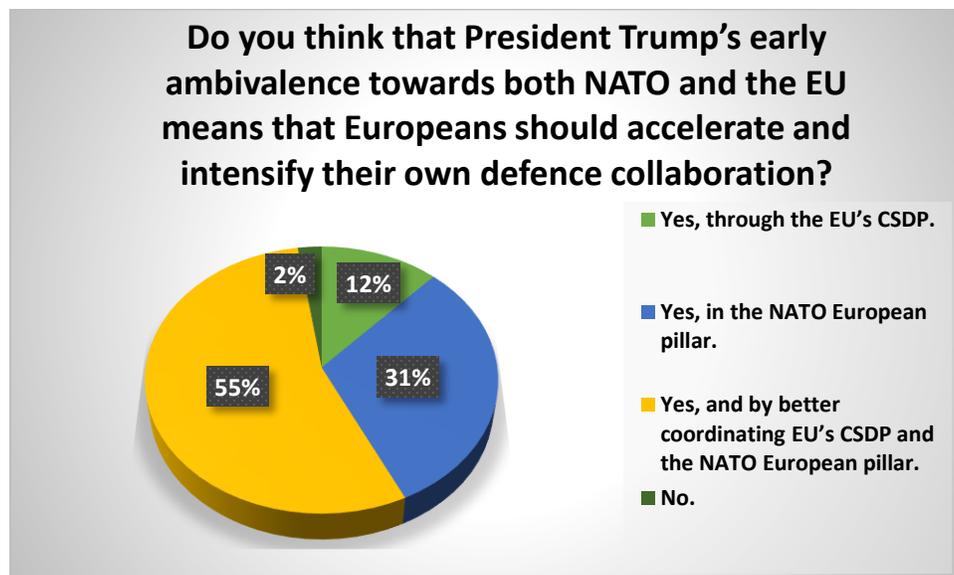
When delving into the specifics of how this effort to enhance and increase capabilities can translate into the establishment of closer defence cooperation across Europe, the overwhelming majority of those surveyed pointed to **enhancing cooperation specifically on research and development**.

More importantly, the respondents believed their respective **countries would be willing to cooperate in smaller clusters in order to speed up the development and delivery of military technologies**. This represents a key opportunity for fostering trust and interdependence which could lead, potentially, to better operational collaboration.



2.2 In response to President Trump’s ambivalence towards both the EU and NATO, a clear message of the need for better EU-NATO coordination

Amid the multiplicity of crises and threats surrounding Europe, a key decision about the future of the continent’s security revolves around the way in which Europeans should accelerate their collaboration. Nearly all respondents agreed with the need to intensify security and defence efforts. While some preferred this to be done primarily through the EU’s CSDP or within the NATO European pillar, **improved coordination between the two structures enjoyed the biggest support**. Investing more political capital in streamlining relationships to make them function more effectively could prove to be the middle ground for European politicians, as it would ensure decreased duplication and more efficient use of available resources.

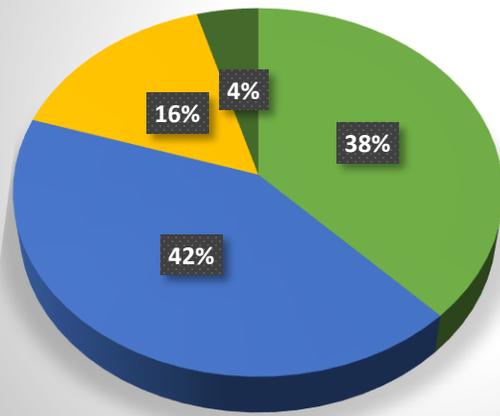


2.3 Strong support across Europe for Theresa May’s vision of a “deep and special” UK security and defence relationship with the EU after Brexit

Among all the variables surrounding forthcoming ‘Brexit’ negotiations, questions about the nature of the UK-EU relationship on security and defence remain an integral part of policy considerations on both sides of the Channel.

When prompted to assess the future outlook of how the UK and the Union should set their working dynamic, a definite majority maintained the position that the UK should continue to be engaged in or with the EU structures. While support was spilt between two kinds of institutional arrangements (full integration and partial integration in specific areas), it was evident that the respondents favoured close collaboration. The alternative choice of the UK cooperating with the rest of Europe but within different frameworks, for example NATO, received little support.

Do you think the UK should be fully integrated back into the EU security and defence framework post-Brexit?



■ Yes.

■ Partially: there should a special EU-UK cooperation arrangement covering specific areas.

■ No, the UK should seek to cooperate through different frameworks such as NATO.

■ I'm not sure.

CONCLUSIONS

- There seems to be little doubt among European politicians and their constituents that Europe needs to do more for its own security and defence. Although there is not much appetite for any revolutionary institutional change, there is clear support for enhancing co-ordination and co-operation along the lines of what has been agreed upon already, individually and collectively, by the EU and NATO.
- Across Europe, politicians' perceptions of threat vary and existing divergences over security and defence priorities will not be easily overcome. The first steps could be building resilience to respond to multiple threats (e.g. both state aggression and hybrid warfare) and devising crisis management plans to address a wide range of regional challenges. However, decision-makers need to communicate clearly that the strategies implemented would benefit all Europeans and that decisions about those strategies are taken with a well-defined vision for what Europe (the EU members and the European NATO Allies and their partners) must do.
- Recent efforts to increase the EU's security and defence footprint have been welcomed across Europe, even if there is little doubt that NATO remains the bedrock of the European defence architecture. However, all considerations are permeated by significant ambivalence over the ultimate aim of EU efforts in the security and defence sectors. Clarity and singularity of the EU mission in that regard will be difficult to achieve. However, as demonstrated by this Caucus, there is support for ***smarter and more agile policies for increased defence spending, increasing defence-related research & development efforts and a more effective partnership with NATO.***
- An excellent starting point would be **joint defence research and development of capabilities which could be employed in the service of both EU and NATO missions.** Such a proposal would build on the already agreed goal of developing complementary defence capacities and would avoid opposition from those who favour working within a single framework.
- Other than in the areas of research and development, the formation of operational clusters of states outside EU treaty structures, or attempts to create not fully inclusive formats for closer cooperation with external states would be met with resistance from those EU member states and NATO Allies who want to avoid duplication or multi-speed action.
- Even though there is no shared vision of the final goal and level of ambition for the overall collaboration effort, **improving the coordination between NATO and the EU along the lines of the already agreed joint declaration** is seen as the best way in which Europeans might look after their own security.
- In recognition of the **central role the UK plays in Europe's security, leaders across the continent support as close as possible a security and defence relationship between Britain and the EU.** It is in the interest of all of Europe that 'Brexit' causes minimum disruption to defence and wider security collaboration.