What should be the task of the European Union in European defence? The European integration project evolved under the United States' security umbrella. Since the failed attempt at a European Defence Community in the 1950s, the EU's involvement in the field has been limited and anchored in the transatlantic security framework. After the end of the Cold War, EU members enjoyed the peace dividend. However, with the Russian aggression in Ukraine having entered its fourth year and with a US president determined to accelerate the US withdrawal from Europe, European countries must do more to bolster their defence.

In 2022, a few weeks after Russia's attempted full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, the EU adopted its Strategic Compass for Defence, aiming at strengthening its security and defence policy by 2030. Russia's military aggression brought additional urgency to the EU's ongoing work on enhancing its strategic posture and developing its joint capability of approaching security threats. The White Paper for European Defence - Readiness 2030, presented on March 19 this year, comes at a time when the security environment has further deteriorated after Mr Trump entered the White House for a second term as US president. The White Paper acknowledges the need for the EU to do much more to ensure credible deterrence and security for its member states.

The White Paper should serve as a 'blueprint for action to deliver a more capable, fully ready European defence by 2030' by increasing defence spending within the EU, filling capability gaps, supporting Ukraine and developing partnerships with other states around the world. ***The question is whether the White Paper presents a sufficient framework to fulfil this ambition, or what else the EU can and should do to strengthen its defence readiness.***

The role of the EU within the field of defence is largely that of a facilitator and a coordinator. The White Paper stresses that it is the responsibility of the Member States to ramp up their defence capabilities. The larger share of the ReArm Europe plan comes from national resources, and the member states can decide how to invest in their defence. ***Is there a risk that insufficient attention is paid to ensuring that investments are targeted where they are most needed? Should more work be done to enhance the interoperability of EU member states?***

The "buy European" principle included in the SAFE instrument of the ReArm Europe plan states that procured products must have at least 65% of their origin from EU, EEA, or EFTA countries or Ukraine. ***Is there a risk, though, that the "buy European" approach can clash with the interests of allies? What about the US, the UK and their defence industries?***

The White Paper stresses the importance of an open European security architecture and variable geometry approaches. Since 23 of the EU's member states are in NATO, the alliance remains at the core of the union's defence. Therefore, it is logical for the EU to use enhanced cooperation in this area to enable development without requiring the participation of all member states, and also enable the flexible inclusion of like-minded non-EU countries, as in the case of the Permanent Structured Cooperation. However, the differentiated approach might raise some concerns about the coherence. Moreover, the crucial role of NATO stresses the importance of the US. ***What can and should the EU do to maintain the US interest in Europe? Can Europe even manage without the US?***