INDEPENDENT SPECULATIVE PROJECT - FOR PORTFOLIO PURPOSES ONLY

The Wall Street Journal
Opinion: European defense infrastructure is more important than any single war.
28 October 2026

This fictional op-ed is written from the perspective of a hypothetical executive responsible for sales and business development in Europe and Africa at Embraer Defense & Security. It is not affiliated with or endorsed by Embraer or The Wall Street Journal.

European defense preparedness must extend beyond the duration of any individual conflict. The foundations of the European Union were forged from the devastation of the Second World War, with the ambition to create the practical conditions necessary to sustain peace on the continent. Sustaining peace requires infrastructure, training and long-term support necessary to keep military capabilities operational. How can Europe make defense investment economically sustainable over the decades required to build and maintain capability? European governments must not only demonstrate the political willingness to finance defense capabilities today but also establish the economic and institutional arrangements to sustain them tomorrow.

In 2021, only seven of the EU member states that also belonged to NATO at that time were spending at least 2% of GDP on defense. As Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 forced Europe to confront the persistence of war on the continent, the challenge is now ensuring that this extraordinary increase in spending produces lasting military capability. EU defense expenditure subsequently reached €418bn in 2025, with €454bn projected for 2026. The EU's Readiness 2030 initiative aims to mobilize up to €800bn in additional defense spending.

Higher defense expenditure does not necessarily translate into greater operational readiness. Purchasing aircraft, vehicles and other equipment does not automatically produce operational capability needed in peace- and wartime. Defense systems depend on an interconnected network of infrastructure and services, many of which require sustained investment beyond the original procurement.

Existing civilian infrastructure also needs to become part of the security conversation. Energy networks, airports, ports, data centers, and subsea cables face growing resilience challenges. The consequences of infrastructure vulnerabilities extend far beyond the battlefield. The clearest examples became apparent almost immediately after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. German households purchased nearly one million electric heaters in just eight months amid fears of gas shortages. Across the European Union, the proportion of people unable to keep their homes adequately warm rose from 6.9% in 2021 to 10.6% in 2023. Meanwhile, a shortage of wiring harnesses from Ukrainian suppliers forced German truck manufacturer MAN to suspend production at major plants, affecting thousands of workers. The disruption demonstrated how even sophisticated industrial operations can depend on a relatively small number of specialized suppliers. In the 21st century, Europe's economic and technological capabilities should be matched by the resilience of the infrastructure and supply chains upon which its citizens and industries depend.

This is an independent, fictional communications exercise. It is not affiliated with, endorsed or issued on behalf of Embraer or The Wall Street Journal.

It is just as important to invest in the personnel responsible for operating and maintaining Europe's growing defense capabilities. According to the European Defence Agency's 2025-26 defense data report, personnel numbers increased by just 3.8% from 2023-2025. It is worth considering that unlike equipment procurement, military personnel cannot be expanded simply through additional budget allocations. Competition from civilian employers, difficulties retaining experienced service members and limited training capacity have complicated efforts to expand Europe's armed forces. Without corresponding investment in people, Europe's growing inventory of sophisticated military equipment risks outpacing its ability to operate and maintain it.

Infrastructure itself (e.g., airfields, ports, barracks, training facilities or other fixed military assets) comprised just 2.3% of total defense expenditure in 2025, while equipment procurement accounted for approximately 85% of defense investment. Only 24% of defense equipment procurement was undertaken collaboratively in 2025 by member states, including arrangements with third-party partners. European collaborative procurement also remained below the 35% benchmark established in 2007. This shortfall is particularly concerning because the European Investment Bank (EIB) estimated this year that better-coordinated European defense spending could save approximately €3bn annually in equipment procurement and up to €820 million on research into emerging technologies.

If Europe wants to realize the EU's Readiness 2030 objectives, it needs greater interoperability between European armed forces. The consequences of fragmented procurement are substantial. According to the Kiel Institute, Europe operates 14 different main battle tank models, compared with one in the United States. Such variance complicates procurement, maintenance and logistics, while limiting opportunities to achieve economies of scale. Moving forward, it is important that governments coordinate not only on what equipment they buy, but also how that equipment will be maintained, supported and operated together.

Defense manufacturers cannot expand production capacity overnight. They must invest in new production facilities, specialized workforces and supply chains, often years before those investments generate meaningful returns. Without predictable demand, companies may struggle to justify expanding industrial capacity that governments increasingly require. According to the EIB, cross-border mergers and acquisitions within the EU defense sector have increased by 60% since 2021, but industry consolidation alone does not guarantee that Europe will have the production capacity it needs. Governments must therefore consider how their procurement practices can provide greater certainty to manufacturers. Multi-year purchasing commitments and arrangements that support the maintenance of production capacity could encourage industry to invest beyond immediate demand, helping preserve capabilities even when short-term procurement requirements decline.

Some European manufacturers are already responding to this challenge. Missile manufacturer MBDA doubled production between 2023 and 2025 and has outlined plans to invest €5bn in European operations between 2026 and 2030. These commitments demonstrate the scale of industrial investment required to translate growing defense budgets into production capacity.

This is an independent, fictional communications exercise. It is not affiliated with, endorsed or issued on behalf of Embraer or The Wall Street Journal.

Consider military aviation. The delivery of a new aircraft does not automatically make it mission-ready. Pilots and aircrews require continuous training, maintenance personnel need specialized technical expertise and operators depend on accessible spare parts, simulation facilities and logistical support throughout an aircraft's service life. These investments are essential to turning equipment purchases into operational capability.

European cooperation should not end when a procurement agreement is signed. Shared training facilities, coordinated maintenance arrangements and common support infrastructure could help participating countries make more effective use of their investments while improving interoperability across national forces. Aircraft manufacturers such as Embraer understand that delivering an aircraft is only the beginning of a much longer commitment.

The success of Europe's defense investments should ultimately be measured not only by the size of the national budgets or the value of procurement contracts, but by the capabilities those investments deliver: equipment that is operational, personnel who are trained, supply chains that are resilient and armed forces that can operate together when required. Europe's preparedness must endure beyond individual conflicts.

This is an independent, fictional communications exercise. It is not affiliated with, endorsed or issued on behalf of Embraer or The Wall Street Journal.