

# Land Forces by Design: How China, the US, and the EU Turn Strategic Intent into Military Capability

**María Caminero Clemente**

Department, IE University, Madrid, Spain  
BBA BIR.

E-mail: [mcaminero.ieu2023@student.ie.edu](mailto:mcaminero.ieu2023@student.ie.edu)

Published: January 2026

Editor: Sara Castagna, Science Po

## Abstract

This article examines how China, the United States, and the European Union are able to translate strategic intent into military capability within the land domain. The issue arises in the context of intensifying great power competition, where timely and coherent defense delivery has become a political priority. The paper reviews the strategic governance frameworks of the three actors, each of which is shaped by a different institutional logic: namely, centralised reform in China, interagency negotiation in the US and multilateral consensus in the EU. The review concludes that China's model allows for faster execution but structural rigidity, which poses strategic risks; the U.S. leads the innovation sector, but is often offset by bureaucratic delays; and the EU is largely limited by its fragmented operating structure, which has resulted in the lengthiest decision-making process. These differences are defining and revealing elements in terms of their credibility and actual capacity when it comes to the development of ground forces. The recommendations proposed in this article primarily focus primarily on the EU, given that it is in the most disadvantageous position. As such, it should prioritize streamlining its joint decision-making processes and to strengthen cohesion and integration among its member states.

Keywords: strategic governance; military capability; policy latency; crisis response; European defence integration

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, due to escalating tensions such as the Russian-Ukraine war<sup>1</sup> and growing frictions in the Middle East, the speculation over which major power holds

strategic superiority has intensified. Or in other words, who is winning the strategic competition?

To address this question, it is important to examine how countries manage to translate their defense strategies into actual military capabilities, particularly in the land domain, where the outcomes are more visible and tangible.

This article is based on the following hypothesis: having an

---

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of how the Ukraine war reshaped European defense priorities, see: Sven Biscop, *European Strategy in the 21st Century: New Future for Old Power* (Routledge, 2019); and European Council on Foreign Relations, "Europe's Defence Awakening," ECFR Policy Brief, March 2023.

ambitious strategy is not enough; what ultimately matters is the ability to implement it coherently, effectively and consistently.

Contrary to expectations that traditional warfare was becoming obsolete, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated that territorial control remains central. The ability to control territory, deploy troops and project deterrence along physical borders remains essential, even in times of cyberattacks and hypersonic weapons. It is precisely on land that the discrepancy between declared strategy and actual capabilities is most evident. This reality goes hand in hand with the growing pressure on defense budgets. This means that understanding how military capabilities are built and deployed is no longer merely just a technical or military concern, but has become a major political question.

This article compares three models of strategic governance: China, the United States and the European Union. China operates under a centralized and reformist system that enables speed and control. The United States relies on technological innovation, but faces multiple bureaucratic barriers. The European Union, to a certain extent, stands as an emerging (and largely reactive) actor facing structural limitations inherent to its own system. The purpose of this analysis is to examine a series of key variables for the effective implementation of strategies. These variables include speed of decision-making, the time elapsed between planning and execution, and the consistency between the objectives set and the results obtained.

Rather than establishing a ranking among these models, the aim is to understand which elements enable a power to turn its strategic vision into real capabilities and to identify lessons that can be learned, particularly in the context of accelerating competition, budgetary pressure and growing demands for effectiveness, in the European case.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Strategic Governance in China, the United States, and the EU

The way in which each major power translates strategic intent into actual military capability is closely tied to its political and institutional model, as this determines how decisions are made and implemented.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the positions of each of the three actors are markedly different. For this reason, before assessing the effectiveness of their respective systems, it is necessary to first understand how each one operates from within.

### 2.1. China

The People's Republic of China's strategic governance model is characterized by a highly centralized structure, one-party rule, and long-term state planning. Both civilian and military power are fused under the authority of the Communist Party of China (CPC). This fusion enables the party to oversee both political and military decision-making, resulting in faster and more coherent

---

<sup>2</sup> Council of the European Union, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence – For a European Union that Protects its Citizens, Values and Interests and Contributes to International Peace and Security, March 21, 2022, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic\\_compass\\_en3\\_web.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Cornell University Press, 1984).

responses compared to the democratic systems which often face institutional checks and deliberative constraints.<sup>4</sup>

Since Xi Jinping assumed leadership in 2012, there has been a drastic acceleration in the reform of China's unified military force, the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Within less than a decade, China has reorganised the PLA's command structure, professionalized its land forces, and massively invested in advanced military technologies.<sup>5</sup> These changes have been built into a more agile and simplified command structure capable of fast response in high-intensity combat environments.

This transformation has been made possible through the president's direct control, as Xi also chairs the Central Military Commission (CMC), the body responsible for implementing strategic military directives. This centralised authority significantly reduces the time required for policy deliberation and execution.

A pillar of this strategy is known as the *Military-Civil Fusion* (军民融合)<sup>6</sup>, which aims to combine industry, academia and the defense sector under a unified long-term agenda. In practice, his model drastically reduces the latency between the design of a policy and its actual implementation, particularly in areas such as land mobility,

mechanised brigades modernisation, and the rapid deployment of forces along border regions.

### 2.1.2. Decision-making and Implementation

In the Chinese authoritarian system, the strategic decisions are concentrated in a very small circle of select leaders, mainly within the Politburo and the CMC. This centralization enables fast action once consensus is attained (or Xi has set a personal instruction), as there are no parliamentary bodies or other public debates to delay the process. The policy latency in such a system can be relatively low *after* the decision is made; yet it is worth noting that decisions of this scale involve years of preparation behind closed doors.<sup>7</sup>

The fidelity of implementation in China is bolstered by the political indoctrination of the PLA, and the vertical obligation for compliance; both commanders and leaders have no choice but to implement instructions as directed, despite some reported internal reluctance to change.<sup>8</sup> In terms of crisis response, the centralized command enables top-level rapid and coordinated responses, although its strategic culture has traditionally leaned toward caution in the deployment of forces.

However, Chinese opacity in the decision-making process hinders an accurate assessment of speed and latency of its responses; the lack of an institutional dialogue risks creating blind spots or a predisposition toward

---

<sup>4</sup> Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, *Chinese Military Reform in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications* (National Defense University Press, 2017), 8–12.

<sup>5</sup> Meia Nouwens and Helena Legarda, "China's Military Modernization and Technological Development," *Mercator Institute for China Studies*, March 2022, <https://merics.org/en/report/chinas-military-modernization>.

<sup>6</sup>See: Liu, Wei. "Deepening Civil-Military Integration to Build a Powerful Military." *Qiusbi Journal*, Central Party School, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> The military reforms launched in 2015 had been in preparation since at least 2012, according to reports from the Central Military Commission (CMC) and defense analysts.

<sup>8</sup> Joel Wuthnow & Phillip C. Saunders, "Chinese Military Reform in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications", NDU Press, 2017.

single-minded thinking. Nevertheless, the system has demonstrated a strong capacity to pool national resources for military projects. Ranging from large investments, to the construction of roads and railways in strategic border regions, within very short timeframes.

## 2.2. *United States*

One core feature of the U.S. defense governance is civilian control over the military. The president operates as commander-in-chief, and the Department of Defense (DoD), currently known as the U.S. War Department is led by a civilian secretary. This reinforces the separation of political authority and military power, a principle embedded within the broader pluralistic and institutionalized American system characterized by power distribution among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Elected officials and career civil servants alike play active roles in the equation of defense policy-making, ensuring accountability and transparency.

A particular feature of the U.S. military administration is that it has a planning, programming, budgeting, and execution (PPBE) process, a system that was adopted in the 1960s with the aim of aligning strategy and budget. PPBE is essentially a multi-year resource allocation cycle whereby the armed forces and DoD agencies design programs in accordance with strategy. Congress then approves and allocates the funds, and the DoD spends as planned. Although the PPBE has brought a rational and sustainable approach to U.S. defense planning, it is currently being criticized for its rigidity and slow pace. The entire process involves a highly elaborate annual and multi-year planning

process which can take more than two years from the conception to funds in the field. In a world in which technology and threats evolve so rapidly, this represents a significant political latency. A recent example is the delay in scaling counter-drone systems for deployed units, despite the growing demand, due to a misalignment between the urgent requirements of the field and the PPBE's timelines.<sup>9</sup> Congress is aware of this, and has created a PPBE Reform Commission<sup>10</sup> in 2022 to update and agilize the system.

## 2.3. *European Union*

The European Union represents a sui generis case, as it is not a state per se, but a political community. In light of growing international tensions, the EU has pushed for greater integration and cohesion in defence policy among its member states, despite still lacking full military sovereignty. It is worth noting though, that this push of integration has followed the crisis rather than preceded it, as seen with the acceleration initiatives post-Ukraine. At the same time, Donald Trump's return to the White House—along with his ambivalent stance toward NATO and friendlier posture to Russia,<sup>11</sup> has renewed the urgency and revived concerns about the reliability of transatlantic guarantees.

This reactive posture is not coincidental, but stems from the fact that since the European Union's creation,

---

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Congress, Commission on Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution Reform, Interim Report, August 2023, pp. 11–14.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Congress, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022*, Pub. L. No. 117-81, Sec. 1004.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Birnbaum, "Europe braces for Trump's return," *The Washington Post*, November 2, 2023.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/02/europe-nato-trump-fears/>

defense and security were never core to the European project. Integration was built around economic independence and regulatory harmonization<sup>12</sup>. This focus was adequate in a post-Cold War era, where military sovereignty seemed almost optional and was comfortably outsourced to the U.S., Europe's indisputable ally. Today, nonetheless, the geopolitical landscape has undergone a near-180-degree shift, and that legacy has evolved into a structural vulnerability. As the following analysis will show, the European historical and institutional background will directly affect their capacity to turn intentions into executions.

Strategic decision-making depends on consensus among all member states, a requirement that leads to a considerably slower and more fragmented process than state-based systems. The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is the overarching framework within which initiatives such as PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) have been developed. These instruments aim to foster industrial and capability cooperation and promote shared strategic planning. However, effective implementation of these policies still depends on approval from all member states, inevitably leading to divergences in national priorities, duplication of capabilities, limited interoperability and dependence on NATO<sup>13</sup> in key areas of defence. Although Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sped up certain processes, the EU is still a long way from achieving the kind of direct

and executive defence governance seen in China or the United States. While steps towards greater defence coordination have gained political momentum, the bloc continues to be limited in its ability to act as a unified military actor.

To summarise, these three actors operate within systems that are very different from each other. The subsequent section will examine how these structural differences influence their respective strategic capabilities and their conversion of objectives into tangible results.

### **3. Crisis Response and Capability Development: A Comparative Analysis**

For the purposes of this review, three governance-related metrics serve as analytical anchors:

- *Policy latency* refers to the time elapsed between the formulation of strategic intent, the articulation of strategic intent, and the tangible delivery of military capabilities.

- *Decision-making speed* denotes the speed with which an actor can take meaningful action in a security crisis situation.

- *Implementation fidelity* measures the degree of consistency between the results and the initial objectives that were established.

These parameters will serve as a common base for comparing the three systems within their specific institutional framework.

---

<sup>12</sup> Desmond Dinan, *Europe Recast: A History of European Union*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> European Defence Agency, *Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD)*, 2022.

### 3.1. Crisis Response and Decision-Making Speed

China, the United States, and the European Union differ markedly in the speed of decision-making during security crises, reflecting their contrasting governance models previously discussed.

The Chinese model enables swift action once a decision has been made. There is no need for parliamentary negotiations or institutional consensus, since power is concentrated in the hands of the CPC.

For example, during the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Libya in 2011 and the PLA's response to the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan in 2020<sup>14</sup>, the state and military apparatus were able to mobilise within days. The 2015 military reform is another example of this: Xi Jinping ordered a comprehensive transformation of the PLA, which was executed rapidly and without institutional opposition. But such efficiency also carries risks, as errors in judgment may occur upstream, and if no corrective mechanisms or second opinions are in place, mistakes may be amplified or repeated.

The United States blends tactical agility and strategic deliberation. In immediate crises, such as terrorist attacks or hostage situations, actions can be taken with immediacy, within hours. However, for longer-term or large-scale operations, the decisions must undergo a process of inter-agency consultation, which are often also subject to congressional accountability. This reflects the pluralistic structure described in Chapter 2, where power is

distributed across civilian and military institutions, and decisions must pass through layers of accountability.

This results in a slowdown of strategic changes, as was the case of the Afghan "surge" in 2009-10,<sup>15</sup> where internal debate lasted for months, delaying the decision-making process whilst conditions on the ground progressively deteriorated.

In the EU, where sovereignty is pooled among 27 member states, crisis decision-making is structurally encumbered by the need for consensus. Even crises that are not strictly military in nature may take weeks to resolve, as in 2021 with the migration crisis in Belarus, where three long rounds of negotiations were needed before sanctions and countermeasures could be imposed.<sup>16</sup> Hence, when it comes to military deployments, the unanimity barrier is even greater. As mentioned in section 2, the Common Security and Defense Policy depends on consensus, which has led the EU on several occasions to opt for financial or diplomatic measures (which are more feasible in negotiations) rather than resorting to the direct use of force (for example, by financing African Union operations or launching maritime patrols in the Mediterranean).<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Bates Gill and Adam Ni, "China's Expanding Role in Peacekeeping and Foreign Military Operations," *United States Institute of Peace*, 2016.

---

<sup>15</sup> Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), especially Chapter 10.

<sup>16</sup> Council of the European Union, "Belarus: EU Imposes Fifth Round of Sanctions," *Press Release*, 2 December 2021. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/12/02/belarus-eu-imposes-fifth-round-of-sanctions/>

<sup>17</sup> See: European External Action Service (EEAS), *Operation IRINI: EU Naval Operation in the Mediterranean*, 2023. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/operation-irini\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/operation-irini_en)

The EU's institutional framework is thus better suited for managing internal diversity than for delivering fast, decisive crisis responses.

### 3.1.1 Interagency and Multilateral Coherence

Speed by itself is no guarantee of effectiveness; coherence (among the different agencies and institutions) is also crucial. This is particularly evident in China, given its hierarchical structure. The PLA, ministries, and local governments must ultimately respond to central directives, thus preventing clashes between levels. While this favours fast and effective execution, it also limits local innovation, as no actor has the capacity to offer dissenting views or alternative proposals. That in turn, can create a false sense of consensus, which may lead to blind spots or unaddressed structural problems.

In the United States, this role is performed by the National Security Council (NSC),<sup>18</sup> which integrates Defense, State, Intelligence and Treasury. If the NSC functions properly, it is capable of producing optimal and integrated results, as it did in the 1991 Gulf War;<sup>19</sup> in the event of failure, as in Somalia in 1992-1993, incompatible objectives can completely undermine the results. Coordination broke down and humanitarian and military objectives could not be aligned. Interagency disagreements persisted and Washington's guidance remained vague.

Nevertheless, the US model delivers superior performance compared to the EU, where there is no single government or commander-in-chief. The underlying problem stems from structural fragmentation between north and south, large and small states, and their divergent perceptions of threats. Eastern countries prioritise deterrence against Russia, while Southern states focus on border security and migration control.<sup>20</sup> These differences make it difficult for the EU to define a clear and timely strategic direction. Indeed, a resolution can be delayed simply by determining whether an event can be qualified as a "security crisis."

The 2015 migration wave prompted some states to prioritise humanitarian aid, whereas others were more concerned with border control.<sup>21</sup> Even so, when consensus is reached, the EU can act with great coherence and efficiency, as witnessed in missions such as Sophia and Operation Irini<sup>22</sup> where the EU successfully deployed multinational maritime forces under a unified mandate to enforce arms embargoes and curb smuggling.

### *3.2. Capability Development and Implementation Fidelity*

China has demonstrated consistent adherence to its strategic plans in the land domain. Its centralized control model has delivered notable results over the past two

---

<sup>18</sup> See: Ivo H. Daalder and I. M. Destler, *In the Shadow of the Oval Office: Profiles of the National Security Advisers and the Presidents They Served* (Simon & Schuster, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> See: Richard N. Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (Simon & Schuster, 2009); also see Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Little, Brown and Company, 1995).

---

<sup>20</sup> See: Nicole Koenig, "The EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: A Guide to Reverse Strategic Shrinkage?" *Jacques Delors Centre*, March 2022.

<sup>21</sup> See: Angeliki Dimitriadi, *Governing Irregular Migration: Bordering Culture, Labour and Security in Spain and Greece* (Routledge, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> See: European External Action Service (EEAS), "Operation Irini: Mandate," accessed 2025, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/irini\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/irini_en).

decades.<sup>23</sup> Once the goals of the PLA regarding mechanization and informatization were set, they quickly translated into targeted funding, procurement, and organisational reforms. Its streamlining system has already proven its efficiency. By 2020, Beijing had already mechanized most of its ground forces and produced advanced weaponry such as Type 99 tanks and armored vehicles. However, it should be noted that centralisation can also lead to distortions in reporting and performance. Lower-level units may be prone to exaggerating their progress under pressure to meet top-down targets.

Even so, the scale of the transformation the country has achieved illustrates an execution model that, while rigid, is indisputably effective.

The United States leads in innovation, but not in terms of speed. The country's difficulties in implementation have resulted in significant economic losses as evidenced by the failure of programmes such as Future Combat Systems in the 2000s.<sup>24</sup> These initiatives were derailed by overly ambitious goals and multiple veto points<sup>25</sup>, resulting in the loss of billions in investment. However, it is precisely this oversight system that precludes errors from perpetuating indefinitely; the M1 Abrams tank programme,<sup>26</sup> for example, entailed years of iterative development and testing before it became one of the most powerful pieces of

armored artillery. The US system deliberately sacrifices speed in favour of accountability and performance. Its present challenge lies in maintaining parity with its competitors. China's deployment cycles for ballistic missiles and armored systems are significantly shorter than those of the U.S. acquisition process.<sup>27</sup>

Historically, Europe has demonstrated the lowest implementation fidelity. In 1999, the "Headline Goal"<sup>28</sup> to deploy 60,000 troops within 60 days never materialized, stalled by political disagreements and logistical shortfalls. In a similar manner, the 2010 "Ghent Framework"<sup>29</sup> sought to enhance cooperation and capability sharing, yet failed to achieve lasting results as many governments were reluctant to rely on others for critical resources. Nevertheless, more substantial results have already begun to emerge, such as projects on artillery, armored vehicles, and drones within the framework of PESCO and the European Defense Fund (EDF), laying the groundwork for the development of a shared European industrial base. In the aftermath of Russia's incursion into Ukraine in 2022, there is a strong possibility that this trend will be further entrenched, provided that there is a joint effort to increase and improve defense spending by the 27 member states. In 2023, a joint purchase of one million artillery shells<sup>30</sup> took

---

<sup>23</sup> Zhao, Weibin. "Strategic Considerations on Strengthening Joint Operations Command." *China Military Science*, no. 3 (2021): 42–51.

<sup>24</sup> See: Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Defense Acquisitions: Future Combat Systems' Challenges and Prospects for Success*, GAO-07-380, March 2007.

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Defense Acquisitions: Future Combat Systems Challenges and Prospects*, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> See: Congressional Research Service, *The Army's M-1 Abrams Tank: Background and Issues for Congress*, RL32131, 2020.

---

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*, Office of the Secretary of Defense.

<sup>28</sup> See: European Council, *Presidency Conclusions – Helsinki European Council 1999*; see also: Daniel Fiott, "Europe's Headline Goals: Ambition and Reality," *EUISS Brief*, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> See: European Defence Agency, *Pooling and Sharing – Final Report on the Implementation of the Ghent Initiative*, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> See: European Commission, *EU Joint Procurement of Ammunition for Ukraine*, March 2023.

place, signalling collective initiatives towards improving implementation fidelity.

### 3.3 Indicators of Success and Failure

In the field of logistics, the United States remains a global model, the result of decades of sustained investment in infrastructure and military doctrine. This has conferred the nation an unparalleled capacity for global projection, as evidenced by its interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan<sup>31</sup>. The People’s Republic of China is also accomplishing rapid progress through the construction of new distribution hubs and the development of tactical deployment capabilities. However, its true capacity to function in high-intensity conflict scenarios remains unproven, as it has not yet been subjected to a major war situation<sup>32</sup>.

The European Union’s logistics architecture is still not fully integrated, frequently relying on NATO or U.S. assets. Its military mobility has been improving gradually, supported by regulatory reforms and infrastructure investments but the lack of a unified command structure continues to hinder operational coherence.

On the innovation front, both the U.S. and China are locked in a race characterised by accelerating adoption cycles of technological adoption. The PLA has deployed loitering munitions and integrated AI tools into command systems within just a decade. In response, the Pentagon has

launched several initiatives like the Army Futures Command to accelerate development and deployment of advanced technology.

The EU has demonstrated a more gradual and inconsistent progression in this domain; however countries such as France and Germany stand out for their advanced capabilities. The European Defence Fund<sup>33</sup> (EDF) has the potential to address this discrepancy, provided it succeeds in fostering real industrial cooperation among member states.

**Table 1** below summarizes the comparative performance of the three actors across key strategic governance dimensions analyzed in Section 3.

Dimension	China	United States	European Union
<b>Governance Logic</b>	Authoritarian centralism	Democratic institutionalism	Intergovernmental consensus
<b>Strategic Speed</b>	High, post-decision opaque initiation	Fast tactically, slow strategically	Structurally slow
<b>Implementation Fidelity</b>	Coherent but top-down (risk of distortion)	Mixed: iterative and contested	Historically weak, improving through integration mechanisms
<b>Crisis Response</b>	Centralized and swift, but cautious	Agile in emergencies, slower in sustained missions	Deliberative, often fragmented
<b>Innovation Model</b>	State-driven fusion (military-civil)	Tech-heavy, feedback-based	Uneven, driven by leading states
<b>Dependency Profile</b>	Self-reliant	Leadership role, reliant on alliances	Dependent on NATO

<sup>31</sup> See: U.S. Army, *Operation Iraqi Freedom – Lessons Learned*, 2006; and U.S. Department of Defense, *Afghanistan Assessment Reports*, 2009–2015.

<sup>32</sup> See: M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy Since 1949*, Princeton University Press, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> See: European Commission, *European Defence Fund: 2021–2027 Programme Overview*, and recent funding calls (2023).

Table 1. Comparative summary of strategic governance characteristics in China, the United States, and the European Union.

## 4. Policy Recommendations

In order to achieve best maximum effectiveness, reforms should be tailored to each actor's governance model. The European Union would benefit from a simplification of its structure, the United States should focus on synchronizing innovation and speed, and China, while less receptive to outside influences, could seek to implement internal improvements regarding transparency and feedback.

### 4.1 European Union: Toward Strategic Responsiveness and Unity

#### 4.1.1 Adopt Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) for Urgent Decisions

The European Union should hold the prerogative of transitioning from unanimous voting to qualified majority in matters pertaining to Common Foreign Policy and Security Policy, when circumstances require prompt action. This can be attained by leveraging existing provisions such as the 'pasarelle' clauses.<sup>34</sup> These clauses stipulate that member states can agree on specific categories, including humanitarian rescue or stabilization missions, to be classified as crises and thus subject to a majority vote. Accordingly, the institutionalization of

'constructive abstention'<sup>35</sup> could enable reluctant states to opt out without obstructing action. This action would show partners that Europe can act decisively when necessary.

#### 4.1.2 Strengthen Planning and Command Capacity

It is recommended that the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC)<sup>36</sup> continues to evolve into a fully functional EU headquarters for limited missions (up to 5000 troops); considering that a permanent headquarters, staffed by a multinational personnel, could not only enhance preparedness, but also facilitate more effective contingency planning and optimize deployment coordination. This would provide a valuable complement to NATO by covering operations that fall outside its scope of responsibility. As per NATO, a series of coordination frameworks would contribute to optimize interoperability and the sharing of resources.

#### 4.1.3 Create a European Security Council Mechanism<sup>37</sup>

Consisting of a reduced and dynamic forum, comprising major and rotating states, chaired by the High Representative. The primary function of this forum would be to address urgent crisis situations. Whether formalized or informal, the forum's rapid deliberations would serve as

<sup>34</sup> Council of the European Union, "Qualified majority voting," Consilium Europa, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/voting-system/qualified-majority/>.

<sup>35</sup> Article 31(1) and (2) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), allows member states to abstain constructively, thereby not blocking consensus. See: *Treaty on European Union*, EUR-Lex, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12012M%2FTXT>.

<sup>36</sup> European External Action Service, "EU Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC)," [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/mpcc\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/mpcc_en).

<sup>37</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), "A European Security Council: How and Why," 2018, [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_a\\_european\\_security\\_council\\_how\\_and\\_why/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_a_european_security_council_how_and_why/).

a foundational and supportive basis for the Council decisions, thereby resulting in faster political alignment and increased trust among key actors. This would mirror the flexibility of the UN Security Council within the EU context.

#### 4.1.4 Enhance Implementation Tools

Expanding the *European Peace Facility*<sup>38</sup> with the aim of creating a permanent instrument would ensure sustained funding for military assistance. Concurrently, the creation of a European Defense Procurement Coordination Agency<sup>39</sup> could be entrusted with overseeing framework contracts on behalf of member states, thereby facilitating the joint procurement of equipment in a timely manner. As for the progress and respective contribution of each country to the established objectives (PESCO, NATO targets), could be evaluated on an annual basis through the implementation of a “European Defense Semester”, launched to reinforce compliance in a transparent manner and with peer pressure.

#### 4.1.5 Use flexible subgroups and coalitions

Article 44 of the TEU allows ‘coalitions of the willing’ to undertake missions under the EU flag even when consensus has not been reached.<sup>40</sup> This clause is currently in force, yet it has never been invoked. This instrument

---

<sup>38</sup> European External Action Service, “European Peace Facility (EPF),” EEAS. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-peace-facility-epf\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-peace-facility-epf_en).

<sup>39</sup> European Defence Agency (EDA), “Joint Procurement: Towards Coordinated European Defence Acquisition.” <https://eda.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/2023/03/07/towards-coordinated-european-defence-acquisition>.

<sup>40</sup> Treaty on European Union, Article 44. EUR-Lex. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12012M%2FTXT>.

empowers member states to act with political legitimacy without being constrained by third peers, yet unanimity is still a prerequisite for the activation of this mechanism. Member states are reluctant to take this step due to the absence of precedent<sup>41</sup> and standardised protocols, as well as concerns over the creation of a ‘multi-speed Europe’ and particularly in such a sensitive domain as defence. However, as Europe is facing growing international turmoil, reaction speed is critical. This clause becomes an underutilized tool that could provide the EU with a viable operational mechanism to act collectively without being limited to the lowest common denominator.

#### *4.2 United States: Sustaining Agility and Innovation*

The US is still the most capable military actor; however to maintain this status under pressure from technology and competition requires continuous reform. The governance system checks and balances innovation but its structure can slow response, especially in developing land-based capabilities. Its inherent constraints can impede responsiveness, primarily affecting land-domain capabilities. The core policy problem is to address this latency without compromising oversight.

#### 4.2.1 Accelerating Capability Delivery Through Budget Reform and Rapid Acquisition Pathways

Reforming the PPBE (Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution) system, as recommended by the 2024 Commission, has been deemed essential to reducing these structural delays.

---

<sup>41</sup> Sven Biscop, “European Defence and the EU Global Strategy: More Coherence, More Capabilities, More Inclusiveness,” *Security Policy Brief*, Egmont Institute, 2016.

Among the proposed measures, the creation of multi-year innovation funds, not subject to the expiration of the fiscal year, together with an expansion of internal reprogramming authority powers so that resource allocation can be more flexible, are particularly noteworthy.

Another potential solution would be to institutionalise rapid acquisition mechanisms, such as the model of the Rapid Capabilities and Critical Technologies Office (RCCTO)<sup>42</sup>. Thus, the most critical technologies (counter-drone systems or hypersonic prototypes) reach deployment faster. Naturally, this approach must be accompanied by mechanisms that ensure accountability protocols based on iterative prototyping and direct feedback from deployed forces.

#### 4.2.2 Enhance Interagency Synchronization through Unified Strategic Guidance

The US federal agency system operates in a rather fragmented manner, with each agency acting according to its own agenda and timeline.<sup>43</sup> Inevitably, this causes delays in coordinating responses. One way to enhance the efficiency of the process would be to establish a revitalized Deputy Committee under the National Security Council. This committee, which convenes the second-in-command officials from key agencies, would be specifically tasked with resolving disputes within strictly defined timeframes. Concurrently, the formulation of a National Security Planning Guidance could facilitate the integration of the

priorities of Defense, State, and USAID; thereby ensuring synchronised action, particularly in regions where there is contestation. This would be further enhanced by aligning budget authorisations and introducing flexible funding packages that combine military and diplomatic tools within a single operational framework.

#### 4.1.3 Double Down on Alliance Integration and Interoperability

Finally, we must bear in mind that alliances remain one of the United States' greatest assets, so in order to fully exploit

this potential, Washington should prioritise interoperability<sup>44</sup>. This entails not only conducting joint exercises, but also establishing common standards and co-developing logistics and land capabilities systems. Such steps would not only ease the operational burden on the United States, but also strengthen overall cohesion. It is important to underscore that supporting EU defense initiatives that complement NATO strengthens transatlantic coherence rather than undermining it.

#### *4.3. Observations for China*

Recommendations for China's system are less externally actionable, but several observations can still be made. Firstly, it is recommended that Chinese strategists consider broadening the focus on transparency<sup>45</sup> and predictability within their planning system, as this would serve to mitigate the risk of miscalculation. Secondly, it

---

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Army Rapid Capabilities and Critical Technologies Office. <https://www.army.mil/rccto>

<sup>43</sup> Congressional Research Service. *Interagency Collaboration: Key Issues and Approaches*. Updated March 2023. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44474>

---

<sup>44</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. *National Defense Strategy 2022*. <https://www.defense.gov/nds>

<sup>45</sup> Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Why Chinese Military Transparency Matters," *The Diplomat*, August 2021.

would be wise for China to continue fostering trusting relationships with its neighboring countries<sup>46</sup> to improve its security posture without needing to compromise its capabilities. Thirdly, at the internal level, the fostering of a culture of red-teaming<sup>47</sup> and the encouragement of more diverse advisory input within the PLA and the Communist Party could potentially facilitate the timely detection of policy errors. However, such changes would entail political reforms that China's current leadership is unlikely to accept, rendering them largely theoretical in the short term.

## 5. Conclusion

The land domain continues to be a critical variable for demonstrating a state's ability to translate strategic intent into action. A comparison of the governance models employed by China, the United States and the European Union has demonstrated that each model exerts a direct influence on military effectiveness. China's centralized system has enabled a rapid and cohesive modernisation, with substantial reforms of the PLA carried out at an unprecedented speed. Nevertheless, this efficiency is not without its drawbacks, as overcentralization inevitably restricts feedback, and political conformity may mask inherent vulnerabilities. In contrast, the U.S. model is characterised by a balance of innovation, accountability, and international influence. Its democratic deliberation system guarantees quality and legitimacy, yet the adaptation stage is hindered by bureaucracy and political

cycles. The EU's multilateral model is recognised for its legitimacy and comprehensive strategy; however, EU institutions consequentially face fragmentation and inertia in decision-making. Nonetheless, the war in Ukraine has catalysed an unprecedented level of unity in defence.

Having evaluated the designated parameters, it is concluded that both policy latency and decision-making speed are observed to be lowest in China, intermediate in the United States, and highest in the European Union. With regard to the implementation fidelity, China has demonstrated the highest degree of consistency, albeit with a lower level of transparency. The United States shows mixed performance; and the European Union, historically the least effective, is currently initiating improvement through joint planning and procurement initiatives.

Each actor is learning: China by adopting joint command practices inspired by Western militaries; the United States by reforming its budgeting and acquisition processes to gain agility; and the European Union by experimenting with different strategies designed to provide greater flexibility in common decision-making. These trajectories suggest a possible convergence toward enhanced responsiveness, while preserving their respective political identities.

The fundamental conclusion that can be drawn is that a nation's system of governance is directly linked to its security outcomes. It has been demonstrated that authoritarian centralism has the advantage of rapidly mobilising significant resources; yet, it also requires prudent leadership. Democratic governance relies on

---

<sup>46</sup> Lora Saalman, "Trust and Realpolitik: The Challenge of Building Confidence with China," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> See: Zhao Weibin, "Strategic Considerations on Strengthening Joint Operations Command," *China Military Science*, 2021.

accountability to correct errors; multilateral governance functions through distributed power, yet must seek solutions to avoid paralysis.

Unity, accountability and solidarity: each the respective strength of a given system—are complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

## **Acknowledgements**

The author wishes to thank colleagues at the *International Policy Review* and *The Sundial Press* for their insightful feedback, and gratefully acknowledges the support of research partners whose contributions of data and analysis informed this article.

## Bibliography

- Biscop, Sven. *European Strategy in the 21st Century: New Future for Old Power*. Routledge, 2019.
- Biscop, Sven. “European Defence and the EU Global Strategy: More Coherence, More Capabilities, More Inclusiveness.” *Security Policy Brief*, Egmont Institute, 2016.
- Cheung, Tai Ming. *Innovate to Dominate: The Rise of the Chinese Defense Innovation System*. Cornell University Press, 2022.
- Congressional Research Service. *The Army’s M-1 Abrams Tank: Background and Issues for Congress*. RL32131, 2020.
- Congressional Research Service. 2022. *The Army’s Rapid Capabilities and Critical Technologies Office (RCCTO)*.  
<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12088>
- Council of the European Union. *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence – For a European Union that Protects its Citizens, Values and Interests and Contributes to International Peace and Security*, March 21, 2022.
- Council of the European Union. “Belarus: EU Imposes Fifth Round of Sanctions.” Press release, December 2, 2021.  
<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/12/02/belarus-eu-imposes-fifth-round-of-sanctions/>
- Daalder, Ivo H., and I. M. Destler. *In the Shadow of the Oval Office: Profiles of the National Security Advisers and the Presidents They Served*. Simon & Schuster, 2009.
- Dimitriadi, Angeliki. *Governing Irregular Migration: Bordering Culture, Labour and Security in Spain and Greece*. Routledge, 2020.
- Dinan, Desmond. *Europe Recast: A History of European Union*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- European Commission. *European Defence Fund: 2021–2027 Programme Overview*.  
[https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/european-defence-fund-edf\\_en](https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/european-defence-fund-edf_en)
- European Commission. “EU Joint Procurement of Ammunition for Ukraine.” March 2023.  
[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_1602](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_1602)
- European Council. *Presidency Conclusions – Helsinki European Council*, 1999.
- European Council on Foreign Relations. “Europe’s Defence Awakening.” ECFR Policy Brief, March 2023.
- European Council on Foreign Relations. “A European Security Council: How and Why.” ECFR, 2018.  
[https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_a\\_european\\_security\\_council\\_how\\_and\\_why/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_a_european_security_council_how_and_why/)
- European Defence Agency. *Pooling and Sharing – Final Report on the Implementation of the Ghent Initiative*, 2014.
- European Defence Agency. “Joint Procurement: Towards Coordinated European Defence Acquisition.” March 7, 2023.  
<https://eda.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/2023/03/07/towards-coordinated-european-defence-acquisition>
- European External Action Service. “European Peace Facility (EPF).”  
[https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-peace-facility-epf\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-peace-facility-epf_en)
- European External Action Service. “EU Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC).”  
[https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/mpcc\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/mpcc_en)

- European External Action Service. "Operation IRINI: EU Naval Operation in the Mediterranean." [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/operation-irini\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/operation-irini_en)
- Fiott, Daniel. "Europe's Headline Goals: Ambition and Reality." *EUISS Brief*, 2019.
- Fravel, M. Taylor. *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949*. Princeton University Press, 2019.
- Gordon, Michael R., and Bernard E. Trainor. *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf*. Little, Brown and Company, 1995.
- Government Accountability Office (GAO). *Defense Acquisitions: Future Combat Systems' Challenges and Prospects for Success*, GAO-07-380, March 2007.
- Haass, Richard N. *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars*. Simon & Schuster, 2009.
- Kania, Elsa B. "In Military-Civil Fusion, China Is Learning Lessons from the United States." *Defense One*, August 2020. <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/08/military-civil-fusion-china-learning-lessons-united-states/167872/>
- Koenig, Nicole. "The EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: A Guide to Reverse Strategic Shrinkage?" *Jacques Delors Centre*, March 2022.
- Li, Mingjiang. "The Transformation of Chinese Military Strategy: Doctrine, Force Structure, and Strategic Intent." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 5 (2017): 640–661. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1284133>.
- Mastro, Oriana Skylar. "Why Chinese Military Transparency Matters." *The Diplomat*, August 2021.
- Meia Nouwens and Helena Legarda. "China's Military Modernization and Technological Development." *Mercator Institute for China Studies*, March 2022. <https://merics.org/en/report/chinas-military-modernization>
- Meia Nouwens and Helena Legarda. "China's Defence Industry: A Breakthrough in Reform." *MERICCS*, 2020.
- Mulvenon, James. *Soldiers of Fortune: The Rise and Fall of the Chinese Military-Business Complex, 1978–1998*. M.E. Sharpe, 2001.
- PLA Academy of Military Sciences. *Science of Military Strategy (战略学)*. Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013.
- Posen, Barry R. *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars*. Cornell University Press, 1984.
- Saalman, Lora. "Trust and Realpolitik: The Challenge of Building Confidence with China." *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 2020.
- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database." Accessed November 29, 2025. <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>
- U.S. Army. *Operation Iraqi Freedom – Lessons Learned*, 2006.
- U.S. Army Rapid Capabilities and Critical Technologies Office. <https://www.army.mil/rccto>
- U.S. Congress. *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022*, Pub. L. No. 117-81, Sec. 1004.
- U.S. Congress. *Commission on Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution Reform, Interim Report*, August 2023.
- U.S. Department of Defense. *Afghanistan Assessment Reports*, 2009–2015.
- U.S. Department of Defense. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*. Office of the Secretary of Defense.
- U.S. Department of Defense. *National Defense Strategy 2022*. <https://www.defense.gov/nds>

United States Institute of Peace. Bates Gill and Adam Ni. "China's Expanding Role in Peacekeeping and Foreign Military Operations." 2016.

Woodward, Bob. *Obama's Wars*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010.

Wuthnow, Joel, and Phillip C. Saunders. *Chinese Military Reform in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications*. National Defense University Press, 2017.