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## **THE EUROPEAN UNION'S JUSTIFICATION OF MILITARISATION THROUGH THE CONCEPT OF STRATEGIC PEACE**

### **Abstract**

The article examines how the European Union's post-2022 security approach and discourse redefine the meaning of peace through the emergence of what is conceptualised in the paper as strategic peace. Building on critical peace scholarship, the article argues that strategic peace represents a discursive synthesis of peace and deterrence, in which peace is no longer understood as the opposite of militarization but as something sustained through it. Through a content analysis of major EU strategies and the discourse within them, the article shows how Russia was framed as an existential threat to European stability despite its arguably limited direct military risk, legitimizing increased defense spending, NATO expansion, and thus a further militarization of the EU. This reframing of peace allows EU member states to militarize while maintaining a positive self-image of normative peacefulness, presenting military spending

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and strategic alignment as peace-preserving. Strategic peace is conceptualized as a broader transformation from liberal, cooperative notions of peace toward a deterrence-based understanding that normalizes militarization as necessary for European peace and security.

**Keywords:** strategic peace, security discourse, EU militarization, peace and security, European security

## INTRODUCTION

The European Union's (EU) security and defence policies have experienced a notable transformation after 2022, marked by a rapid increase in militarization and a corresponding change in the way peace and security are framed in official discourse. These developments emerged and are justified in response to the perceived threat posed by Russia, as well as to a more general context of increased geopolitical instability. In such a context, the EU has increasingly presented military preparedness, defence integration, and strategic alignment as necessary and responsible measures for preserving peace in Europe. Rather than being portrayed as a departure from its established identity as a peace-oriented actor, this turn has been discursively framed by the EU as a continuation of its commitment to peace and stability. Furthermore, in such a framework, militarization is not presented as an alternative to peace but as its precondition, with peace increasingly articulated not as pacifist neutrality or as a product of norms and cooperation but as something that must be actively sustained through deterrence, readiness, and strategic alignment. This leads to a research puzzle of how increasing militarization is being reconciled with the EU's continued self-presentation as a peaceful actor. This leads to the question of how peace is reframed in EU military security discourse so that it can persist alongside militarization. The expectation is that peace would be increasingly framed in high-level EU strategic and security

discourse as dependent on military deterrence and capacity, so that militarization will be justified as peace-affirming and necessary without fully abandoning earlier framings of the EU's peaceful character.

In the article, this transformation is examined through the framework of critical peace theory by analysing how official EU strategic documents redefine peace and its conditions, focusing on the emergence of what is conceptualised in the paper as a „Strategic peace“. Unlike liberal peace which prioritises civilian cooperation and institutionalised norms (Mac Ginty 2025), or explicitly militarised peace which is based on military dominance (Richmond 2025b), strategic peace is conceptualised here as a discursive synthesis in which peace remains a normative goal while being framed as dependent on military deterrence and strategic alignment, allowing militarisation to be justified while preserving a self-image of normative peacefulness. Therefore, the analysis that the article provides focuses on whether and how peace language is coupled with defence and deterrence language in major EU strategic documents, and through which increased defence spending, closer military cooperation, and strategic alignment are framed as peace-preserving acts. Peace thus becomes established through strategic and military means, diverging from the EU's traditional liberal internationalist approach centred on cooperation and normative diffusion. Militarisation is understood in the article as the increased normalisation of defence spending and references to the increasing need for military power, examined through the content of EU strategic texts rather than actual military capacity.

The EU's turn towards geopolitics has already been examined in the scientific literature, and leading EU politicians are urging the Union to develop into a geopolitical power (Macron 2026). Less attention has been placed on how peace itself is being redefined in order to legitimise these developments. By focusing on the content of the EU's strategic documents and policy frameworks and their relation to peace in the current geopolitical context, the article contributes to debates on the EU's geopolitical role and to critical peace scholarship by conceptualising strategic peace as a

framework through which militarisation is made compatible with a peace-oriented identity, and by which this peaceful identity is even maintained through recourse to militarisation. The concept of Strategic peace is developed in the article in order to examine this change of the EU's policy and normative approach, emerging through a synthesis of recent critical peace scholarship and an interpretative analysis of EU strategic texts. The empirical section consists of a qualitative content analysis of EU strategic documents and policies over the past decades, interpretatively examining how peace is conceptualised and framed in relation to defence and deterrence, and conducted within a critical peace framework. The article starts with a literature review on the EU's changing geopolitical role and its presentation of this change, followed by a theoretical framing on the problems and questions raised by the paper through the lens of critical peace theory, followed by a conceptualisation of the concept of Strategic Peace and an empirical section which provides evidence for its existence.

### **THE EU'S CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL ROLE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF ITS PEACE IDENTITY**

The focus of the following review is the examination of scholarship on the EU's evolving geopolitical and security role, with particular attention to how the Union's peace-actor identity is treated in this literature. The recent evolution of EU security and defence policy has been conceptualized by Hoeffler et al through the notion of a prolonged polycrisis, conceived as a sequence of overlapping economic, political, and security shocks that have gradually reshaped EU competences in uneven ways. They note that the EU has faced successive crises, but that earlier security shocks failed to generate a shared perception of an existential threat across the Union as member states disagreed on how to respond, resulting in paralysis within its security decision-making. They argue that the initial conflict in Ukraine in 2014 enabled increased EU security and defence competences through the framing of an external existential crisis, which produced a shared perception of

threat and enabled increased defence spending and coordination (Hoeffler, Hofmann, and Mérand 2024). Costa and Barbé mark the 2022 deterioration as a turning point, after which the EU adopted unprecedented measures in defence cooperation and military assistance, forcing a change from crisis management and external stabilization toward territorial defence. They note that even in this increased focus on military defence, strategic autonomy was portrayed as unrealistic due to the EU's security reliance on NATO, which was reaffirmed as the primary framework for defence (Costa and Barbé 2023). This would make the outbreak of conflict in Europe the initial justification for a transformation of the EU's peaceful self-presentation.

Cross et al treat the conflict in Ukraine as a critical case for the EU exercising power under conditions of international crisis and within an international system marked by growing instability and a weakened liberal order. They noticed that the conflict marked a strong influence of external structural conditions on EU decision-making, which had to overcome its fragmentation to exercise power coherently and together with a peaceful normative framing (Cross and Karolewski 2016). Helwig likewise frames the conflict in Ukraine as exposing the gap between EU ambitions for strategic autonomy and continued military dependence on NATO, considering autonomy to be the capacity to act within interdependence rather than full independence. He argues that the conflict revealed both structural constraints and a need for increased EU agency, such as expanded defence cooperation, which resulted from it (Helwig 2023).

Håkansson connects the increasingly geopolitical role of the EU to European integration and institutional consolidation, which have historically advanced through crises. He argues that the conflict in Ukraine should produce far-reaching defence integration, while accelerating an ongoing process through which the European Commission has expanded its political and practical role and emerged as a more explicitly geopolitical actor. He describes the crisis as creating an opportunity that enabled the Commission to strengthen its mandate in relation to defence-

related initiatives, despite defence remaining a sensitive policy area (Håkansson 2024). Bosse focuses on the evolution of member states' security interests, also noting that while the 2014 conflict in Ukraine did not fundamentally alter security preferences, the 2022 escalation caused a significant reformulation of interests, enabling consensus on unprecedented measures framed through values-based norms, including international law, sovereignty, solidarity, and responsibility toward Europeans, marking a change toward a more community-based understanding of EU identity (Bosse 2022). This transformation of the EU's self-presentation as a more defensive and active actor was enabled by an internal transformation of public opinion, which increasingly supported defence-related policy and investment, providing motivation for a continuation of this approach (Thomson et al. 2023).

Browning argues in relation to the EU's geopolitical identity that it should not be understood as a naive or post-geopolitical actor, but as one that has, in fact, long engaged in geopolitical practices aimed at ordering space beyond its borders through non-military means. He places its geopolitical role in the ability to influence political, economic, and normative alignments, and connects these practices to the EU's pursuit of ontological security, understood as the need to maintain a stable sense of self-identity and order. He notes that Russia is presented by the EU as an ontological challenge as it rejects the EU's universalist claims and advances a competing geopolitical vision (Browning 2018). Sperling and Webber consider the EU to have used the crisis emerging from the conflict in order to consolidate and expand policies designed to mitigate perceived threats and reinforce security governance. They focus on how the EU legitimises collective responses by threat framing, allowing it to implement security and defence policies across internal and external domains, supported by its official discourse, which reframes the EU as an active actor in security and defence governance (Sperling and Webber 2019).

Wagnsson and Hellman examine this change in self-presentation by linking the EU's normative power not only to policy choices but to modes of communication, arguing

that representing others in non-antagonistic terms is central to maintaining a normative role. They argue that the EU's response to Russian official discourse generated a tension between a discourse emphasizing unity and dialogue, articulated by the High Representative, and a more antagonistic and security-based discourse associated with its strategic communication, reflecting a shift toward a defensive posture (Wagnsson and Hellman 2018). The evolution of the EU's peace narrative into a peace and security narrative required military security practices to be embedded within an established peace identity to sustain internal cohesion and external legitimacy. This logic was formalized in the Treaty of Lisbon, which described peace as both an internal condition and an external objective grounded in international law, and enabled its instrumentalization in EU foreign policy through strategic narratives (Chaban et al. 2017). Smith argues that the EU's earlier pursuit of peace through peaceful means was caused by its general avoidance of strategic approaches, but that the Global Strategy marks a departure from these earlier civilian and normative self-conceptions by foregrounding defence and military capability in a more pessimistic and security-oriented assessment of the international environment (Smith 2017).

Tocci notices that EU policymakers increasingly recognized that the EU could no longer assume a benign international environment or rely solely on norm diffusion and Europeanisation, but that they increasingly turned towards increasing the Union's resilience. He presents resilience as a pragmatic middle ground between over-ambitious liberal peacebuilding and narrowly defined stability, allowing the EU to retain normative objectives related to peace, democracy, and rights while acknowledging the inevitability of crises, although in practice the concept has often been associated with a more security-focused foreign policy (Tocci 2019). Håkansson also examines how earlier geopolitical crises had already expanded the EU's role in security and defence cooperation, and that increased support from member states enabled the Commission to gain influence in a traditionally intergovernmental policy field and to mobilise greater resources

for the purposes of defence (Håkansson 2021). Tian et al note that the post-2022 period has accordingly seen unprecedented increases in European military expenditure, with shifts in threat perception being a key cause of this. He argues that the sharp rise of European militarisation is often justified through narratives of deterrence, NATO burden-sharing, and fundamental changes in the security environment (Tian et al. 2023). Pogodda et al. also argue that the earlier EU standard response to crises, which was aimed at management and normative peacebuilding ambitions, was shifted towards containment, stabilization, and military-security oriented approaches (Pogodda, Mac Ginty, and Richmond 2021).

Maurer, Whitman, and Wright describe the EU's response to the 2022 conflict as unusually rapid and coherent, sustained by a shared norm of collective responsibility that obliges member states to act together despite differences in capacity and national constraints. This norm enabled the use of the European Peace Facility for large-scale military support, framed as a foreign policy decision rather than a defence commitment (Maurer, Whitman, and Wright 2023). This further shift towards a greater focus on military security and a geopolitical role appears to have persisted alongside earlier normative commitments, at least nominally. In relation to that, Cardwell and Moret argue that the EU has begun to translate its economic power into political influence and to use this power more directly in order to achieve its goals related to peace and security (Cardwell and Moret 2023). Schimmelfennig connects this change to the process of European integration, which he frames within a changing external environment, arguing that military vulnerability and geopolitical instability have generated pressures toward stronger borders. He argues the EU uses more assertive geopolitical discourse and increased investment in border control and defence cooperation, while leaving the direction of integration open (Schimmelfennig 2021). Anghel and Džankić likewise connect the policy changes caused by the conflict to changes in EU enlargement, arguing that the renewed momentum on enlargement followed a security logic

whereby enlargement became a process related to security rather than normative alignment. They argue that enlargement itself has become a geopolitical process that maintains EU security, prioritising stability over transformation (Anghel and Džankić 2023). These changes imply that increased interest in geopolitical power achieved through military security increasingly permeates all aspects of EU foreign policy.

Tocci considers that the approach of principled pragmatism has been inherent in EU strategies since 2003, whereby the EU began to prioritize its own internal security rather than prioritising normative convergence, recognizing that the existence of existential threats requires a more actionable and implementation-focused strategy that integrates defence and strategic communication while avoiding the language of robust military intervention (Tocci 2017). Helwig and Sinkkonen examine the EU's increasing focus on strategic autonomy within a changing international environment characterised by great power rivalry, the weakening of the rules-based international order, and intensified economic competition, presenting it as the principal framework through which the EU now articulates responses in foreign, security, and defence policy. They note that the resulting increased defence spending carries the threat that a more hardened EU risks undermining its normative appeal (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022).

Håkansson connects this to ambitions to strengthen European defence cooperation and protect Europe militarily, showing how security developments enabled its executive to expand its role by increasing its activity, building coalitions, and incorporating NATO standards into EU frameworks despite internal contestation (Håkansson 2023). Bergmann and Müller likewise frame these developments within a longer pattern of incremental reform in the EU's security and defense policy, arguing that repeated crises generated functional pressures that led to increased funding for military equipment outside the EU budget while preserving strong safeguards due to persistent member state divisions (Bergmann and Müller 2021). This

would imply that increased defence spending and prioritization of military security have been ongoing even before the conflict in Ukraine, but that it provided a normative justification for it post hoc. Genschel argues that the absence of an existential security challenge historically constrained centralisation in areas such as defence integration in the EU, which the conflict in 2022 provided. He argues that this external threat reduced opposition to increased defence integration and muted internal conflict. He adds that these dynamics depend on the symmetry and immediacy of perceived threat (Genschel 2022).

### **CONCEPTUALIZATION OF “STRATEGIC PEACE” IN THE TRADITION OF THE CRITICAL PEACE THEORY**

Building on the literature on the EU’s changing geopolitical role, the following section examines how peace has been conceptualised in critical peace and security scholarship, using this literature to situate the EU’s militarisation turn within broader shifts in which peace itself is increasingly understood through military security rather than liberal internationalist transformation. If the EU is perceived as a liberal organization, as its norms would suggest, the changing of the international order affects it significantly. Richmond has argued that the international peace architecture has increasingly transformed from normative and transformative ambitions toward stabilisation and military security-oriented practices. He notes that EU states have increasingly prioritized security and containment, moving away from normative and transformative goals and focusing on conflict management (Richmond 2021b). Mac Ginty similarly argues that the traditional liberal peace approach no longer functions as a dominant framework, describing the international system as hybrid and fragmented, and as one in which states increasingly privilege stabilisation, military security, and containment over democratisation or transformative peacebuilding, while selectively applying international norms (Mac Ginty 2025).

Ikenberry likewise notices the crisis of the liberal international order, marked by internal fragmentation and the weakening of liberal democracy. He considers that liberal internationalism is no longer managing to reconcile sovereignty with cooperation and to provide adequate military security and stability, but that no better alternative yet exists (Ikenberry 2018). With a less optimistic view, Lawson and Zarakol focus on legitimacy challenges arising from accusations of hypocrisy, arguing that there is a gap between universalist claims and selective application, which provoked resentment, particularly when powerful actors combine norm violation with moral condemnation (Lawson and Zarakol 2023). Finkenbusch argues that the crisis of liberal internationalism was worsened by the increased critiques aimed at it, which lowered the ability of liberal actors to formulate guiding norms for collective action, producing a governance stance centred on caution, risk aversion, and harm avoidance rather than transformation (Finkenbusch 2021). In relation to this transformation, Richmond and Pogodda argue that within the liberal order, peace was embedded within relatively coherent alignments between international institutions, leading states, and normative frameworks, allowing it to be articulated through shared references to law, cooperation, and institutional mediation. They argue that in the emerging multipolar order, this alignment is weakening and producing fragmentation among institutions and states, while increasingly associating peace with national sovereignty, stability, and strategic positioning, and normative coherence declines (Richmond and Pogodda 2024).

Richmond further argues that peacebuilding increasingly reaches stalemates, preserving surface stability while diluting the substantive content of peace and weakening the legitimacy of the international order. He notes that insecurity is managed rather than resolved, and that peace is instrumentalized for stability's sake (Richmond 2025a). He relates this to the changing of the international structure of norms and practices related to peace, which he conceptualizes as the international peace architecture. He describes it as fragmenting and becoming more fragile, as peace is

increasingly becoming directly concerned with military security and conflict-management rather than with norms (Richmond 2021a). He argues that an authoritarian international order is emerging, characterised by multipolar rivalry, militarisation, and the normalisation of violence, in which peace is closely tied to control, containment, and geopolitical balancing (Richmond 2025b). Within such an environment, it is reasonable to expect that the approach of the EU regarding keeping peace would change towards military security and defence integration.

Richmond, with Pogodda and Visoka, argues that there is a broader fragmentation of the international order, marked by reactionary nationalism, weakened normative frameworks, and the reassertion of extra-legal sovereignty, with conflict and violence increasingly reclaimed as political tools. Such processes obstruct and dilute peace, managing insecurity rather than addressing the underlying roots of conflict (Richmond, Pogodda, and Visoka 2025). Grimmel and Strasheim bring these transformations and their consequences to the EU, arguing that the promotion of peace and security is central to the EU's political identity and external role, and that this self-understanding has come under increasing strain as the context in which the EU operates has fundamentally changed. They note that policymakers increasingly emphasise resilience, stability, and order over democracy promotion and societal transformation, and that armed conflict in its neighbourhood and the transformation of the global order have strained its capacity to act as a peace and security actor while sustaining its normative self-image (Grimmel and Strasheim 2021).

Rieker and Riddervold perceive a tension between long-term normative commitments and short-term military security responses, arguing that while the EU continues to promote peace, multilateralism, and rule-based cooperation at the level of overarching strategies, it adopts more interest-driven and security-oriented practices when confronted with crises perceived as urgent. From this, they argue that military security is increasingly prioritised without the formal abandonment of

normative principles, which remain embedded in its identity as outwardly presented (Rieker and Riddervold 2022). In this way, it would appear that the EU is attempting to maintain its image as a peaceful organization while increasingly militarizing, producing a different conceptualization of the maintenance of peace in response to changes in the international order

From this foundation, it is possible to build *a theoretical framework* and conceptualize Strategic peace. Focusing on military security, this conceptualization is meant to explain how peace is discursively framed by the EU in relation not to its traditional normative and liberal positions, but in relation to military preparedness, deterrence, and defense policy within the Union's strategic documents. Strategic peace is conceived of in the article as a discursive configuration in which peace remains the stated normative objective, but is defined as contingent upon military deterrence, defense readiness, and strategic alignment. In this way, the EU's increased militarization, focus on defense and military security, and its increased military spending are justified through peace language and framed as a way to preserve peace, which is a break from its earlier discourse. Strategic peace can be distinguished from other conceptualizations of peace by its combination of normatively and nominally liberal language with a justification of peace pursued through military power, whereby peace is invoked as a normative objective, but the instruments through which it is expected to be secured are based on military security and defense.

The concept itself is original and developed through a synthesis of insights from critical peace scholarship and an interpretative reading of EU strategic documents. The conceptual foundation is provided by theoretical literature on the transformation of liberal peace, the weakening of the international liberal order, and the prioritization of stabilization and security within the contemporary international order. The concept can therefore function as an analytical category used to identify and interpret the EU's discursive configuration and justification as found in its strategic documents. The empirical

analysis is focused on the existence of such a Strategic peace in EU strategic documents, and it does so by examining whether peace is discursively constructed as dependent upon military security and defense capacity, if peace language is consistently linked to deterrence, and whether militarization is framed as a necessary and responsible instrument for preserving peace.

The method used is qualitative content analysis, which is based on a corpus of select major strategic and policy documents issued by all EU institutions between 2016 and 2025. The analysis systematically examines how peace is defined, framed, and connected to defense and military security within official EU discourse in these documents, in which the EU institutions define, formalize, and communicate the Union's positions on peace, security, and defence. Therefore, it is the content of these strategies and policy directives that is analyzed, and within them, the discourse related to peace, military security, defense, deterrence, readiness, defense spending, and integration, and related terminology observed in relation to peace and in justification of its achievement. The analysis identifies the patterns of the EU's institutional discourse, which define the conditions by which peace can be preserved or maintained, the patterns of where it is connected directly to military security and defense, and the methods by which the EU institutions justify and legitimate defense investment and implicit militarization as necessary for maintaining peace. These patterns and the discourse are expected to be presented as ordinary and necessary, rather than as a break with previous practice and discourse, in an attempt to maintain a normatively peace-oriented self-presentation while justifying militarization. The analysis, therefore, attempts to answer how peace is defined or described in EU strategic documents, what instruments are presented as necessary for achieving or preserving peace, and how defense-related measures are framed in relation to the EU's identity as a peace actor.

## **THE EUROPEAN UNION'S STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT AND ITS RECONCEPTUALISATION OF PEACE**

Having thus established a framework, the empirical analysis examines how peace is described and contextualized in major EU strategic and policy documents in order to examine what understanding of peace emerges, and if militarization is presented as a necessary condition for its preservation. The 2016 Global Strategy signified a major change from the earlier approach and discourse of the EU, and it presents the EU as existing in an increasingly unstable, contested, and insecure international environment in which challenges to the European security order, particularly to the east, have direct consequences for the safety of EU citizens. Peace and security are defined in it as core interests of the Union and are directly linked to developments beyond EU borders, with increased ambition and strategic autonomy being framed as important for the EU's ability to maintain peace and safeguard security within and beyond its borders. It states that the security of the Union depends on its ability to prevent conflict, manage crises, and promote stability in neighboring regions, yet also that the EU must be ready and able to deter, respond to, and protect itself against external threats. The strategy adds that European security and defense must become better equipped to build peace, guarantee security, and protect human lives while engaging more systematically in defense and security matters. It explicitly says that peace and stability are no longer a given in Europe after the emergence of open conflict in Ukraine, and it essentially introduces principled pragmatism as the guiding approach of EU external action, combining values-based commitments with a realistic assessment of power, threats, and constraints. It declares that the EU must take greater responsibility for its own security, act as a responsible global stakeholder, and strengthen its capacity to act, with security and defense framed as central to its credibility. The more established liberal forms of cooperation are still referenced as important for maintaining

peace, and increased strategic and defence cooperation is defined as urgent and is prioritised in the text (European Union 2016, 3–23).

The Council of the European Union's conclusions then defined a new level of ambition for security and defence, arguing that Europe's security environment requires a strong European Union, able to promote peace and guarantee the security of its Member States and citizens. It expressed a commitment to the Union's ability to act as a security provider and to enhance the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which is defined as an essential part of the Union's external action, especially in reference to external conflicts. Security is described as indivisible among Member States, making solidarity and mutual assistance obligations that require credible, deployable, and interoperable civilian and military capabilities. Defence investment, cooperation, and capability development are framed as necessary responses to an interconnected threat environment, while cooperation with NATO is presented as complementary and reinforcing (Council of the European Union 2016b, 1–7). It linked the promotion of peace to the EU's capacity to guarantee its security in an evolving threat environment, presenting security challenges as requiring a concerted and cooperative response at the EU level, making regular deliberation on security and defence a political necessity. Strengthening the Union's role as a security provider and enhancing its ability to act autonomously when necessary are framed as essential to the EU's global role. Peace was explicitly linked to building defence capacities and coordination, resilience to instability, and stabilization beyond EU borders (Council of the European Union 2016a).

This logic was reinforced by the European Defence Action Plan, which framed defence cooperation and industrial capacity as prerequisites for protecting the EU. The Commission argued that the EU must be able to defend itself, using that to justify increased defence cooperation and the establishment of a common defence fund as necessary responses, urging for increased defence integration in order to maintain collective

security (European Commission 2016). Soon after, the European Commission produced a Reflection Paper on the Future of European Defense, which reiterated the EU's self-perception and image as a project historically associated with peace, while at the same time arguing that in the changing defense and security environment, peace could no longer be taken for granted. It frames peace and European security as contingent on defense and argues that security and defense must play a more prominent role in EU policy, urging member states to cooperate more closely in the development of military capabilities leading to a Defense Union (European Commission 2017, 7–13). In 2021, the European Council also framed the EU as being in a context of heightened global instability, growing strategic competition, and complex security threats, reaffirming its commitment to the rules-based international order while further emphasizing the need for the Union to take greater responsibility for its own security. Peace and security were linked to the EU's capacity to act, with increased autonomy in defence framed as necessary for protecting its interests and values and for contributing to global peace and security. Cooperation with NATO and the transatlantic relationship was reaffirmed as central. Security was increasingly connected to deterrence and the management of external threats (European Council 2021).

The Commission's communication on the EU Security Union Strategy had similar discourse and framing, considering the EU to be in such a complicated and dangerous international environment that security had to be addressed at the EU rather than the national level. It urged members to continue increasing their defense-related capabilities and to increase their cooperation, framing European values as being threatened and requiring protection through a Security union, and justifying it by what it defined as a rapidly changing European security threat landscape (European Commission 2020, 2–6). The Council of the EU then established a European Peace Facility to finance its foreign policy actions, framing the goal as being the preservation of peace, preventing conflicts, and strengthening international security.

The established financial structure enabled military operations, military assistance, and capacity-building, which were framed as necessary for maintaining peace in the EU's vicinity (Council of the European Union 2021). This framing was further consolidated in the Versailles Declaration, which was given in response to the conflict emerging in Ukraine, and which presented the security environment as having undergone a fundamental rupture. It explicitly connected peace and stability to the EU's responsibility to protect its citizens and values, and connected this responsibility to taking more responsibility for security through further decisive steps towards European sovereignty. It connected the preservation of peace and stability with substantially increased defense expenditure, collaborative defensive capability development, incentives for joint projects, and cooperation in defense. It focused directly on security rather than on peace, putting attention on what it called growing instability, strategic competition, and security threats, urging for more responsibility towards bolstering joint defence capabilities (European Council 2022b, 1–5). Peace was therefore increasingly being presented as achieved through defense and the EU's ability to provide military security, moving away from normative language and liberal cooperation and towards hard power.

This framing was consolidated and formalized in the Strategic Compass, which presented the EU as operating in a security environment fundamentally altered by the return of high-intensity interstate conflict, with European security described as facing its most serious challenge since the end of the Cold War. Peace was more explicitly linked to the Union's capacity to deter threats, protect itself, and act decisively, with security defined as a prerequisite for prosperity, stability, and the protection of EU citizens and values. While reaffirming commitment to a rules-based international order and multilateral cooperation, the document emphasized that power politics, coercion, and strategic competition increasingly shape the international environment, requiring a more assertive EU posture, especially in the fields of defense. It included explicit calls for an increased strategic

autonomy and greater defense readiness and industrial capacities, framing it as necessary conditions for maintaining peace, alongside solidarity and mutual assistance among Member States (Council of the European Union 2022, 17–25). The European Council later emphasized increased defense spending, deeper defense integration, and sustained military support as essential for protecting peace, democracy, and the European security order. It called for substantial enhancement of the EU's foreign, security, and defence policy, and called for the establishment of a defence union and implementing the Strategic Compass as a basis for common defence. It framed EU security and defence policy as serving the protection of peace, democracy, and international law (European Council 2022a, 1–8). The normalization of military and defense language, therefore, continued, with calls for a Security union becoming calls for a Defense Union, and with peace being constantly connected to defense and capabilities

The European Parliament's recommendations on how to accept the new discourse and frame Russian actions in Ukraine as an attack on the European peace order itself, arguing that it undermined the foundations of the Union's foreign, security, and defence policy. It called for the EU to use determination and resolve to protect and defend the Union, its values, and the rules-based international order. Peace was explicitly framed as requiring protection and defence against military aggression, and was directly linked to deterrence, preparedness, and the availability of adequate military and financial capabilities, with military assistance presented as a legitimate instrument for defending peace (European Parliament 2022, 2–9). This framing was reinforced in the following year, when peace was framed in relation to the need to respond effectively to military security threats. The absence of sufficient deterrence and preparedness prior to the emergence of conflict in Ukraine was presented as a contributing factor to the outbreak of conflict, and the EU's credibility was directly connected to its ability to act decisively. It was security that was continually referenced rather than peace, which itself was framed as simply the product of military

security, requiring sustained military support, deterrence, and the development of credible defence capabilities and readiness. Urgent calls were made for additional defence capacity building, while calls for deeper cooperation with international organisations were framed in relation to maintaining security and referenced with regard to the EU's security and defence policy (European Parliament 2023, 7–14).

The 2024 parliamentary resolution consolidated this by accepting a new urgency for the EU to strengthen its defence capabilities, including by building on what was described as an unprecedented investment in the defence fund and peace facility. The maintenance of peace was framed as contingent on military investment, with increased military strength necessary for a secure Europe. The protection of European citizens, values, and interests was repeatedly linked to the strengthening of defence rather than international cooperation or the maintenance of the international order, which itself was referenced together with effective implementation of the common defence policy (European Parliament 2024, 6–14). The Council of the EU continued to describe the Union as facing an unprecedented amount of threats, with the rules-based international order increasingly challenged by revisionist powers. It framed security and enlargement within a single geopolitical logic in which defence capacity, strategic alignment, and resilience against external threats became central to the EU's approach (European Council 2023, 1–6).

The Council's conclusions described Russia's actions as posing an existential threat to European security, while the continuing conflict in Europe was presented as requiring the large-scale availability of defence products, substantial increases in defence expenditure, and greater investment undertaken jointly at the EU level. Strategic autonomy and defense readiness were emphasized while commitments to multilateralism, conflict prevention, and peace mediation were reaffirmed in connection to them rather than as ends in themselves (Council of the European Union 2024, 1–4). The European Defence Industrial Strategy likewise defined defense readiness as crucial in the

protection of EU citizens and their values, justifying military assistance to Ukraine as an investment in peace. This was framed in relation to geopolitical competition and increased insecurity for the Union (European Commission and High Representative 2024). The European Council continued these developments in framing and discourse, stating in 2025 that defense was a core element of the EU's emerging geopolitical role, and framing it as necessary due to the existential challenge of conflict on the continent. Defense was presented as requiring increased strategic autonomy, preparedness, and responsibility across the EU's entire strategic environment, calling for a substantial increase in defense expenditure and wide cooperation to address defensive and military limitations (European Council 2025a). Defence was now treated as a central element in EU policy, and as a way to maintain peace and security, with discourse related to maintaining peace through liberal institutions and dialogue being framed in relation to military security.

The Council demanded that the EU must achieve defence readiness by 2030 through accelerated implementation of capability development, framing security as contingent on military strength, and noting that it needed to strengthen its eastern flank. It emphasized the importance of joint capability development, standardization, and large-scale procurement, supported by EU financial instruments, alongside strengthened political oversight and coordination within EU defence governance structures. Urgent calls were made to strengthen the European Defence Agency and to increase the European defence industry's capacity and direct defence investment towards joint development, production, and procurement. Cooperation was stressed only in relation to those partners who share the EU's foreign and security policy goals (European Council 2025b). In its strategic document on major threats, the Black Sea region was framed by the Commission as a space of increased geostrategic importance due to the conflict in Ukraine. In the strategy related to its security, peace was directly presented as inseparable from security guarantees, deterrence, and defense cooperation. The Commission used the strategy to call

for full alignment of members with the EU's foreign, security, and defense policy, including military support (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2025b). Calls for dialogue and conflict resolution were thereby framed within a strengthened security framework rather than treated autonomously.

The EU further updated its strategic documents in 2025, defining rapid and large-scale movement of forces and equipment as a prerequisite for effective deterrence and crisis response. In relation to this, peace was again explicitly linked to the EU's ability to ensure deterrence through defensive capability, with military mobility framed as essential for safeguarding security (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2025a). The strategic compass continued to guide strategic thinking, with the High Representative asserting that the international security situation had worsened, demanding that an increased operationalization of the strategy had to occur. Defense readiness was framed as a priority for the protection of the EU, normalizing military security as the primary way of maintaining international peace and security (European External Action Service 2025, 8–10, 19–20). With this development, the EU strategic discourse normalized the framing that peace depends not only on norms and values, legal principles, or diplomatic engagement, but on the EU's capacity to project and coordinate military power. This completed the consolidation of strategic peace as an organizing logic of EU security policy, treating peace no longer as a normative foundation of EU foreign and security policy, but as an outcome to be actively gained through increased defensive capacity and cooperation. This move was conducted while under the normative orientation towards peace, nominally preserving earlier framing and discourse, yet the path towards achieving peace was changed towards military power.

## CONCLUSION

Driven by an interest in how the EU continues to maintain its peace-oriented normative framework, which is constitutive of its identity, while increasingly orienting itself towards defense and military power, the article provided an examination of its discursive transformation. The analysis showed that the transformation towards a language of defense underlining the language of peace had begun years before the outbreak of open conflict in Ukraine in 2022, as peace was progressively repositioned inside security policy rather than treated as its external objective. Peace remains a central normative basis for the EU at all levels, yet it is no longer conceptualized primarily as the outcome of international cooperation or liberal norm diffusion, but rather as dependent on military deterrence and power. In such a framing, peace is not assumed as the effect of cooperation but is described as something that must be protected and actively sustained, making security provision part of what peace is taken to mean. Militarization is not positioned as an alternative to peace but as the responsible and legitimate means through which peace can be preserved in an unstable and competitive international environment. It is worth noting that the EU's discourse and strategies are not deprived of references to cooperation and international law; the change is rather that international cooperation is increasingly treated as secondary to military security and defence. Peace itself is framed no longer as achieved through cooperation, as would be expected in the liberal international order, but rather as achieved primarily through military strength.

The article's arguments are based on critical peace studies, introducing the concept of strategic peace to capture this discursive transformation. Strategic peace is a framework in which peace continues to be discursively invoked as the desired goal, while being framed as achievable only through military strength. Strategic peace combines the language of peace, stability, and responsibility with a security logic that is framed as necessary for the maintenance of peace in a world of geopolitical competition.

This enables the EU to expand its military role while preserving its self-understanding as a peaceful organization, not abandoning peace but reframing it in a way that makes militarization compatible with it. The analysis illuminated how, in the EU's policy and strategic documents, this compatibility is produced through the repeated coupling of peace-language with military deterrence and defensive preparedness, so that increased defense spending and military support are framed as peace-maintaining measures rather than as departures from its peaceful identity. This redefinition of peace appears to have become normalized across the EU's institutions, becoming part of its general strategic approach. The analysis shows that peace is constantly described as something that must be defended, protected, and secured through strength, becoming enabled through strategic means.

Strategic peace, therefore, is a reframing of the EU's normative commitments to peace, democracy, and international law as subject to a dominant organizing logic of military security and defense. The analysis showed that the transformation reveals not an abandonment of peace language or peace as a normative goal, but rather that defense and deterrence have been built into the definition of peace as necessary for it, rather than being treated as instruments that support it. Therefore, a peace identity can remain publicly intact while militarization is normalized as ordinary and necessary, being justified by the peace itself. This implies that the EU actively attempts to justify its militarization through peace-oriented language, creating the danger that it would lean further into the process and further normalize its new power-based geopolitical role, losing its earlier normative and peaceful appeal and becoming less inclined to pursue peace and security through cooperation and mediation. The concept thus contributes to the literature by demonstrating how peace can remain normatively central while being substantively transformed in practice, surviving discursively through the concept of strategic peace.

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## ОПРАВДАВАЊЕ МИЛИТАРИЗАЦИЈЕ ОД СТРАНЕ ЕВРОПСКЕ УНИЈЕ КРОЗ КОНЦЕПТ СТРАТЕШКОГ МИРА

### Резиме

Рад анализира трансформацију начина на који Европска унија након 2022. године концептуализује и оправдава мир у контексту убрзане милитаризације и промене безбедносног приступа и дискурса, а на основу ранијих корака ка томе. Полазећи од критичких студија мира, рад показује да милитаризација није представљена као одступање од мировног идентитета Уније, већ као његов логичан наставак, при чему се мир све чешће дефинише као стање које се мора активно обезбеђивати кроз одвраћање, војну спремност и стратешко усклађивање. Кроз анализу кључних стратешких докумената и званичних дискурса ЕУ, показује се да се Русија представља као егзистенцијална претња европској стабилности, док се повећање војних издатака, ширење НАТО-а и јачање одбрамбених капацитета представљају као нужни и одговорни кораци ради очувања мира. Рад уводи концепт стратешког мира како би означио ову дискурзивну синтезу мира и одвраћања, у којој мир више није супротстављен милитаризацији, већ се конституише кроз њу. За разлику од либералног мира заснованог на сарадњи

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и нормативној дифузији, стратешки мир задржава мировни дискурс, али га везује за одвраћање и стратешко усклађивање. Анализа показује да овај помак није краткотрајна реакција на сукоб у Украјини, већ део дугорочније трансформације у којој се мир све чешће схвата од стране ЕУ као стање које се одржава кроз одвраћање, војну спремност и стратешко усклађивање, а не као резултат трансформативних процеса и сарадње. Такав помак омогућава Европској унији да истовремено убрза милитаризацију и очува позитивну слику о сопственој нормативној мирољубивости Рад закључује да стратешки мир омогућава Европској унији да истовремено проширује своју војну улогу и очува самопредстављање као мировни актер, чиме доприноси разумевању начина на који мир може остати нормативно централна, али суштински преобликована категорија у савременој европској безбедносној политици.

**Кључне речи:** стратешки мир, безбедносни дискурс, милитаризација Европске уније, мир и безбедност, европска безбедност

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