Assessing the military in times of re-armament

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Summary

Following a decades-long post-Cold War focus on peace dividends and asymmetric threats, the international landscape has undergone a paradigmatic shift marked by the resurgence of state-based conflicts, as seen in Ukraine. This has triggered a rapid and substantial rearmament effort, particularly in Europe, where nations are striving for greater strategic autonomy amid perceived U.S. unreliability.

The process faces dual challenges. Firstly, a change in scale poses significant political and industrial dilemmas. Politically, governments must navigate the zero-sum game of reallocating substantial resources from other priorities like health and education toward defence within tight fiscal constraints. Industrially, Europe's rearmament is hampered by a fragmented, inefficient, and non-competitive defence industrial base, leading to costly duplication and dependence on non-EU suppliers.

Secondly, the changing military doctrine complicates procurement and armed forces planning. Strategic priorities have pivoted from expeditionary operations and stabilisation forces (Afghanistan, Iraq, Sahel) back to existential territorial defence on the continent. Simultaneously, the future of warfare is highly uncertain, blending traditional heavy weaponry with disruptive technologies like drones, forcing difficult trade-offs between sophistication and mass production. Regaining autonomous command, control, and strategic enabler capacities from the U.S. adds further complexity.

These dynamics make effective defence policy monitoring and assessment critically important yet exceptionally difficult. The sector is characterized by inherent obstacles: the complexity of policy and technology, a lack of transparency due to necessary but often excessive secrecy, and weaker public accountability mechanisms compared to other sectors. Performance is hard to measure, as core objectives like deterrence and prevention are intangible, and output criteria are elusive.

A comparative analysis with health and education policy underscores these unique difficulties. While the latter sectors rely on data-driven forecasts, robust output indicators, broad stakeholder engagement, and transparent governance, defence policy depends on scenario-based foresight, struggles with meaningful performance metrics, and operates within a centralized, opaque governance model with a narrow stakeholder base and limited civil society oversight. This combination heightens risks of inefficiency, misallocation of funds, and corruption.

As military expenditures rise to historic levels, the existing frameworks for democratic oversight and performance assessment are ill-equipped for the task. Strengthening parliamentary expertise, enhancing transparency where possible, and developing more mature evaluation frameworks are imperative to ensure that vast new defence expenditures are effective, efficient, and accountable.

Table of Contents

Tables

A paradigmatic shift

Imagine monitoring and assessing a doubling of the public education budget in the next five years but with a number of caveats:

- great uncertainty about the future of education, the content of school, college and university curriculums;
- a good third of education building contractors are located outside of Europe, mainly in the US;
- no union teachers, no NGOs to watch, a handful of independent education experts, and many other experts connected to government or to big contractors;
- no serious parliamentary oversight; and
- budget increase eating on the health budget.

This, very unlikely, scenario for education is happening across Europe in another key government function: defence policy.

It is difficult to understate the paradigmatic shift that has happened in the past few years regarding geopolitical and international relations globally. With the Cold War's end in the 1990s, the prospect of great-power, high intensity wars receded, giving way to a golden age of multilateral cooperation and open and rules-based international order. Through trade and investment liberalisation, innovation would unleash global prosperity and hence global peace for all. In short, Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" vision.

This vision translated into a general fall in military expenditures and shrinking of armed forces in order to exploit the peace (or disarmament) "dividends" of globalisation[i]. While the "security umbrella" provided by the United States within the NATO framework was upheld, strategic attention drifted to terrorism and the Middle East. For the RAND corporation, *"The general consensus among defence strategists has been that, as the emphasis shifted to fighting terrorism and wars in the Middle East after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, allies' preparations to defend the international order in Europe and Asia have been chronically underfunded"* (RAND 2024).

Since the mid-2010s however, the global geopolitical situation has gradually changed direction and has pivoted almost 180 degrees today. It has shifted from (i) a stable and multilateral setting in which conflicts were mainly confined to non-state conflicts, and to terrorism in particular, to (ii) an unstable and unpredictable setting in which state-to-state conflicts are becoming more frequent. According to a report by the Peace Research Institute Oslo published in 2024:

- the three most violent years in terms of battle deaths since the end of the Cold War have been… 2021, 2022 and 2023. Over this period in total almost 600,000 people were killed in conflict. there has been a worrying increase in state-based conflicts over the past decade;
- more than 50 state-based conflicts have been recorded each year for the past eight years, peaking in 2023 with 59 conflicts. The only other period since 1946 where more than 50 state-based conflicts have been recorded was during the early 1990s (PRIO 2024).

We are reaching a point in the "normalisation" of wars where a direct armed conflict between two nuclear powers, India and Pakistan in May 2025, is not necessarily reaching top of the global news headlines. The return of wars and conflicts as normal exit for resolution of conflicts is a clear indication of severe weakening of multilateralism and peaceful international cooperation. For the Munich Security Conference *"many governments are no longer focussing on the absolute benefits of global cooperation but are increasingly concerned that they are gaining less than others"* (MSC 2024). Armed conflicts (not just "geopolitical tensions") are becoming standard downside risk scenarios in the main global economic outlook reports produced every year, as seen in recent World Bank and OECD reports: "Escalation of armed conflicts and geopolitical tensions" (World Bank 2025) and "Geopolitical risks and policy uncertainty have intensified" (OECD).

Trump's second term as President of the United States served as an accelerant to this trend. It will be more radical and authoritarian, than the first term. It clearly aims at establishing authoritarian state surveillance under the rule of an oligarchy domestically. Internationally, the unpredictability of the Trump Administration is another major source of policy uncertainty,

surely on trade, investment, and climate, but more broadly on geopolitical aspects and conflict resolution.

The hot spots of geopolitical tensions are numerous. In the Indo-Pacific, the growing China-US rivalry is not limited to geo-economic aspects and the prospect of a China-US de-coupling. It also has a defence and security dimension. China's growing militarization of its maritime periphery is trying to convert East Asia into its exclusive sphere of influence, clashing with Taiwan's aspirations and with the US historical presence and influence in the region. Meanwhile the Middle East is engulfed in an escalating cycle of violence, from the Hamas attacks of October 2023 to Israel's devastating campaign in Gaza, deemed a risk of genocide by the International Court of Justice, spreading instability to Lebanon and Syria. Across Africa, from Sudan's humanitarian catastrophe to the coup-ridden Sahel, states are fracturing.

Rearmament

It is in Europe however, that the geopolitical shift is particularly abrupt. Once a haven of peaceful and "happy globalisation", war has indeed returned violently to the European continent with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Not only, confronted with the Trump Administration, Europe can no longer rely on the US umbrella. For Bruegel (2024), *"Failing to stop Russia's aggression would leave Europe at a critical disadvantage for decades, with a long-term threat to peace in the European Union. The EU can no longer rely on United States leadership in NATO and European countries therefore need to rapidly build-up their military capabilities."*

The new consensus is that European countries must rapidly and substantially re-arm and rebuild their own military capabilities to ensure their own defence. EU Leaders and heads of states are multiplying statements on their commitment to a historic transformation of European defence. The Munich Security Centre (2023) sees there an opportunity to *"unleash new dynamics"* for *"public support for greater defence spending"*. Analysts estimate an additional EUR500 billion is required over the next five years (Bruegel 2024).

Table 1: Military spendings 2022 > 2024

In USD Bn (current)	2022	2024	2022>2024	*Increase in %*
United States of America	861	997	137	*+16%*
China	292	314	22	*+8%*
Russia	102	149	47	*+46%*
Nato Europe	324	449	125	*+39%*
rest of the world	608	744	135	*+22%*
total	2187	2653	466	*+21%*

Source: https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex

Looking at the figures, a rearmament process of Europe is already happening. As shown in tables 1 & 2, European members of NATO increased spendings by +39% combined between 2022 and 2024 and, during that period, accounted for 14 of the top 25 countries by the budget increases. Countries close to Russia are unsurprisingly top of the list: Poland, Romania, the Nordic and the Baltic countries. At the NATO Summit on 24-25 June 2025, NATO members

made a commitment to spend 5% of GDP on defence annually by 2035, of which 3.5% on core defence (up from the current NATO guideline of 2%) and 1.5% on defence and security-related spending. For the European Central Bank (2025), the additional spending is projected to rise over time and to reach 0.3% of GDP in 2027, with the bulk of it coming from Germany.

Table 2: Top 25 increases in military spendings since 2022 (above USD1bn in annual budget)

2024	USD Bn	% GDP	% growth 2022>2024
Israel	45.3	8.8%	+98.0%
Algeria	20.4	8.0%	+96.5%
Poland	34.5	4.2%	+88.4%
Denmark	9.8	2.4%	+77.5%
Myanmar	5.2	6.8%	+62.9%
Estonia	1.4	3.4%	+58.0%
Burkina Faso	1.0	4.7%	+57.0%
Russia	150.5	7.1%	+53.1%
Sweden	11.7	2.0%	+50.0%
Netherlands	22.4	1.9%	+46.9%
Finland	6.9	2.3%	+44.8%
Latvia	1.4	3.3%	+44.5%
Czechia	6.7	1.9%	+44.5%
Iraq	5.8	2.4%	+43.7%
Norway	10.3	2.1%	+42.8%
Germany	86.3	1.9%	+40.1%
Japan	58.4	1.4%	+35.8%
Bulgaria	2.3	2.2%	+35.4%
Ukraine	66.8	34.5%	+34.5%
Armenia	1.4	5.5%	+34.3%
Azerbaijan	3.7	5.0%	+31.6%
Romania	8.1	2.3%	+31.3%
Austria	5.1	1.0%	+30.4%
Lithuania	2.6	3.1%	+27.6%
Belarus	1.7	2.1%	+25.8%

Source: https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex

The on-going rearmament process comes with two sorts of challenges: (i) challenges related to the upcoming change in scale (mobilisation finance, eliminating bottlenecks while securing an autonomous defence industrial basis), and (ii) challenges related to the changing military doctrine (what to finance, how to organised armed forces, what is the future of war).

Change in scale

The first challenge is eminently political by nature: the political cost of budget arbitrage in favour of armed forces and against other priorities. In a zero-sum game, the question of how to fund the surge in military spendings is indeed a profound economic dilemma with both debt burdens and tax levels already historically high across Europe. A sustainable solution seems to lie not in creating new public spendings, but in reallocating existing resources. Yet this is politically and socially challenging. Governments face competing priorities, from the green and

digital transitions, the education needs, demographic ageing and the health costs that go with it, to curbing income inequalities and maintaining social cohesion, all within a heavily constrained fiscal environment. In the United Kingdom for example, the rise in military expenditure is explicitly financed by reducing official development assistance from 0.5% to 0.3% of Gross National Income.

The challenge is also industrial. Europe's ambition for "strategic autonomy" is fundamentally constrained by a fragmented and inefficient defence technological and industrial base. The domination of US arms supplier, inherited from decades of US umbrella policy, and a lack of joint procurement – except for a handful of programmes – have structured the European defence market into small, uncompetitive national markets, leading to costly duplication of capabilities and weakened industrial foundation (MSC 2023 & BRUEGEL 2024). According to a recent report to the European Parliament (2024), *"the fragmentation of national defence equipment spending in the EU generated inefficiencies of around EUR10.9 billion per year"* which is equivalent to *"20 % of the gap towards meeting the 2 % NATO target"*.

The urgent need to rearm after Russia's invasion of Ukraine has, paradoxically, worsened this trend, with nations scrambling to buy ready-made equipment – often from the US, as well as from other key arms producer such as Israel and Korea – to fill immediate gaps. According to EDA (2024) *"Collaborative projects remain a tiny fraction of the total, and nations are failing to meet agreed-upon targets for joint research and development. This perpetuates the fragmentation that undermines Europe's collective strength"*.

Market fragmentation also gives national suppliers substantial market power. An increase in demand in an environment of limited competition means that companies can charge higher prices and increase rents (Bruegel 2025). Different prices paid by Member States for the same equipment or system is common. For example, the estimated unit price of an armoured howitzer (PzH-2000) produced by Germany has varied more than five-fold, from EUR4.5 million to EUR23.5 million depending on the client states (EP 2024).

Changing doctrine

The second challenge is the changing military doctrine and its implications in terms of procurement policy, equipment of forces and overall organisation of armed forces. The landscape of modern defence in Europe is being reshaped by concurrent forces in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine: (i) a fundamental shift in strategic priorities, (ii) uncertainty over operational warfare (i.e. conducting military operations) as a result of technological change, (iii) the urgent need to regain tactical autonomy (vis à vis the US) in conducting military operations.

For years, European militaries had to balance territorial defence within a US umbrella framework, against far-flung crisis management operations – expeditionary forces for France and the UK, NATO-led or UN-led stabilisation forces outside of Europe. That tension has now decisively resolved. Russia's war on Ukraine has brutally re-focussed national strategy on (existential) territorial defence and moving away from the expeditionary force models. Small and agile armies specialised on expeditionary and short stay operations abroad (Afghanistan, Iraq, Sahel) are no longer a priority. The focus is on heavy, dense and resilient forces that can protect the European continent.

The challenge also relates to technology and "product design". The war in Ukraine has made heavy artillery, heavy tanks, long range missiles and basic infantry troops relevant again. West European armed forces are also forced to rethink military operations without air supremacy – which historically was considered a given particularly in expeditionary missions. Yet, experience from the battlefields of Ukraine present a paradox. While heavy weapons, trenches and the overall relatively static situation at the front line is reminiscent of WWI, the conflict is equally a laboratory for disruptive innovation. Drones and loitering munitions have proven devastatingly effective and have benefited from more innovative changes in the past 2 years than in the decade preceding. The future of war therefore bears many unknowns and is far less predictable than before, in terms of technological choices and arbitrage between sophistication and mass production.

The changing military doctrine for European armies is also about regaining autonomous operational command and control capacities. Under the US umbrella framework, most European armies had become aggregated and mutually dependent bricks of a broader NATO integrated system. With the notable exception of France, and perhaps the UK, none of the European armies had sufficient command and control capacity to organise, on its own, a complex military operation. With the US becoming unreliable ally, European armies need to regain these capacities as well as other "strategic enablers". As stated in a recent policy paper by Bruegel (2025) *"Europe's defence relies on NATO and US leadership within NATO. Apart from boots on the ground, the US has provided Europe with 'strategic enablers' (…) command and control capabilities, satellite-based intelligence and communication, development of expensive new weapon systems such as fifth- or sixth-generation fighter jets, integrated weapon systems needed by multiple countries such as strategic air defence, strategic lift (large-scale air transport and maritime logistics), missiles and nuclear deterrence"*.

The challenges of defence policy monitoring and assessment

This situation in which governments have to, simultaneously, mobilise funding to change scale in volume and transform their own military doctrine, makes the ability to monitor and assess defence policy performance more challenging and critical than ever. The six steps of evaluation and decision making processes are more complex than ever when applied to defence: relevance (it is the right thing to do?), coherence (how well does it fit?), effectiveness (is it achieving its objectives?), efficiency (how well are resources being used?), impact (what difference does it make?) and sustainability (will the benefits last?).

Here lies the third major challenge: comparatively, even prior to the upcoming change in scale and in substance, defence policy was *already* characterised by a lack of mature and effective assessment frameworks. A NATO study across twelve nations found in 2019 a "high level of diversity" in the maturity of performance measurement systems, with many nations having only moderate or low maturity, and some lacking any strategic-level system at all. The report concludes *"more attention is generally paid in defence organisations to the measurement of means (i.e. resources) rather than ways and ends"*. Not only that, *"several nations lack clear objectives and measures related to national interests and credibility"*, and *"neglect important performance categories, including those related to science and technology, information and*

intelligence" while *"relatively few metrics support the systematic evaluation of collaboration between nations"* (NATO 2019).

All in all, from the current literature, there are three key challenges to effective defence policy assessment and monitoring: Difficult to clearly define and measure outputs, complexity of policy, lack of transparency and lack of public accountability.

Defining outputs

The are relatively few academic studies on defence policy assessment, which itself is a very telling information. Among the few ones most cited, a study in 2021 conducted by six academic experts (Keathley-Herring et. al. 2021) concludes also to a serious lack of ownership of managerial performance assessment practices and framework by defence organisations, as well as the difficulty to measure outputs and to clearly defined core objectives. The academics see a number of shortcomings. First, upstream, the authors identify the risk of a *"misalignment between the military-strategic and politico-strategic functions. Policy goals may therefore not be appropriately translated into strategic ends"*. Second, downstream, *"within defence organisations themselves, it remains particularly challenging to define and measure some of the KPAs and critical outputs. A significant part of the value generated by defence activities are cognitive and non-tangible (e.g. prevention)"*.

Complexity

Complexity is another key feature. The number of international standards and guidelines is a good indication of the level of technical complexity. While NATO is primarily seen as a military and political alliance, it also happens to be one of the world's largest providers of standards and guidelines. It maintains no less than 1050 "standardisation agreements" (STANAG), with another 353 draft versions in preparation. While NATO stands far behind the International Standardisation Organisation, which is maintaining over 25000 standards, the number of NATO standards is higher than the total combined of equivalent or comparable organisations, the FAO, the WHO, the ILO and the OECD. NATO standards cover all aspects of military operations, "everything from ammunition sizes to rail gauges to the words that troops use to communicate with each other"[ii]. Examples include "common doctrine" for planning a campaign, standard procedures for transferring supplies between ships at sea and interoperable materiel such as fuel connections at airfields, etc.

Table 3: List of standards and guidelines by NATO, OECD, ILO, WHO, FAO

Organisation	Nb	Status
FAO[iii]	237	Standards of the Codex Alimentarius
WHO[iv]	300	Guidelines
ILO[v]	101	Conventions
OECD[vi]	273	Legal instruments
NATO[vii]	1050	Standardisation agreements

Beyond technical aspects, defence is also characterised by a high level of complexity at policy and institutional levels. For the authors of the above cited study *"Defence organisations tend to be amongst the largest, most complex, and most diverse public sector organisations with a huge number of activities"* (Keathley-Herring et. al. 2021). Given the level of complexity,

outsiders and policy makers' access to independent expertise becomes all the more crucial. And yet that access is precisely problematic. For the Inter-parliamentary Union *"many parliamentarians rely on external expertise – and some providers of this expertise may have vested interests. In such cases, the complexity of the sector can make it more difficult for parliaments to exercise proactive and fully independent oversight, underscoring the importance of strengthening internal parliamentary expertise"* (IPU 2025).

Lack of transparency

Defence policy makes extensive use of and is designed based on restricted information and classified data, given the obvious national or operational security conditions. While some level of secrecy is necessary, excessive classification prevents outsiders from having informed debate, including by preventing comparative analysis with other sectors. Secrecy may in fact become factors of inefficiencies or corruption. That is precisely why defence is a very at-risk sector when it comes to corruption and explains why Transparency International, and other anti-corruption NGOs bring so much attention to the sector. TI has in fact a stand-alone programme on defence and military affairs. And for a cause. *"Due to the sensitivity of some defence-related information, access to information in the defence sector faces an extra layer of complexity. When considering publication, public interest needs to be weighed against potential harm to national security. Technical complexity, capacity constraints in public institutions, and broad, vague definitions of national security and related exemption clauses all contribute to the lack of effective mechanisms for accessing information from the defence sector in many countries"*[viii].

The OECD comes to similar conclusions, though in more diplomatic terms: *"The degree of departure of defence procurement legislation from the general standards of openness and transparency varies amongst jurisdictions but invariably involves a wider than usual margin of discretion for contracting authorities. (…) Unfortunately, this environment of secrecy and lessened transparency, together with a wider than usual field of discretion for contracting authorities, lends itself to becoming a fertile ground for protectionism, corruption and inefficient use of public resources"* (OECD 2016).

Accountability versus discretionary powers

Finally, defence policy most often is treated separately from normal public accountability mechanisms. For TI *"defence sectors are often lacking the basic governance standards of other public sectors, with oversight, transparency and accountability requirements so often excluding defence because of broad and overused national security exemptions"*[ix].

The role of parliaments is absolutely central to uphold accountability. Government strategic reports and "White Papers" are often debated in parliament. Parliamentary defence or armed-services committees are mandated to scrutinise budget implementation, can hold hearings and engage reports. Annual or multi-annual budget and, in some cases, specific military engagements abroad requires approval by parliament. Parliament's own auditors, when they exist, can engage independent reviews and special inquiries.

Yet, the powers of parliaments vary extensively across Europe. The strongest mechanisms are found in Germany, the Nordic countries and the Netherlands. The Germany Bundestag for

example has exceptionally strong constitutional rights[x]. In the United Kingdom, parliamentary oversight is also fairly strong[xi]. Bottom of list is France[xii]. Yet all in all, parliamentary oversight is weak. For the Interparliamentary Union *"the defence and security sector presents specific features that require special attention. Complex budgets, secrecy and political pressures are among the many obstacles to effective parliamentary oversight of military expenditure"* (IPU 2025).

In addition, governments are often granted wide discretion over defence matters, including by treating military spendings under off-balance sheet procedures to bypass standard parliamentary procedures, using to that end national security exemptions clauses. The problem of course, is that, once institutionalised, such mechanisms can be very difficult to dismantle. To give concrete examples, almost a third of Poland's 2023 military spendings, focussed on procurements to modernise the armed forces equipment, were treated off-budget. In the same vein, the EUR17bn European Peace Facility aiming at funding military equipment for 2021–2027 is also off-budget.

Defence spending can be politically charged, given the amount of money at stake and the significant national security implications at play, thereby limiting transparent and inclusive debates. For the IPU *"Substantial lobbying by defence contractors can also add to the pressure, potentially influencing priorities and making it more challenging to maintain a balanced and fully objective assessment of national needs"* (IPU 2025). Combining secrecy, off-balance procedures and politically charged corporate lobbying, leads to defence policy matters to be particularly exposed to risks of corruption and misappropriation and misallocation of funds.

Comparing with health and education

Given the above, and the specific features of military affairs, it is worth comparing public policy assessment frameworks for defence, health and education. This is relevant given current trends in in military spendings, and the commitments to raise it to 5% GDP by 2030, which would bring it to the same levels as education spendings. As shown in table 4, across Europe, education spendings have broadly stagnated at 5% of GDP, and have slightly decreased since 2020. By opposition, defence spendings across Europe were at 1.22% GDP throughout the 2010s and are now picking up in a number of countries. The most emblematic rises are in Poland and in Germany, where the share has increased from 1.56% in 2021 to 2.59% in 2024 and from 1.04% in 2021 to 1.41% in 2024 respectively.

Table 4: Defence & education government expenditures in % GDP

Country	Function	*2010-2019 average*	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024 p
EU OECD	Defence	*1.22*	1.3	1.24	1.26	1.33	
	Education	*4.79*	4.92	4.77	4.62	4.69	
France	Defence	*1.78*	1.87	1.73	1.8	1.83	1.93
	Education	*5.42*	5.18	5.07	5.04	5.01	
Germany	Defence	*0.99*	1.1	1.04	1.03	1.11	1.41
	Education	*4.20*	4.57	4.47	4.39	4.47	
Italy	Defence	*1.27*	1.36	1.36	1.2	1.20	1.20

Country	Function	*2010-2019 average*	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024 p
	Education	*4.06*	4.32	4.19	4	3.92	
Netherlands	Defence	*1.15*	1.33	1.25	1.29	1.34	1.77
	Education	*5.25*	5.11	4.96	4.86	4.90	
OECD avg	Defence	*1.44*	1.59	1.52	1.51	1.70	
	Education	*5.29*	5.42	5.19	5.01	5.13	
Poland	Defence	*1.59*	1.72	1.56	1.6	2.04	2.59
	Education	*5.20*	5.06	4.87	4.54	4.94	
Sweden	Defence	*1.30*	1.35	1.33	1.67	1.77	2.35
	Education	*7.28*	7.82	7.33	7.12	7.18	
UK	Defence	*2.13*	2.17	2.15	2.12	2.25	2.30
	Education	*5.34*	5.47	5.34	4.94	4.81	
US	Defence	*3.67*	3.49	3.21	2.98	3.04	3.14
	Education	*6.16*	6.01	5.71	5.55	5.42	

Source: https://data-explorer.oecd.org & 2024 projections based on data provided by https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex

Core objectives

As outlined in table 5, the core objectives and tools for foresight and anticipation are radically different. For health and education, core objectives are most likely rooted in observable data – being ill or not, being able to read or not etc. The entire process for defining objectives and future-oriented analysis and foresight in large part rely on statistics and data, longitudinal studies and are implemented through iterative processes.

Table 5: Defence vs Health & Education core objectives and foresight methodology

	Defence	Health Education
Core Objectives	National security & sovereignty, Strategic deterrence, Military readiness.	Population outcomes, Equitable access to service, Service quality
Strategic Alignment	Diplomacy and geopolitical threats, National cohesion, Domestic industrial basis	Societal values & citizenship, Social cohesion & justice, Labour market needs
Time horizon	Crisis-oriented	Long term & iterative adjustments
		& Crisis-oriented (e.g. COVID)
Understanding future trends	Foresight Scenario-Based Assessments Strategic Reviews	Forecast Data-Driven Assessment Evidence-Based Approaches
Predominant academic field	International relations	Economics and statistics

By opposition, core objectives of defence policy in large part on intangible outcomes that are open to various cognitive interpretations ("peace", "sovereignty") and for which data not readily available. The core objective of "strategic deterrence" and the means to achieve it is a good example: what are the means needed to prevent an attack or a war that has not happened yet? Future oriented programming hence cannot rely on data-driven trends and assessments. Rather than scientifically driven forecasting, defence policy rely on scenario-based approaches

and foresight. The entire academic field of foresight in fact stems from the US armed forces, and its closely associated think tank, the Rand corporation.

Accordingly, outside the direct technical expertise (military for defence, teaching for education, medicine for health), the predominant academic fields are different: international relations experts and political scientists for defence, economists for education and health.

Performance criteria

The same difference applies when considering monitoring performance and assessment criteria. Health and education performance criteria are generally fairly robust and cover both input and outputs. For example, teacher-student ratios, hospital bed occupancy & admission rates for input criteria, student literacy / numeracy rates, cost per quality-adjusted life year for output criteria.

Performance criteria for defence policy is far more difficult task. While input performance can be measured satisfactorily – cost overruns, equipment readiness, troop training & skills – it is an entirely different matter regarding output indicators. Other than intermediary outputs, such as the responsiveness (in time and in execution) of armed forces during military exercises, output criteria that effectively inform on core objectives are difficult to design. How can one measure the performance in achieving prevention, credibility and deterrence? of not being at war?

Table 6: Defence vs Health & Education policy performance criteria

	Defence	Health	Education
Examples of performance Criteria (Input)	Equipment readiness Troop training & skills Cost overruns in procurement	bed occupancy & admission rates Waiting times for critical procedures, Rural vs. urban care access	Per-pupil spending, Teacher-student ratios, Teacher salaries vs. Outcomes
Examples of performance Criteria (output)	Response time to mobilize forces Cybersecurity resilience	Life expectancy & mortality rates Vaccination rate Cost per quality-adjusted life year	Student literacy / numeracy rates Graduation/dropout, Equity gaps
Use of int'l peer review and benchmarking	Limited to assets and flows (military expenditures) and technical interoperability	Widespread and systemic, comparing and assessing national policies across a wide array of KPIs	
Benchmarking	NATO (STANAG) and data on spendings (e.g. IISS, SIPRI etc.)	WHO & OECD	OECD (PISA), UNESCO, Shanghai Ranking, etc.

The same gap appears when considering the availability of international benchmarks. Health and education benefit from a wide range of international benchmarks to measure output performance relative to peers. The OECD PISA rating of education system has a lot of media visibility and impact on domestic policy making processes.

Governance

Finally, and as discussed above, there are even greater differences when it comes to the governance and public accountability mechanisms. Defence policy governance is heavily centralised and confined to restricted government circles and insiders, while health and education policy governance are far more inclusive and decentralised. Likewise, the stakeholder base is small and narrow on defence and military affairs, involving a handful of elite think tanks and academics alongside big businesses, while it is broad, dense and diversified in the health and education sectors.

The interparliamentary union further argues that narrow and centralised model governance of defence policy benefits from "public apathy". According to IPU "Citizens tend to prioritize visible sectors such as health and education, meaning that MPs face less pressure to scrutinize defence. (…) The absence of vibrant public discourse and civil oversight diminishes accountability. Weak public interest reduces pressure on MPs to ask the difficult questions, allowing inefficiency or corruption to persist" (IPU 2025).

Table 7: Defence vs Health & Education governance and accountability mechanism

	Defence	Health Education
Governance	Centralised Driven by classified national security	De-centralised Driven by consensus building
Parliamentary oversight	Weak	Strong
Transparency and access to data	Very Low (classified information)	High (open data)
Stakeholder base	Narrow (centre of government circles, defence contractors and a handful of think tanks).	Broad (patients / students association, trade unions, NGOs, trade unions, numerous and diverse think tanks).
Civil society participation	Limited (Public apathy) absence of trade unions, NGOs focussed on peace, disarmament and corruption, not on defence policy as such	Widespread (Public engagement) high trade union density, influential student/patient/user/parents associations, strong NGO activism covering the full spectrum of issues

Source

Bruegel 2024 A European defence industrial strategy in a hostile world nov-24
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[i] Although that view is somewhat simplistic: in a research paper in 1994, the OECD argued indeed that "For most developing countries (….) the reduction of military procurement observed since the mid-1980s is due to financial constraints rather than to a sustainable change in political attitudes on security and military issues". (OECD 1994)
[ii] https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/standardization
[iii] https://www.fao.org/fao-who-codexalimentarius/codex-texts/list-standards/en/
[iv] https://www.who.int/publications/who-guidelines
[v] https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en
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[viii] https://ti-defence.org/publications/creating-access-strengthening-and-expanding-information-governance-in-defence/
[ix] idem
[x] Deployment of armed forces abroad requires prior parliamentary approval, which is regularly debated and time-limited. Its Defence Committee has special powers, including investigative powers. German MPs can have clearance for classified information.
[xi] The House of Commons Defence Select Committee can also conduct inquiries and its parliamentary National Audit Office can deliver opinions and fact finding reports on defence procurement.
[xii] The French parliament (both the lower and upper houses) have fairly limited powers if not symbolic. The lower house National Defence and Armed Forces Committee exists and can organise debates but otherwise has far less powers compared to its counterparts in Germany or the UK. While the parliament votes on a multi-year programming law, its ability to amend the defence budget is restricted and it has no role in authorising overseas deployments. Even the government obligation to inform parliament at least three days after the beginning of a military intervention is not systematically respected. France has the distinct feature, among liberal democracies, of having an elected Head of state, the President of the Republic, who cumulates the function of (operational) Commander-in-Chief of the Armed forces.