The European Security Strategy is stalled; Europe's counter-terrorism strategy shows a way through



03 September 2026 ~ Expert comment ~
Dr. Constance Wilhelm-Olympiou

Overlaying twelve yellow EU stars circling over digital cityscape, showing blueprint overlays. Photocredits// Shutterstock

Where is the new European Security Strategy (ESS), **promised** for delivery **after July's** NATO summit? Europe aspires to strategic autonomy, yet EU Member States reportedly have made little progress in agreeing on a common approach, scope and action to achieve it. But here's the overlooked reality – the EU is already operating an autonomous architecture in a security field: counter-terrorism. The **ProtectEU strategy**, and European counter-terrorism practice more broadly, offer a model for European strategic autonomy.

The stakes

Delays in delivering the ESS damage the credibility of **European strategic autonomy**: at a time of return of the dominance of hard power, they undermine the relevance of Europe amid threats from Russia and geopolitical tectonic shifts around China, Iran and the broader Middle East. They expose the constraints on Europe's ability to act

assertively and rapidly on security and defence, lest the Union encroaches on Member State sovereignty. More critically, they reflect a continued assumption that Europe can rely on a US-anchored NATO.

NATO's reliability can no longer be taken for granted. Its **strongest member** is now also its least predictable. Tensions over Ukraine, Iran, Greenland and base positioning illustrate this volatility. The pressing question is not whether Europe can build autonomy, but why it continues operating as if NATO's responsiveness is guaranteed.

The ProtectEU model: proof of concept

While EU Member States debate foreign policy positioning, Europe already operates an autonomous security governance for counterterrorism. **Established in 2025**, **ProtectEU** sets out a whole-of-society security strategy integrating citizens, civil society, businesses and research institutions. Counter-terrorism coordination through ProtectEU and its 2026 **EU Agenda to Prevent and Counter Terrorism** (CT Agenda) offers a live, operational, autonomous security architecture of intelligence-sharing, cross-border police and judicial mechanisms through Europol and Eurojust, development of a common European definition of 'terrorism' and infrastructure protection. This constitutes an already functioning model for a way forward.

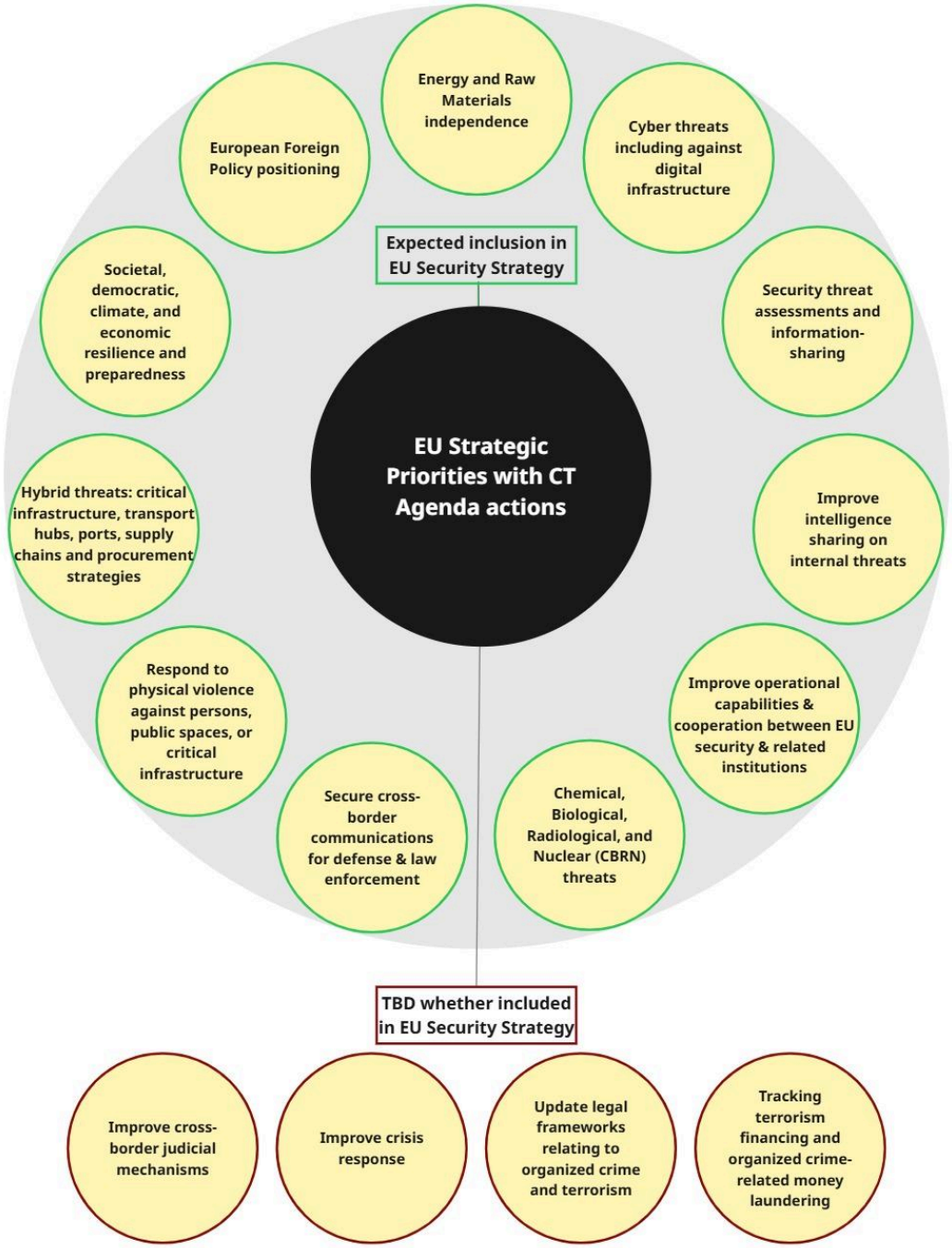
The strategic advantage is clear: counter-terrorism generates political will for cross-border cooperation within the EU, as well as security and judicial partnerships with non-EU countries. The CT Agenda builds on advances in legal frameworks for terrorism-related offences, terrorist financing, and firearms and explosives restrictions. It seeks to strengthen border management and travel-related security systems. It increases research and information-sharing and cooperation on terrorism-related threats. Critically, it demonstrates how EU institutions can coordinate autonomously without requiring military force generation or comprehensive foreign policy consensus.

Strategic overlap: the model already exists

A comprehensive ESS is '**expected to provide a long-term vision integrating defense, security, resilience, technological sovereignty, economic and supply-chain security and partnerships into a coherent framework to guide EU action**'. It would link ProtectEU, with 'external' dimensions of security – across conflict zones from Ukraine to Iran to the Sahel.

Critically, there is overwhelming strategic overlap between the expected ESS and the already-adopted CT Agenda, which offers new or improved mechanisms, institutions, and approaches that can be expanded across European security priorities. Mapping the CT Agenda against what the ESS is expected to deliver (Figure 1) shows just how much ground is already shared.

Figure 1: Strategic Overlap between ProtectEU's CT Agenda and forthcoming EU Security Strategy



While European CT has its own gaps and areas for improvement, as made clear by recent **actual and attempted attacks** in France and Germany, the CT model still offers a clear path forward for European security.

The American counterpoint

The new US **counter-terrorism strategy** reveals the divergence between US and European security strategies. It identifies three main terrorist threats: narcoterrorists and transnational gangs, 'legacy' Islamist terrorists, and violent left-wing extremists, including anarchists and anti-fascists. Far-right extremism is noticeably absent from the document.

While it calls Europe its preeminent, long-term CT partner, it blames Europe's border and migration policies and diminished CT resources for turning Europe into a 'permissive operating environment for plotting against Europeans and Americans' and a 'transmission belt for terrorists', resulting in Europe's 'willful decline'.

Europe's strategy is different. It does not target specific actors, but instead categorises different threat types and institutional responses. It is functional and coherent, while also demonstrating an approach fundamentally misaligned with current US strategy. This asymmetry shows that European security cannot be outsourced to NATO if its leading member operates from incompatible premises. An ESS built on Europe's own capacity is therefore essential.

What next?

Delivering an ESS does not require comprehensive foreign policy consensus. ProtectEU proves this. While an ESS must integrate broader external dimensions, the EU can move forward now on concrete security measures that have already been agreed within internal security policy: hybrid threats, cyberattacks, critical infrastructure protection, supply chain security and technological sovereignty.

Procedural obstacles do exist: **EEAS reform** would affect intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and there are questions about Member State sovereignty in defence and military force generation. But they are not insurmountable. European defence spending commitments confirm capacity: NATO's 5% defensive spending quotas, the EC's **ReArm Europe** initiative of €800 billion and the €150 billion **SAFE loan programme** demonstrate both political will and financial resources.

Of course, the defensive capacity and deterrence NATO offers against conventional and non-conventional threats do not at present have a parallel in European capacities. Moreover, NATO quotas provide a real opportunity for European security: as over 70% of NATO membership are also part of the EU, higher European defensive budgets move Europe a step closer to the aim of strategic autonomy. The subsequent increase in resources and capacity could potentially be redirected towards common European defense initiatives if **NATO security responsiveness may be found lacking**.

Progress toward strategic autonomy need not be stalled by negotiations on foreign policy positioning; agreement on **definitions of security** that include all its military, economic, technological, energy, or societal dimensions; or consensus on the degree of continued reliance on America.

The new ESS is a critical lifeline for the future of Europe. The ProtectEU CT Agenda offers a working model for European security coordination, and a way to build confidence and capacity that can be scaled into a concrete, actionable ESS – and so closer to strategic autonomy, and European defence on its own terms. By identifying threat types and specific institutional responses, combined with increased Member State spending on defence, this approach circumvents comprehensive foreign policy agreement in favour of concrete measures on a range of key security priorities that have already been agreed. These can then be expanded to bring in energy and economic security and defensive capabilities against traditional or nuclear threats, whether at the member state level or through **Permanent Structured Cooperation** (PESCO), the **European Defense Fund** (EDF), **EU battlegroups** and **Rapid Deployment Capacity**, or a new consolidated structure.

At a time when hard power is dominating geopolitics, and paradigm-shifting wars and new partnerships are shattering the power structures and spheres of influence of the last 80 years, Europe's ability to use its existing strengths and policies to assert strategic autonomy will determine whether it remains a major player. This is the question European security now turns on.

SHARE THIS ARTICLE

Authors



Dr. Constance Wilhelm-Olympiou

PhD, King's College London, Department of War Studies

TAGS

Foreign policy Security Europe

EXPLORE SIMILAR CONTENT



ODI Europe Impact Report: Bridging Europe and the world in a fragmented era

Europe's role in the world is being tested, renegotiated, and reshaped in real time. As geopolitical rivalry intensifies, economic security reshapes strategic choices, and multilateral cooperation grows more contested, the assumptions that once



Think Change episode 90: beyond rearmament – what does security mean for Europe now?

Guests explore how security should be redefined for the more complex and contested world that Europe is navigating today.

by Sara Pantuliano, Benedetta Berti et al

underpinned European policymaking no longer hold. Our new impact report sets out how ODI Europe has worked over the past year to help Europe and its partners navigate this more complex and interconnected global landscape.

30 June 2026 - Other



Europe and the new world order: an updated approach to foreign engagement

The EU needs to urgently restructure its foreign affairs apparatus and change its approach to cooperation if it is to meet the challenges of today. This includes a serious debate around Europe's assets for foreign engagement, and how to deploy these most effectively. This paper is an attempt to kick-start this discussion.

by Dora Meredith

30 October 2024 - Briefing/policy paper

05 February 2026 - Podcast

Leadership
Governance
Finances
Terms and statements
Contact

© 2025 ODI Global. **CC BY-NC-ND 4.0**. ODI Global is a registered charity (number 228248).