

Grand designs: the EU's ambitions for defence integration

Now, almost seven years on from the EU summit that launched PESCO, this framework is undergoing a scheduled health check. It is timely. The world has changed dramatically since PESCO was first conceived. The EU's attention is more focused on high-intensity warfare, in coherence with NATO, following three years of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine.

The review highlights PESCO's crucial role in shaping EU defence, but suggests it is time to refresh its commitments. The focus should be on setting clear, measurable targets in areas such as defence spending and industrial collaboration, the review suggests. Future joint projects under PESCO should align with collaborative opportunities identified in the EU's defence review (*see EDM page 8*).

The European Defence Agency (EDA) is part of the PESCO Secretariat.

Krista Salo, EDA's Head of Unit, PESCO, and Project Officers Dorota Sliwa, Giuditta Morandi and Georgios Karaferis, as well as outgoing Project Officer Ana Rodrigues, sit down with *European Defence Matters* to discuss how the flagship defence framework is faring so far.

It is permanent, it is structured and it is about cooperation. The EU's defence framework sounds so straightforward. Understandably in the EU's multinational setting, and at a time of war in Europe, the reality is more complex.

It is permanent, it is structured and it is about cooperation. The EU's defence framework sounds so straightforward. Understandably in the EU's multinational setting, and at a time of war in Europe, the reality is more complex.

"The beauty of PESCO," says Krista Salo, "is that it is a framework where 26 nations sit together regularly to discuss the cooperative efforts (Malta is not in PESCO). But the challenge lies in turning those ideas into concrete capabilities."

To understand the significance of PESCO's strategic review, it is important to consider its origins. PESCO was inspired by a recognition that Europe needs to do more in the field of defence. Member States realised that a more structured approach to defence cooperation was necessary.

So far, PESCO has focused broadly on projects in areas such as military →



© Leonardo

concepts, training, capabilities and materiel. It remains a work in progress. "We have a very different security environment now," Salo says. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine have forced the EU to rethink its strategic priorities. Instability, terrorism and failing states on the EU's borders have made it clear that Europe's traditional approach to security is no longer sufficient.

"PESCO, initially designed to facilitate increased collaboration gradually, is now in need of greater urgency," says Salo.

Time for a 'Strategic Review'

Launched in 2023, the review aims at reassessing PESCO's objectives and commitments and at ensuring that its projects meet today's security needs. "We've gained seven years of experience in implementing the commitments agreed upon then," Salo says. "Now it's about turning this into action. The time for broad conceptualisation is over."

The review seeks to refine PESCO's strategic focus, ensuring that defence projects are aligned with both immediate and long-term threats, says Giuditta Morandi, who is part of Salo's team. "The aim is not just to create a framework for discussion but to produce real-world results – defence capabilities that are operational, scalable, and aligned with the EU's broader strategy," Morandi says.

"We've gained seven years of experience. Now it's about turning this into action. The time for broad conceptualisation is over"

The review of PESCO has been multifaceted, with several key areas being addressed to enhance the initiative's effectiveness. One of the primary goals is to ensure that PESCO projects are more tightly aligned with the EU's defence priorities, which have shifted in response to Russian aggression.

"This review pushes for more from PESCO. We need projects to be more coherent with collaborative capability development in the EU," says Dorota Sliwa, who is also part of Salo's team.

Time to commit

Under the framework of PESCO, EU countries have committed to planning together, sharing resources, and investing in joint capability development. The initiative aims to fill gaps in military capabilities that no single country could manage alone.

These include:

- Committing to annual increases, in real terms, in defence spending
- Investing in joint projects addressing critical capability gaps

- Modernising armed forces to meet operational standards, within the EU and with NATO
- Providing personnel, equipment, and support for EU missions and operations
- Boosting defence industry integration and support innovation in the defence industry

"In the review, we've looked at where we stand with the implementation of these commitments so far," says Sliwa. "Progress has been mixed, but the achievements are encouraging and provide a foundation for the next phase, which will be based on a refined set of commitments and clear objectives."

From its inception, PESCO has been a cornerstone of the EU's emerging defence architecture, and what makes it special are the commitments. "We are updating the commitments to reinforce PESCO as an overarching framework," Sliwa says.

A permanent road trip

PESCO projects have been criticised for their slow progress, with some of them remaining in the planning phase for years. "The review aims to shorten the timeline from concept to delivery, so that projects can move from early-stage development to prototypes within a feasible timeframe," Morandi says.

Currently over 60 PESCO projects are being developed, with more in the pipeline.

Each of the projects is carried forward by varying groups of PESCO participating Member States (project members) and is coordinated by one or more of them (project coordinators).

While progress in each PESCO project unfolds at its own pace, and with military capability development inherently a long-term endeavour, the initiative is delivering results.

"PESCO projects have demonstrated adaptability to challenges from the COVID-19 crisis to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine," says Georgios Karaferis, another member of Salo's team.

With many signalling readiness for operational use by 2025, most PESCO projects have advanced steadily. Several projects are already operational:

- **The EUFOR Crisis Response Operation Core** has refined EU force sensing systems, crucial for the emerging Rapid Deployment Capacity (see EDM page 20).
- **The European Medical Command** has established the Multinational Medical Coordination Centre – Europe, a permanent resource that supported COVID-19 responses and aid to Ukraine.
- **The Cyber Threats and Incident Response Information Sharing Platform** offers a cutting-edge software prototype to strengthen EU cyber defence.
- **The Cyber Rapid Response Teams and Mutual Assistance in Cyber Security** develops specialised teams to respond to cyber incidents.

Karaferis says: "While the fundamentals of PESCO are under review, the cooperation in a new set of PESCO projects already demonstrates a positive and ambitious direction for the future of the initiative."

The second phase of PESCO is set to start in 2026.

EDA believes that for PESCO to be truly successful, a cultural shift is needed, where Member States fully embrace collaboration. "They need to come together, assess gaps and launch projects that align with both EU priorities and their own national interests, in complementarity with NATO," says Ana Rodrigues, an outgoing project officer who has been responsible for tracking individual PESCO projects and providing updates of their progress. 



A recipe for success

More focus on impactful projects: Showcase PESCO's value: Driving impactful and strategic projects that matter to the EU and its Member States

Increased cooperation: Gather at least three Members States to launch a project and unlock the power of stronger cooperation

Strategic alignment: Projects should align with European defence priorities

Solid preparation: Focus on laying a strong foundation from the start to ensure a successful project journey

Strengthen the PESCO Secretariat's role: Advice and support from EDA, the EU Military Staff (EUMS), and the European Union External Action Service (EEAS), could help to filter out low-impact projects