



The Institutional Architecture - connecting the Assets That Already Exist

Curated by Robin Ashby

May - July 2026 This paper — the second in a series of four — addresses the institutional architecture needed to give Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union genuine operational weight. Paper I established the strategic case: the closing window, the hybrid threat scenarios, the five gaps, the command and control debate including the February 2026 JFC command transfer, and the decision-making reforms available within existing treaty law. This paper addresses what the collective defence architecture should concretely look like: the communautaire assets that already exist and need connecting; the bilateral and minilateral frameworks that provide working models; and the maritime dimension. Paper III addresses capabilities and Paper IV the industrial and procurement foundation.

I. The Communautaire Assets: Connect the Dots

The most important strategic insight available to European defence planners is also the least used: Europe does not need to build collective defence from nothing. It needs to connect what already exists. The assets described below represent the delivery layer that an expanded MPCC command structure and pre-agreed response frameworks would direct.

A. European Air Transport Command (EATC)

Based at Eindhoven and currently drawing on seven participating nations, the European Air Transport Command is arguably the EU's best-kept defence secret. It already pools strategic and tactical airlift supranationally — allocating sorties and optimising aircraft availability across

member state fleets. It has operational control of approximately 75 percent of the aerial refuelling capabilities and military transport fleets within the EU. It works. It is trusted. It is exactly the model for what collective defence infrastructure should look like: politically a coalition of the willing, operationally supranational.

The case for expanding EATC membership to all EU member states, deepening its mandate, and formally linking it to Article 42.7 response planning and the expanded MPCC command structure is compelling. EATC also offers the opportunity to procure advanced long-range maritime patrol and reconnaissance platforms as communautaire assets — extending the model it already applies to airlift and refuelling into the maritime surveillance domain that Frontex and a European fleet-in-being both require.

B. Frontex: From Border Agency to Security Asset

The European Border and Coast Guard Agency — Frontex — is the EU's first uniformed service, with a standing corps of officers and significant heavy assets including maritime patrol aircraft and remotely piloted vehicles. A 2021 paper argued that Frontex could be deployed rapidly in the Arctic under its existing mandate using communautaire assets — search and rescue helicopters, maritime patrol aircraft, ice-capable coastguard cutters — without requiring treaty change. That argument applies more broadly to the hybrid threat scenarios most likely to trigger Article 42.7 or Article 222.

Frontex's naval assets represent a nascent European maritime presence that, with an appropriately expanded mandate, could evolve toward genuine collective security roles: maritime domain awareness, coastal defence support, hybrid threat response, and crisis management. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has resolved several of the basing and overflight challenges previously identified in the northern theatre. The principle is to expand and reframe what exists rather than build from scratch.

C. The Intelligence and Space Layer

The EU Satellite Centre provides imagery and intelligence products to EU institutions and member states, with a mandate covering crisis monitoring and support to CSDP operations. ENISA — the EU cybersecurity agency — coordinates member state cyber defence capabilities. Together these represent the embryonic intelligence layer that a credible Article 42.7 response architecture requires. Neither is currently connected to MPCC in a structured way. Both should be.

Galileo's Public Regulated Service — encrypted, jam-resistant, European-owned — provides the navigation and positioning layer. Any Article 42.7 response architecture that depends on US GPS for positioning, navigation, and timing is not strategically autonomous. Galileo PRS is the solution and it already exists. The GEODE project, developed with approximately EUR 44 million EU grant support across 14 member states, is building the military user segment — receivers, security modules, anti-jamming antennas — for testing on naval, land, and drone platforms. European forces guided by European satellites: this is strategic autonomy made operational.

D. The EATC-Frontex-MPCC Triangle

The most immediately actionable step is to explicitly link three existing bodies into a coherent communautaire security architecture: EATC providing airlift and aerial refuelling; Frontex providing maritime and border security assets with an expanded mandate; and an expanded MPCC providing the planning and command layer. Together, without creating any new organisation, these three constitute the operational skeleton of European collective defence in the hybrid and grey zone scenarios most likely to trigger Article 42.7 or Article 222. The EU Satellite Centre and ENISA provide the intelligence and cyber layers. Galileo PRS provides the navigation foundation.

II. Working Models: Bilaterals, JEF, and NORDEFCO

Around the EU institutional architecture sits a web of bilateral agreements, minilateral frameworks, and regional defence groupings that already deliver collective security effects and provide proof of concept for the broader architecture. Three deserve particular attention.

A. UK Bilateral Agreements: The E3 Triangle

Lancaster House 2.0 — the Declaration on Modernising UK-French Defence and Security Cooperation, signed July 2025 — updates and deepens the 2010 treaties that established the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force and Franco-British nuclear cooperation. The CJEF reached full operating capacity in 2020 and can now rapidly deploy over 10,000 personnel across the full spectrum from high-intensity operations to humanitarian assistance.

The Trinity House Agreement with Germany — the first major bilateral defence treaty between the UK and Germany, signed July 2025 — covers deep precision strike, enhanced interoperability between future combat air systems, a Strategic Land Partnership strengthening the eastern flank, and undersea cooperation in the northern seas. It explicitly complements Lancaster House and the Franco-German Aachen Treaty, completing the E3 triangle.

The Lunna House Agreement with Norway deepens an enduring defence partnership through the Type 26 frigate procurement — sustaining 4,000 jobs in the UK and securing European maritime capability — and through expanded cooperation on Arctic security. Norway's procurement of Type 26, alongside the earlier BV206 Arctic vehicle acquisition completed in under nine months, represents the rapid cooperative procurement model that Paper IV argues should become standard rather than exceptional.

These three agreements — Lancaster House 2.0, Trinity House, Lunna House — form an interlocking structure of UK bilateral commitments that, taken together, represent a de facto European security framework operating outside EU institutional structures but entirely complementary to them.

B. The Joint Expeditionary Force: Sub-Article 5 in Action

The Joint Expeditionary Force — Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom as framework nation — is the most operationally significant collective security framework in northern Europe below the NATO Article 5 threshold, and it is exactly this sub-threshold space that Article 42.7 and Article 222 are designed to address. In January 2025, the UK-led JEF activated NORDIC WARDEN — a response option specifically designed to track threats to undersea infrastructure and monitor Russian shadow fleet vessels, integrating mine countermeasures vessels, submarines, and aerial surveillance platforms from all ten member states across the Baltic and North Seas. This is hybrid defence in operational practice, not institutional aspiration.

The Helsinki Leaders' Summit of March 2026 reaffirmed JEF's development as a flexible coalition configured to respond to security threats that do not meet the threshold of NATO's Article 5 — the precise operational space that Article 42.7 occupies. In November 2025, Ukraine was awarded Enhanced Partnership status with JEF — the first non-member nation to receive this designation — bringing Ukrainian expertise in drone warfare, hybrid defence, and long-range strikes into the framework.

JEF is operationally headquartered at Northwood HQ in the UK. Seven of JEF's ten members are EU member states. Three — the UK, Norway, and Iceland — are not. This geometry mirrors the EU-NATO complementarity argument made throughout this series: JEF provides the operational northern flank architecture; EU collective defence mechanisms provide the legal obligation and the broader institutional surround. MPCC and JEF HQ Northwood should

develop structured liaison arrangements as a priority.

C. NORDEFCO: The Nordic Model

The Nordic Defence Cooperation — Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden — has been transformed by Finnish and Swedish NATO accession from a mixed-membership efficiency framework into a coherent northern flank military grouping with full NATO integration. NORDEFCO Vision 2030, adopted in April 2024, sets the ambition for the Nordic countries to conduct joint training and operations complementary to NATO deterrence and defence. In September 2024, the five Nordic Chiefs of Defence signed a Nordic Defence Concept describing overarching principles for cooperation in all security situations — peace, crisis, and armed conflict.

NORDEFCO operates as a cooperation structure, not a command structure: national decision-making remains sovereign, but the framework enables joint operational planning, capability development, security of supply, and defence industry cooperation. It is the template that EU collective defence architecture should study and where appropriate replicate.

D. The Significance for EU Architecture

The bilateral, JEF, and NORDEFCO frameworks carry three messages for the EU collective defence argument. First, the geometry of effective European security cooperation does not map neatly onto EU membership — JEF includes non-EU members and excludes most EU members, NORDEFCO includes non-EU Norway and Iceland, the UK bilateral agreements create an E3 security triangle outside EU institutional structures. Effective European collective defence architecture must work with this geometry rather than insisting on EU-membership alignment.

Second, sub-Article 5 response capability is achievable and has been demonstrated operationally. NORDIC WARDEN is not a planning exercise. Third, the pre-agreed response option model works: JEF's ability to activate NORDIC WARDEN rapidly reflects years of joint planning and agreed response frameworks — precisely the pre-agreed tiered frameworks that Paper I identifies as the solution to the EU's unanimity speed problem.

III. The Maritime Dimension: Towards a European Fleet-in-Being

The naval dimension is the most significant gap in European collective defence capability that the institutional architecture has yet to address seriously. A 2023 paper argued that the time has come to consider a European fleet-in-being capable of taking on blue water missions, releasing US forces for deployment to potential areas of conflict — in the Indo-Pacific above all. That argument has strengthened considerably in the three years since.

A. The Strategic Logic

During the Cold War, the United States assumed primary responsibility for blue-water operations and for safeguarding supply lines between the US and Europe, while NATO allies assumed responsibility for less costly brown- and green-water operations. The combination of US Indo-Pacific rebalancing, the demands of Pacific contingency planning, and the demonstrated Russian threat to European maritime infrastructure has made a rebalancing of this division of labour both strategically necessary and politically achievable.

EUNAVFOR HQ, now based at Naval Station Rota in Cadiz Bay, provides a ready-made command infrastructure for broader European naval operations, drawing on its operational experience running Op Atalanta since 2008. The EU envoy to the UK confirmed in 2023 that all instruments of European defence policy are open to third countries — including through coordinated maritime presence mechanisms — providing the legal and political basis for UK participation in any European maritime architecture.

B. European Carrier Capability

The European carrier-capable force represents a genuine collective asset if coordinated rather than operated in national isolation:

- •United Kingdom: HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales, each capable of operating up to 36 F-35B aircraft. The UK Carrier Strike Group has operated with Royal Netherlands Navy escorts under a 2018 bilateral agreement — a model for broader European carrier task group integration. The Royal Navy's Thursday War weekly warfighting exercises, in which European navies participate, provides a practical interoperability framework.
- •France: Charles de Gaulle, operating 30 Rafale with catapult and arrestor capability. Has exercised with the Italian carrier Cavour and has landed allied aircraft, demonstrating interoperability with partner air wings.
- •Italy: Cavour, transitioning from AV-8B Harrier to F-35B. Has exercised with Charles de Gaulle. Giuseppe Garibaldi provides additional capacity.
- •Spain: Juan Carlos I, capable of operating up to 30 F-35B in a pure carrier role.

The F-35B commonality between the UK, Italy, and Spain is the key interoperability factor: common aircraft operating from compatible carriers with compatible support infrastructure. This is the foundation for a genuine European carrier task group rather than a collection of nationally operated assets.

C. Three Requirements for Credibility

A credible European fleet-in-being requires three elements for which national buy-in must be secured well in advance of any operational requirement: presence (supplying forces reliably and consistently, not on an ad hoc basis that undermines deterrence); persistence (long-term commitment to sustained operations, not short rotations — Op Atalanta's eighteen-year record demonstrates European navies can maintain persistent presence when the political commitment exists); and realistic rules of engagement agreed well in advance, not negotiated in a crisis.

D. EUNAVFOR and the Architecture

EUNAVFOR HQ at Rota already provides the command and control architecture for European naval operations. Extending EUNAVFOR's mandate — or creating a parallel structure for European blue water operations under the same command framework — is the most practical route to European fleet-in-being command architecture. EATC's role in procuring advanced long-range maritime patrol platforms as communautaire assets would provide the aerial layer that a European fleet-in-being requires, connecting the naval dimension back to the EATC-Frontex-MPCC triangle.

IV. Defence in the Commission and Parliament

A. The Commission

The appointment of a Commissioner for Defence signals that defence is no longer purely intergovernmental. The ReArm Europe / SAFE initiative, potentially mobilising up to EUR 800 billion in defence investment, represents an attempt to use European financial architecture for defence at scale that was unimaginable five years ago. On 3 July 2026, the Commission proposed five European Defence Projects of Common Interest (EDPCIs) under EDIP — covering drones and counter-drone systems; maritime and seabed defence; space; air and missile defence; and eastern flank security — with an average of 18 member states participating in each and Ukraine included in four of the five. This is the communautaire model applied to major defence capability development for the first time at scale.

The Commission should incentivise joint acquisition through a significantly increased defence allocation in the next Multiannual Financial Framework; develop financing tools to frontload

industry on long-term demand signals; explore DARPA-type innovation mechanisms building on EDA structures; and catalyse initiatives for defence programmes that cannot be better addressed than at EU-27 level — Galileo and IRIS2 being the established models. European Defence Bonds, providing multi-annual predictable funding for common projects, represent the most promising near-term financing innovation. The exclusion of weapons and ammunition from European Investment Bank financing should be lifted immediately.

B. The Parliament

The European Parliament holds no formal role in Common Foreign and Security Policy decisions, which remain intergovernmental. But it controls budget, chairs growing defence committees, and represents the democratic legitimacy that long-term European defence investment requires. A more assertive parliamentary role — budgetary scrutiny of defence funds, democratic oversight of Article 42.7 and Article 222 activation, and public accountability for collective defence commitments — would both strengthen and legitimise the framework.

C. The Governance Balance

The fundamental tension in EU defence governance is between intergovernmental logic — defence is sovereign, decisions require unanimity — and communautaire logic — only supranational mechanisms deliver the speed, scale, and commitment that credible deterrence requires. The answer is a hybrid: intergovernmental political decisions on who invokes and who responds, combined with communautaire delivery mechanisms for procurement, logistics, planning, and command. EATC is this model in miniature. JEF and NORDEFCO demonstrate it works at the minilateral level. The task is to scale it across the full EU architecture.

V. The Architecture Assembled

The institutional architecture required to give Article 42.7 genuine teeth has the following layers — none requiring treaty change, all requiring political will and sustained investment:

- •Legal foundation: Article 42.7, Article 222, and the Petersberg tasks framework as the three-layer legal architecture. Pre-agreed tiered response frameworks adopted by the Council. Constructive abstention as the formal operating procedure for invocation decisions.
- •Command: MPCC expanded to 400-500 permanent staff with explicit Article 42.7 and Article 222 planning mandate. European Defence Planning Process coherent with but distinct from NATO's NDPP. Structured liaison between expanded MPCC and European-commanded JFCs (UK: JFC Norfolk; Italy: JFC Naples; Germany/Poland: JFC Brunssum).
- •Airlift and logistics: EATC with full EU membership and explicit Article 42.7 mandate, including procurement of long-range maritime patrol platforms as communautaire assets.
- •Maritime: EUNAVFOR HQ Rota as the command architecture for European blue water

operations. F-35B-capable UK, Italian, and Spanish carriers with Netherlands escort integration as the carrier capability layer. Rules of engagement agreed in advance.

- •Border and coastal security: Frontex with expanded mandate, formally connected to the MPCC situational awareness architecture.
- •Intelligence and space: EU Satellite Centre and ENISA integrated into a structured intelligence layer connected to MPCC. Galileo PRS as the navigation standard for all Article 42.7-relevant forces and assets.
- •Minilateral frameworks: JEF and NORDEFCO formally recognised as components of the European collective security architecture, with structured MPCC-JEF HQ coordination. UK bilateral agreements — Lancaster House 2.0, Trinity House, Lunna House — as the bilateral building blocks.
- •Commission and governance: Defence Commissioner coordinating at Commission level; five EDPs as the first communautaire major defence projects; European Security Council at heads of state level; European Parliament for democratic oversight.

VI. Conclusion to Paper II

The communautaire architecture described in this paper — EATC, Frontex, Galileo, MPCC, EU SatGen, ENISA, EUNAVFOR — already exists in embryonic or operational form. JEF has demonstrated sub-Article 5 collective response in practice with NORDIC WARDEN. NORDEFCO has built the most integrated regional defence framework in Europe. The UK bilateral agreements have created an interlocking E3 security structure outside EU institutions but fully complementary to them. The five EDPs represent the Commission's first serious foray into major communautaire defence capability development.

What is missing is not the assets. It is the deliberate act of institutional connection — linking EATC to MPCC, Frontex to the intelligence architecture, EUNAVFOR to the broader collective defence command framework, JEF to EU Article 42.7 planning, NORDEFCO's capability development to EDF funding, and Galileo PRS to every force element that depends on navigation. Paper III addresses the capability layers — missiles, drones, sanctions, and the neutral state contribution. Paper IV addresses the industrial and procurement foundation.

The tiger has more bones than people realise. The task is to assemble the skeleton.

References

[1] European Air Transport Command, About EATC. eatc-mil.com

[2] Robin Ashby, "Frontex: the EU's Readily Available Toolkit to Enhance Security, Defence and Safety in the Melting Arctic," Defence Viewpoints, UK Defence Forum, 24 December 2021. Written without AI assistance. defenceviewpoints.co.uk

[3] GEODE Project (Galileo for EU Defence). EUR 44 million EU grant, 14 EU member states. Military user segment development including drone platform testing. euspa.europa.eu

[4] UK Government, Lancaster House Declaration on Modernising UK-French Defence and Security Cooperation, July 2025. gov.uk

[5] UK Government, Trinity House Agreement — UK-Germany Treaty on Defence and Security, July 2025. gov.uk

[6] UK Government, Lunna House Agreement — UK-Norway Defence Cooperation, 2025. gov.uk

[7] Joint Expeditionary Force, NORDIC WARDEN activation, January 2025. jointexpeditionaryforce.org

[8] Joint Expeditionary Force, Helsinki Leaders' Summit Communique, March 2026. jointexpeditionaryforce.org

[9] Nordic Chiefs of Defence, Nordic Defence Concept, September 2024. nordefco.org

[10] Robin Ashby, "Stepping Up: How Europe Can Develop Strategic Autonomy While Supporting Its Allies," UK Defence Forum, May 2023. Written without AI assistance. defenceviewpoints.co.uk

[11] EUNAVFOR, Operation Atalanta overview. eunavfor.europa.eu

[12] European Commission, ReArm Europe / SAFE — Security Action for Europe. commission.europa.eu/topics/defence/future-european-defence_en

[13] European Commission, "Commission proposes five joint defence projects to strengthen Europe's industrial capabilities," 3 July 2026. defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu

[14] Robin Ashby with Eurodefense Working Group 18-30, "European Defence Procurement: Some UK Perspectives," Defence Viewpoints, UK Defence Forum, 8 April 2023. Written without AI assistance. defenceviewpoints.co.uk

Cross-references: Mind the Gap III (hybrid threat taxonomy and cable sabotage scenarios); Mind the Gap VI (rapid Arctic procurement as cooperative model); Mind the Gap VIII (closing window and American conditionality). All published at defenceviewpoints.co.uk, 2026.

ÂÂÂ

About the Author

Robin Ashby is Director General and Commissioning Editor of the UK Defence Forum / Defence Viewpoints, and Secretary General of Eurodefense-UK. He is Rapporteur of the Eurodefense Arctic ICE Observatory, Chair of the Eurodefense Russia Observatory, and founder of the High North Observatory. He has written extensively on European defence, Arctic security, and collective defence architecture.

www.defenceviewpoints.co.uk | <https://robinashbyukdf.substack.com> | <https://dr.academia.edu/RobinAshby>

Since 2026 Robin has been using Claude, Anthropic's AI model (version Sonnet 4.6 for this series). All such papers include a specific logo declaring the source of research, structure and document production. Curation, direction, analytical judgements, arguments and original

insights, and some source materials, are the author's. The buck stops with him.

Editorial note: This series was substantially drafted before the NATO Ankara Summit of 7-8 July 2026 and associated recent developments in European defence architecture. A commentary paper addressing those developments — including the JFC command transfer, the Coalition of the Willing anti-ballistic missile coalition, the Defence Industry Forum announcements, and the evolution of EU sanctions enforcement — will follow shortly after pu