



HUMANITARIAN DISARMAMENT IN A REARMAMENT ERA

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Europe's rearmament, while a rational response to Russian aggression, is eroding the humanitarian disarmament norms. By recasting previously settled prohibitions as negotiable constraints on national defence, the current security climate threatens civilian protection and weakens the rules-based order on which Europe's long-term security depends.

Global military spending has reached unprecedented levels at a time when the international security environment is becoming increasingly unstable. The resurgence of interstate conflict and intensifying geopolitical tensions have prompted many governments to prioritise defence spending and military preparedness. These measures are frequently justified as necessary responses to contemporary security threats. Yet the current build-up raises a difficult question: can military preparedness be reconciled with the humanitarian disarmament norms that have shaped international arms governance? This article argues that Europe's rearmament, while a rational response to Russian aggression, is eroding the humanitarian disarmament norms that European states themselves helped to establish. By recasting previously settled prohibitions as negotiable constraints on national defence, the current security climate threatens civilian protection and weakens the rules-based order on which Europe's long-term security depends.

The humanitarian disarmament framework

Disarmament has historically been shaped by state interests, with governments pursuing arms control measures primarily to bolster their own security (Docherty, 2018). Humanitarian disarmament emerged as a corrective to this logic, reframing disarmament around the imperative to reduce human suffering rather than to optimise strategic advantage. Its foundations were laid by the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, also known as the Ottawa Convention and strengthened by the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions, which together transformed the prohibition of indiscriminate weapons into a recognised body of international humanitarian law (Docherty, 2018). As Dresner & Labianco (2024) argue, hu-

manitarian disarmament's core purpose is the protection of life and human dignity across all phases of a conflict. It advances a people-centred vision of security, aiming to prevent and remediate the human and environmental harm caused by weapons (Docherty, 2025).

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The central principles of humanitarian disarmament, according to Docherty (2025, paras. 6-10), thus include:

A humanitarian focus: The goal of protecting civilians is a purpose that can transcend political and national differences;

A cooperative approach: States should meaningfully involve and work in partnership with each other, civil society, international organisations, and survivors in decision-making processes to benefit from their expertise and preserve the humanitarian focus;

A commitment to international law: International law, including humanitarian disarmament, creates obligations for states parties and standards that influence states and other actors outside of a treaty. States should not only create new law, but also implement, defend, and strengthen the law that already exists;

Ability to adapt: Humanitarian disarmament is adaptable, as shown by its move from conventional weapons to weapons of mass destruction and its application to new topics, such as the environment and armed conflict, the destruction of cultural heritage during conflict, and torture-free trade.

A rearmament surge

Europe entered a period of acute structural vulnerability following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a shock compounded by the increasingly hostile posture of the American administration, which has signalled its intent to scale back the security guarantees Europe considered dependable (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2026). In response, the European Union (EU) has launched a series of initiatives to expand defence spending, seeking greater strategic autonomy and readiness (Fried, 2026), ultimately leading to *ReArm Europe*, a five-year €800 billion plan to ramp up European defence spending (European Parliament, 2025).

As a result, after decades of European underinvestment, European defence spending is now rising at an unprecedented pace (Fried, 2026). Global military expenditure has thus reached \$2,887 billion in 2025, the 11th consecutive annual increase and a 2.9% rise from the previous year. Europe accounted for the largest share of this global surge, with military spending climbing 14% to \$864 billion (SIPRI, 2026a).

But it is not rearmament alone that is rising. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), global arms transfers climbed 9.2% between 2021 and 2025 compared with the previous five-year stretch. Europe's imports alone jumped 210%, driven largely by Ukraine, now the single largest arms importer on the planet, absorbing 9.7% of total arms imports since Russia's full-scale invasion (George et al., 2026).

FIGURE 1. WORLD MILITARY EXPENDITURE 2025

Source: SIPRI (2026). *World Military Expenditure 2025*. <https://www.sipri.org/visualizations/2026/sipri-map-world-military-expenditure-2025>

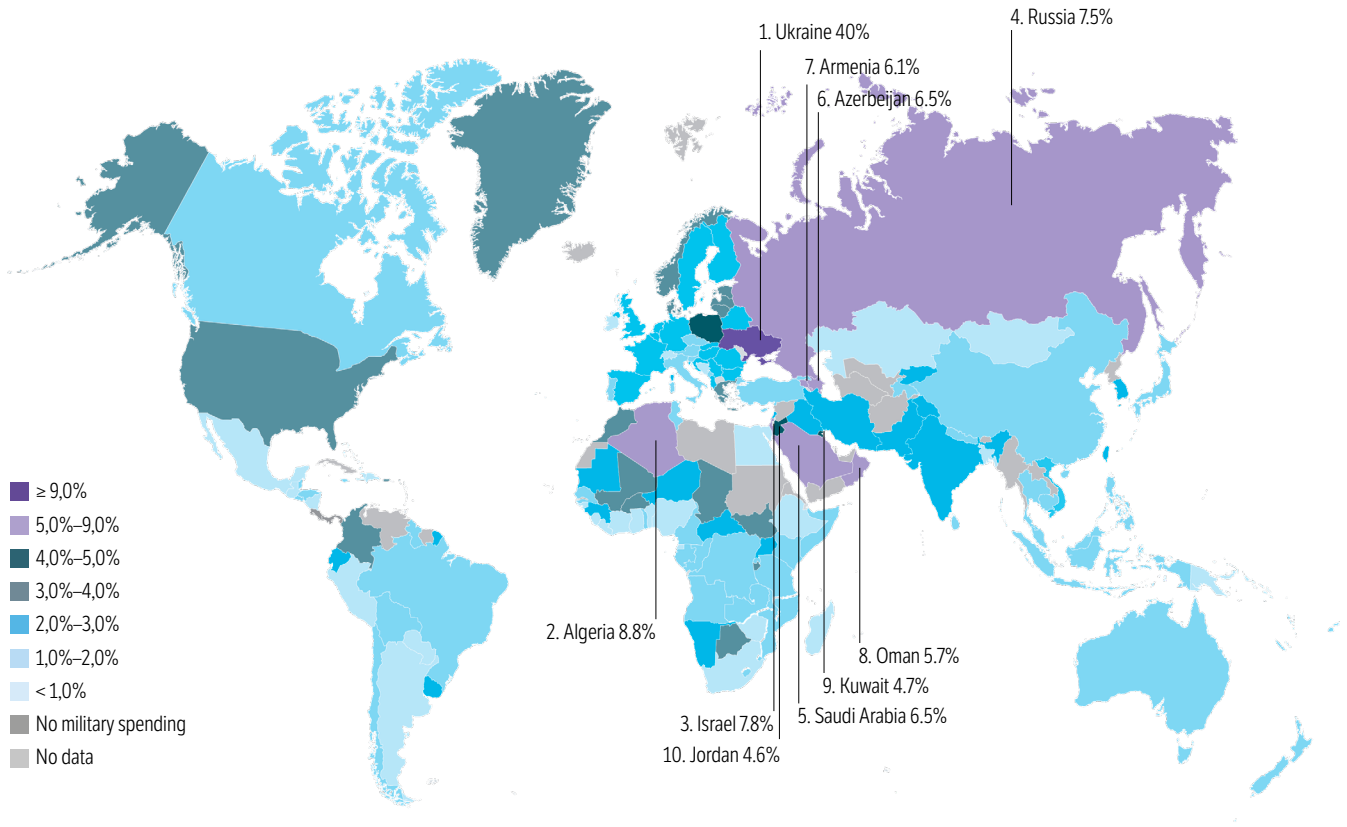
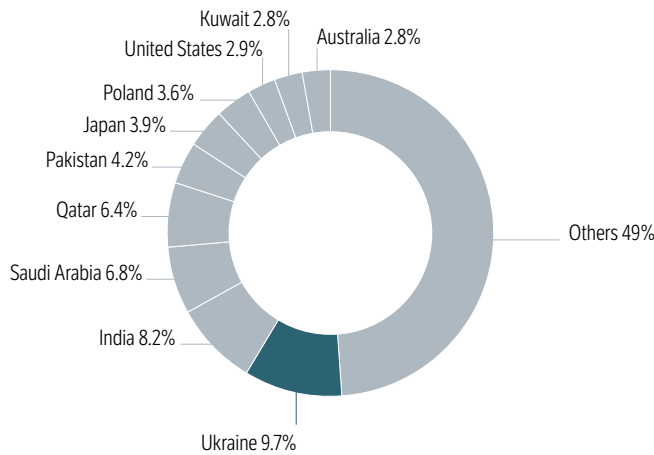


FIGURE 2. GLOBAL SHARE OF IMPORTS OF MAJOR ARMS BY THE 10 LARGEST RECIPIENTS

Source: SIPRI (2026). *Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2025*. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2026-03/fs_2603_at_2025.pdf



At the same time, heightened concerns about Russia's security posture, combined with uncertainty regarding the United States' commitment to European defence, have encouraged North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)'s member states to expand their arms procurement efforts (George et al., 2026).

The significance of these trends lies not only in the volume of military expenditure, but in the political logic that accompanied it. As UN Secretary-General António

Guterres has warned, "The evidence is clear: excessive military spending does not guarantee peace. It often undermines it-fuelling arms races, deepening mistrust and diverting resources from the very foundations of stability" (United Nations, 2025, para. 3). Periods of sustained rearmament often prioritise military effectiveness, deterrence and strategic competition over humanitarian concerns. As a consequence, governments may become more willing to revisit previously accepted restrictions on

weapons systems if these restrictions are perceived to limit national defence capabilities.

The Nuclear dimension

Humanitarian disarmament has increasingly expanded beyond conventional arms to address weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons. This evolution culminated in the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in 2017 and its entry into force in 2021. The treaty was driven by growing recognition of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that any use of nuclear weapons would cause, which extend far beyond national borders (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2026a).

Yet the developments in the global security environment have moved in the opposite direction. Rather than reducing their reliance on nuclear weapons, all nine nuclear-armed states continued to strengthen their nuclear arsenals in recent years, with some deploying new nuclear-capable systems and integrating nuclear weapons more prominently into their defence strategies (SIPRI, 2026b).

The weakening of the broader arms control architecture has further compounded these concerns. Over the past decade,



several key arms control agreements have collapsed, stalled, or become increasingly fragile. Particularly significant has been the deterioration of the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (*New START*), the last remaining bilateral nuclear arms control agreement between the United States and Russia. *New START* established limits on deployed strategic nuclear forces while providing mechanisms for inspections, data exchanges, and transparency measures that helped reduce uncertainty between the world's two largest nuclear powers (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2026a). Russia's suspension of participation in the treaty in 2023, following disputes over inspections and compliance, represented another setback for nuclear arms control and eliminated one of the few remaining institutional channels for strategic dialogue between Washington and Moscow (Williams, 2023). As transparency measures have weakened, nuclear arsenals have become significantly opaquer, increasing mistrust and complicating efforts to pursue future disarmament initiatives (SIPRI, 2026b).

In addition, Russia's deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, combined with uncertainty regarding the future credibility of American security guarantees, has revived debates surrounding nuclear sharing and extended deterrence (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2026). Although the European Union has historically positioned itself as a strong defender of non-proliferation and disarmament, describing the spread of weapons of mass destruction as one of the greatest threats to European security, recent geopolitical developments have encouraged a reassessment of nuclear policy among several member states (European Union External Action Service, 2026).

As a result, discussions concerning nuclear cooperation have become increasingly prominent. Poland has publicly expressed its willingness to host allied nuclear weapons (Chiappa, 2024), while German Chancellor Friedrich Merz has advocated for discussions regarding whether British and French nuclear capabilities could play a larger role in providing security guarantees for European partners (Ross, et al., 2025). Similarly, French President Emmanuel Macron has repeatedly argued that France's nuclear deterrent possesses an inherent European dimension and has reopened discussions regarding its potential contribution to broader European defence ar-

rangements (Ducourtieux, C. et al., 2025). At the same time, France and the United Kingdom have expanded strategic coordination in response to a deteriorating security environment (Fraïoli, P, 2025).

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From a humanitarian disarmament perspective, these developments illustrate a fundamental contradiction. The humanitarian approach seeks to reduce the legitimacy and salience of nuclear weapons by emphasising their catastrophic consequences, whereas contemporary European security debates increasingly centre on strengthening deterrence through nuclear capabilities. The renewed prominence of nuclear sharing, the erosion of arms control agreements, and the continued modernisation of nuclear arsenals suggest that nuclear weapons are becoming more deeply embedded in security thinking at precisely the moment when humanitarian disarmament seeks to move in the opposite direction.

The erosion of humanitarian disarmament norms

Against this backdrop, these developments raise questions that extend beyond defence spending and military preparedness. The issue is not whether European states should respond to genuine security threats. Rather, it is whether the pursuit of military security can be reconciled with the humanitarian norms that Europe spent decades building and promoting.

As Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2026) points out, the acceleration of military investment across Europe risks weakening established arms control frameworks, encouraging broader patterns of military competition that extend beyond deterrence against

Russia, and reducing political attention and financial support for non-military approaches to conflict prevention and peacebuilding in other vulnerable regions.

For decades, the EU cultivated a reputation as a champion of humanitarian arms control. This commitment was reflected in the incorporation of humanitarian disarmament principles across successive EU security and foreign policy frameworks, from the 2003 European Security Strategy, the EU strategy against the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, to the 2016 EU Global Strategy, as well as through consistent diplomatic and financial support for key humanitarian disarmament treaties, including the Ottawa Convention and the Convention on Cluster Munitions (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2026).

However, the (in)security environment created by Russia's invasion of Ukraine has placed this normative commitment under considerable strain. The most visible example emerged in 2025 when Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland withdrew from the Ottawa Convention, citing the need to restore anti-personnel landmines as part of their border defence strategies against Russia (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Lithuania also withdrew from the Convention on Cluster Munitions, while Ukraine unlawfully suspended its operations under the Mine Ban Treaty (International Human Rights Clinic, 2026).

These decisions marked an unprecedented departure from established humanitarian disarmament norms. For the first time since the treaty's adoption, five democratic European states chose to abandon a major international weapons prohibition, challenging decades of progress towards eliminating weapons whose effects cannot be confined to soldiers alone. In the words of Izumi Nakamitsu (2025, para. 17), "leaving the Convention does not strengthen national defence. It weakens the global commitment to protecting civilian lives and human dignity".

The significance of these withdrawals extends beyond the immediate military utility of landmines and cluster munitions. The Mine Ban Treaty and the Convention on Cluster Munitions form a broader normative framework within International Humanitarian Law that seeks to stigmatise weapons causing indiscriminate harm to civilians (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2026).

The humanitarian concerns that motivated these treaties remain as relevant today as

when they were adopted. Anti-personnel mines continue to kill and injure civilians long after conflicts have ended (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2026), with civilians accounting for approximately 80–85% of recorded victims worldwide (Amnesty International, 2026). Similarly, unexploded cluster munitions can remain active for years, creating persistent dangers for civilians' communities and obstructing post-conflict reconstruction (Carbonnier, 2019). The renewed acceptance of these weapons therefore risks reversing decades of progress in civilian protection.

More broadly, Europe's rearmament reflects a shift towards a narrower understanding of security. Following the Cold War, the EU promoted a comprehensive understanding of security that combined defence with development assistance, conflict prevention, human rights promotion, and multilateral cooperation. Today, however, growing defence expenditures have increasingly come at the expense of other security instruments. Several European governments have reduced aid and development budgets to finance expanding military spending (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2026).

The challenge facing Europe, therefore, is not whether it should defend itself, but whether it can strengthen its security without undermining the humanitarian principles and legal commitments that have long formed part of its international identity.

Conclusion

The return of large-scale interstate conflict has fundamentally reshaped Europe's security environment. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, uncertainty surrounding the future of transatlantic security guarantees, and the broader resurgence of geopolitical rivalry have prompted European governments to pursue unprecedented levels of military investment and defence cooperation. In many respects, these developments are understandable responses to a deteriorating strategic environment.

Yet, as this article has demonstrated, Europe's rearmament is producing consequences that go beyond defence policy. The rapid expansion of military spending, the revival of debates surrounding nuclear deterrence and nuclear sharing, the weakening of arms control agreements, and the withdrawal of several European states from cornerstone humanitarian disarmament treaties all point towards a broader shift in

the way security is conceived and pursued. While humanitarian disarmament emerged to place civilian protection and human dignity at the centre of arms governance, contemporary security debates increasingly privilege military effectiveness, deterrence, and strategic competition.

The significance of this shift lies not merely in the weapons themselves, but in the gradual erosion of norms that European states spent decades building and promoting. The Ottawa Convention, the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and broader arms control frameworks helped establish the principle that certain weapons should be restricted regardless of their potential military utility because of their unacceptable humanitarian consequences. Similarly, humanitarian approaches to nuclear

weapons sought to challenge the legitimacy of deterrence by highlighting the catastrophic effects of nuclear use. Recent developments suggest that these normative achievements can no longer be taken for granted.

This does not mean that Europe must choose between security and humanitarian protection. Rather, the challenge is to ensure that efforts to strengthen defence do not come at the expense of humanitarian principles. Indeed, humanitarian disarmament was developed precisely for periods of insecurity. Its relevance should therefore not be judged by its performance during times of peace, but by its capacity to withstand moments of geopolitical tension when pressures to abandon legal and normative constraints are greatest. ●

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