

THE BARRACKS *Vs* THE BEACH

Eighty-One Years of Anesthesia Vs One Wake-Up Call

THE LONG ANESTHESIA

For eighty-one years since 1945, peace in Western Europe has functioned less like a policy achievement and more like a general anesthetic. Generations grew up for whom war was something that happened in history books, in films, or conveniently far away.

Armies shrank, conscription was quietly abolished across most of the continent between 1960 and 2011, and defence budgets slid to levels that assumed the future would resemble the recent past.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was the wake-up call. But an anesthetic wears off unevenly. For a Lithuanian or a Finn, the alarm was deafening. For a citizen of Lisbon, Naples, or Seville, it registered as a light anxiety — a news item between the weather and the football scores. This uneven awakening is now the defining fault line of European defence: the money is converging, but the mindset is not.

THREE EUROPEES, THREE YOUTHS: THE CONSCRIPTION DIVIDE

Money can be voted in a parliament. Willingness to serve cannot. On the question of putting young people back in barracks, Europe splits into three zones a gradient of seriousness running from the Arctic Circle to the Mediterranean.



Zone 1 — The North and East: Locked and Loaded

Facing Russia's Northern Fleet on the Kola Peninsula home to half of Moscow's nuclear-armed submarines the Nordic, Baltic and Polish zone treats defence as a whole-of-society enterprise. Finland never abandoned conscription and can mobilise a reserve of roughly 800,000; 79% of Finns say they would take up arms if attacked Europe's highest. Sweden reinstated the draft in 2017, Lithuania in 2015, Latvia in 2023; Denmark now conscripts women.

Norway declared 2026 its "Total Defence Year," rehearsing wartime roles for hospitals and businesses alongside 30,000 allied troops. Poland is training hundreds of thousands of civilians for war. Here, politicians, industry and youth mobilised together because the threat is visible from the beach, and the beach is on the Baltic.

Zone 2 — Middle Europe: The Money Is Willing, the Youth Is Not

Germany amended its constitution to fund "Europe's strongest conventional army" but its December 2025 service law (registration and a questionnaire, service voluntary unless numbers fall short) passed by only 323 to 272, amid youth protests in 90 cities. The generational split is the tell: 52% of Germans support compulsory service, but 59% of the 18-to-29-year-olds who would actually serve oppose it.

***The barracks are being funded;
the question is who will sleep in them.***

Zone 3 — The South: Warm Regrets

Italy abolished conscription in 2005, Spain in 2001, and its return is politically radioactive. Southern industries happily take the rearmament

contracts, but asked to send their children to the barracks, the South answers with something between a shrug and a strike only 17% of Italians even favour higher defence spending. For a 22-year-old in Palermo, mobilisation is a relic and anything that happened would happen far from their beaches. The South's contribution will be industrial, not demographic.

Its youth has already texted its warm regrets.

THE 5% DOCTRINE: FROM GUIDELINE TO GOSPEL

The numbers tell the story of a continent dragged, decade by decade, out of its slumber.

In 2014, after Russia annexed Crimea, NATO members pledged at the Wales Summit to reach 2% of GDP a target most treated as aspirational.

European allies were then collectively spending around 1.4% of GDP on defence. By 2025, that collective figure had climbed to roughly 2.3%, and for the first time every ally met the 2% floor.

Then came the leap. At the June 2025 Hague Summit, all 32 NATO members with a negotiated carve-out for Spain committed to spending 5% of GDP annually by 2035: at least 3.5% on core defence (troops, equipment, capability targets) plus up to 1.5% on defence-related resilience infrastructure, cyber, civil preparedness, and the industrial base.

Secretary-General Mark Rutte called it a "transformational leap"; he had already told the alliance to "shift to a wartime mindset." Progress will

be reviewed in 2029, and allies must file annual plans showing a credible path — turning a political pledge into an enforceable trajectory.

Poland got there first. Warsaw now spends more of its GDP on defence than any other NATO member around 4.7% and rising toward 5% doubling its army, buying Korean tanks and American jets at a pace no one else matches, and launching a programme to give military training to hundreds of thousands of civilians.

The Baltics and Greece are already above 4%. For the eastern flank, the 5% doctrine was not a concession to American pressure; it was ratification of what they were doing anyway.

- 2006–2014: the 2% guideline, honoured mostly in the breach — only three allies met it in 2014.
- 2014 Wales: 2% pledge after Crimea; slow, reluctant climb begins.
- 2022: Ukraine invasion; Germany declares its Zeitenwende and later amends its constitution to lift the debt brake for defence.
- 2025 The Hague: 5% by 2035 (3.5% core + 1.5% resilience), annual plans, review in 2029; Spain alone opts for its own ~2.1% path.

REARMAMENT WITHOUT BELIEF: CYNICAL ECONOMICS OF THE BUILDUP

Here lies the paradox of European rearmament: much of the continent is arming not because it believes war is coming, but because rearmament has become good business and good politics.

Beyond the eastern flank, few political leaders and fewer voters genuinely expect Russian tanks on their soil. What they do expect is jobs, industrial revival, and the goodwill of Washington.

REARMAMENT BELIEF **Vs** CYNISM



The defence sector has transformed from a sluggish, undervalued corner of the European economy into one of its fastest-growing industries, with investment banks now marketing the NATO pledge as a "programmable revenue stream" stretching to 2035. For countries with declining heavy industry shipyards without orders, automotive plants facing the electric transition, steel towns bleeding jobs a decade of guaranteed defence procurement is a stimulus programme wearing a helmet.

This creates a peculiar coalition. The Poles and Balts arm because they fear invasion. The Germans arm because alliance credibility demands it and because the money now legally flows. The Italians and Spaniards sign the communiqués because the 1.5% "resilience" tranche is elastic enough to absorb infrastructure, cyber, even dual-use industrial projects spending they might have done anyway, now rebadged as defence. Everyone reaches for the same number for entirely different reasons. It invites creative accounting, as several of the biggest spenders France at over 110% debt-to-GDP, Italy at 135% are promising a buildup their public finances can barely carry.

The frontline states, spending against a threat they consider real and near. — True believers

Middle Europe, spending for alliance cohesion and to anchor the US in Europe. — Dutiful alignment

The South, spending (or re-labelling spending) because it subsidises industry and keeps peers content — while polls show as few as 17% of Italians actually favor higher defence budgets. — Cynical convergence.

*** Greece is a southern outlier: it retains conscription and spends above 4%, driven by Turkey rather than Russia.**

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THE THREE ZONES AT A GLANCE

	North & East (Nordic, Baltic, Poland)	Middle Europe (DE, FR, NL, BE...)	South (IT, ES, PT, EL)
Threat perception	Existential, immediate; shared border or Arctic front with Russia	Real but abstract; a matter of alliance solidarity more than survival	Distant; Russia is somebody else's neighbour
Budget posture	Front-runners: Poland ~4.7-5%, Baltics racing upward	Converging on 3.5% + 1.5%; Germany lifted its debt brake to pay for it	Compliant on paper, creative in accounting; Spain negotiated an opt-out
Conscription / service	Active and expanding; Denmark now drafts women; Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania reinstated the draft	Half-measures: registration and questionnaires, voluntary service, draft 'if needed'	Abolished 2001-2005 and politically untouchable; talk of a draft triggers protest
Youth attitude	High defence willingness (Finland ~79%); service is a civic norm	Majority of over-40s support a draft; majority of 18-29s reject it for themselves	Broad refusal; mobilisation seen as a relic of the past
Driving motive	Deterrence and survival; whole-of-society 'total defence'	Alliance credibility, US pressure, industrial policy	Economic stimulus for declining industry;

CONCLUSION: ONE BUDGET, THREE MINDSETS

By 2035 Europe may well have the money, the factories and the hardware of a continent prepared for war. What it will not have outside its northern and eastern rim is a population that believes in the war it is preparing for.

The 5% doctrine has unified the spreadsheets; it has not unified the minds.

The North trains its daughters to fight in the snow.

The Middle funds an army it hesitates to fill.

The South builds the weapons and declines the uniform.

Whether this matters depends on a question no summit communiqué can answer: if deterrence ever fails, do wars get fought by budgets , or by the young people who must be persuaded to leave the beach?

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