

Defence sovereignty: Europe races to build the low-cost weapons of future

Jasper Jolly, The Guardian, 10 May 2026

In a small workshop in England's East Midlands, engineers at the British startup Skycutter are designing weapons for Ukraine. A row of 3D printers make the fuselage for interceptor drones, while parts such as motors and navigation chips are slotted together by hand. The same process happens hundreds of thousands of times a month in partner Ukrainian factories.

The swarms of cheap, deadly and often autonomous drones deployed in that war have already changed combat completely. Troops far behind the frontline must move constantly to avoid attack from the air, travelling along netted tunnels and landscapes crisscrossed by fibre optic cables used to steer drones past radio jamming. Cities are terrorised by guided missiles that are cheaper and therefore more widely used than those that came before.

Europe's militaries are scrambling to catch up, in a drive to spend billions on weaponry – with added pressure from Donald Trump's wavering on the Nato alliance and the US president's insistence that members increase defence budgets.

The unsettling combination of Trump and war on the doorstep has sharpened long-running criticism that the continent has relied too much on US weapons makers.

The EU has responded by promising to spend €800bn on defence over four years. The UK has also pledged to put aside more, with Keir Starmer likely to come under pressure to show progress after Labour's heavy losses in Thursday's elections.

With a new focus on defence sovereignty – the ability to make and use weaponry without unreliable America's help – much of this money is pouring into homegrown companies. A crop of well-funded startups are gaining momentum and expanding production, making big promises – many still unproven – that they can do a better job than traditional manufacturers and Silicon Valley rivals.

Survivable v attritable

Militaries do not believe they can totally dispense with people – infantry – or heavier machinery such as tanks, artillery and ships. But a big chunk of the planned spending will go on drones of various sizes, whether for the air, land, sea or below the waves.

Gen Sir Roly Walker, the UK's chief of the general staff, last year said he wanted the forces' equipment to be 20% "survivable" (because they have people inside), 40% "attritable" (you aren't too worried if they're destroyed), and 40% "consumable" (single use).

The growing feeling across Europe is that "we should be able to stand up on our own two feet", according to one person at a fast-growing weapons startup. "Sovereignty is about control. If you buy things off the shelf from elsewhere you are always ceding some control."

That applies to parts and materials as well. The UK is consulting on how much needs to come from Britain for a product to be sovereign. Manufacturers cannot necessarily rely on parts and materials from various countries who could become adversaries – notably China.

"A lot of supply chain diversification dreams have evaporated," says Kusti Salm, a former Estonian defence mandarin turned chief executive of the anti-drone missile startup Frankenburg. "I think it's natural if Europe wants to sustain its prosperity and freedom." [...]