

## ENHANCING THE COMMON EUROPEAN SECURITY AND DEFENCE CULTURE EUROPEAN SECURITY AND DEFENCE JOINT MASTER PROGRAMME. A PROPOSAL

**Alin BODESCU**

**“Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania**  
[bodescu.alin@armyacademy.ro](mailto:bodescu.alin@armyacademy.ro)

**Abstract:** *This proposal outlines the development of a European Security and Defence Joint Master Programme (ESDM) designed to enhance the EU's common security and defence culture through advanced education. Building on the European Security and Defence College's 20 years of experience in Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) training, the programme addresses the need for a comprehensive master's-level qualification in the Bologna higher education architecture. The joint degree incorporates ESDC courses as micro-credentials within a flexible structure combining core courses, electives, internships, and research components. Implementation would involve a consortium of at least three Member State institutions, with ESDC serving as coordinator. The proposal aligns with recent EU initiatives on joint European degrees and micro-credentials while addressing ESDC's goals of course rationalization and quality assurance standardization. By producing graduates with specialized knowledge in CSDP, the programme would strengthen European strategic autonomy and interoperability among security and defence professionals.*

**Keywords:** ESDC, Security and Defence Culture, Strategic Culture, Micro-credentials, Joint European Degree

### 1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) faces complex security challenges requiring coordinated responses based on shared understanding, processes and interoperable capabilities. A critical enabler of this coordinated approach is a common security and defence culture fostered through education and training. Currently, the European Security and Defence College (ESDC) provides numerous valuable courses but has not yet considered the coordination of a common (joint) comprehensive programme at the master's level, representing a gap in the Bologna-based higher education architecture for security and defence professionals where ESDC is already

involved in supporting bachelor (military basic education) and doctoral (broader area of security and defence) levels.

This paper investigates the ESDC's mission, objectives, strengths, challenges, and ambitions to suggest a structured approach to better exploit ESDC courses and propose a comprehensive joint master programme in European security and defence. By examining key policy documents, existing practices, and emerging trends in European higher education, this research aims to develop a viable proposal that enhances the EU's common security and defence culture through advanced education.

The objectives of this research are threefold:

1. to assess the current landscape of education and training for Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP);
2. to evaluate the ESDC's role in enhancing the EU common security and defence culture, and
3. to develop a proposal for a joint master programme that aligns with contemporary EU higher education initiatives.

The methodology combines policy analysis of key EU documents (Strategic Compass, CSDP training policies, Council Decisions on ESDC), comparative assessment of existing security and defence education programmes, and structured proposal development. The research particularly focuses on the integration of micro-credentials, quality assurance mechanisms, and joint degree frameworks, following the EU's recent initiatives to enhance the competitiveness and attractiveness of European higher education.

## **2. EU Training for CSDP and European Security Culture**

The EU's effectiveness is challenged by various threats including propaganda and fake news, while signals indicate a potentially decreasing role of the United States in Europe, and possibly in NATO, in the long run. This evolving security landscape requires the EU to step forward and operationalise its strategic autonomy while making its security and defence capabilities more effective and interoperable, including through training and education. Training for CSDP is an integral part of both civilian and military capability development, ensuring that human resources possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies to effectively utilize and deploy the EU's security and defence capabilities.

According to the latest EU Policy on Training for CSDP, EU training should foster the development of a shared European security and defence culture [1]. This culture represents a common

understanding of security threats, challenges, and appropriate responses among EU Member States and institutions. It incorporates shared values, principles, and approaches to security issues, enabling more cohesive and effective EU action in international security affairs. The development of this culture is essential for enhancing interoperability, facilitating coordination, and promoting a unified European approach to security and defence. To be effective, training for CSDP should cover and reflect several key areas including: the promotion of EU principles (respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, pursuit of Treaty objectives (set out in Articles 3 and 21 of the Treaty on European Union), key EU policies (the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, the Civilian CSDP Compact, and the Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises). In addition, considering the new and emerging security challenges, CSDP training must remain flexible and responsive to evolving threats, including hybrid warfare, cyber threats, climate security, and other non-traditional security challenges [2].

### **2.1. ESDC – 20 Years of Training and Education in the Area of CSDP**

The ESDC, established in 2005 under Council Joint Action 2005/575/CFSP, serves as a key institution in delivering education and training on the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The ESDC's framework and mandate have been progressively refined through subsequent updates: the Council Decision 2013/189/CFSP emphasized its alignment with EU external action goals; the Council Decision (CFSP) 2020/1515 further highlighted its role in cultivating a European security culture and resilience; and the most recent Council Decision (CFSP) 2024/3116 [3] reinforced its structural and functional mandate, replacing earlier versions to adapt to evolving strategic requirements.

Over its 20 years of existence, the ESDC has transitioned from a singular emphasis on training for the CSDP to addressing broader aspects of the EU's external action, including areas such as conflict prevention, stabilization, and resilience enhancement. Over time, the institution has deeply integrated its initiatives with the EU's foreign and security policy objectives, specifically focusing on contemporary challenges such as hybrid threats, cyber security, disinformation, and resilience-building strategies.

The 2024 revision demonstrates a pronounced focus on strengthening collaborations between the EU and NATO, alongside the development of global partnerships. This includes capacity development programs targeted at third countries, thereby emphasizing the ESDC's strategic role as an instrument of soft power.

The strength of the ESDC is the network of over 100 national education and training entities operating within broader external action area, including military, police, justice, diplomacy, and other civilian sectors working for CSDP. This extensive network ensures that expertise required for diverse learning needs can be readily accessed [4].

## **2.2. ESDC and Its Role in Promoting CSDP Training Principles**

Within the EU Training for CSDP ecosystem, the ESDC plays a central role in implementing CSDP training principles, particularly focusing on qualitative and continuous learning. An improved quality assurance system for pooled and shared CSDP training has been identified as necessary and will be further developed under the coordination of the ESDC.

The strength of ESDC lies in its decentralized structure, which respects Member States' autonomy while addressing common training needs. This approach aligns with the EU's broader governance philosophy, which recognizes the

importance of subsidiarity and flexibility while pursuing common objectives.

One of the most important objectives of the ESDC is the sustainment and further development of a European security culture. After 20 years of ESDC activity, the EU has presumably moved to the next level and should be able to build upon an immaterial but sensible change of mindset among a pool of civilian and military experts and practitioners at the strategic level. According to Council Decision (CFSP) 2024/3116, *“The ESDC shall contribute to enhancing the common European security and defence culture within the Union and to promoting the principles laid down in Article 21(1) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)”* [5].

It is important to note that, most EU security and defence policy and strategy documents stress on the need for building a “EU strategic culture”. Here we should mention that, although they are closely related, at least by suggesting that they require a distinct European behaviour compared to other similar cultures, the “defence and security culture” is not the same with “strategic culture”. European strategic culture is defined by Christoph O. Meyer as: *“... the ideas, norms and patterns of behaviour that are shared across the actors and publics involved in the processes of pursuing European security and defence policies”*. More specifically, according to the cited author, norms set the strategic framework (ends and ways) for the legitimate use of force, ideas capture how the EU perceives its role in the global security arena and its options for positioning relative to major powers and international organizations, and patterns of behaviour frame the approaches to debate, decision-making, and application of force in security and defence [6].

The latest sub-strategy of the EU in security and defence - the Strategic Compass – does not specifically define it but associates the European strategic culture with a shared strategic vision and understanding among

EU Member States to collectively address security threats and challenges. Moreover, when it comes to operationalizing it, the Strategic Compass identifies regular threat analyses, joint situational awareness, and collaborative planning and exercises as key components [7]. It also stresses the need for interoperability, readiness, and the integration of civilian and military capabilities to act decisively in crises.

Although only two courses (High-Level Course and Strategic Communication) specifically mention in their curriculum that they aim at fostering and cultivating a common/shared European security culture, in fact, most ESDC courses achieve this objective indirectly. This occurs primarily through participants' exposure to EU experts involved in delivering lectures or facilitating discussions and exercises, through scenarios specific to the EU level of ambition and decision-making-related processes replicated in the training process. This is the case for courses such as the CSDP Orientation Course, Advanced Modular Training, Strategic Planning Process of Civilian CSDP Mission, Advanced Course for Political Advisers in CSDP Missions and Operations, and EU Integrated Crisis Management [8].

Despite these achievements, the ESDC still faces challenges and has ambitions yet to be fulfilled. A key challenge is the need for a common, supranational quality assurance system that ensures consistent standards across courses and training activities. Additionally, the rationalization of courses remains an ongoing concern, as the current portfolio may not be sufficiently focused, with too many courses and potential duplications that are not always readily apparent.

### **3. The European Joint Degree**

The European higher education landscape is evolving toward greater integration and harmonization, as evidenced by recent policy developments. The Council of the European Union's Draft Council Resolution

on a joint European degree label [9] represents a significant milestone in this journey. This resolution aims to boost Europe's competitiveness and the attractiveness of European higher education by establishing a framework for truly European degrees.

The joint European degree initiative builds upon the success of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which have already harmonized degree structures across participating countries. The resolution outlines a vision for degrees that transcend national boundaries, offering students a genuinely European educational experience while addressing the fragmentation that still exists in the European higher education landscape. The resolution proposes a two-step approach: first, the establishment of a joint European degree label for qualifying programmes that meet specific criteria regarding transnational cooperation, mobility, and quality; and second, the development of a framework for a joint European degree, with implementation targeted for 2029. This gradual approach allows for testing, refinement, and adaptation of the concept before full implementation.

Key elements of the joint European degree framework include: *transnational cooperation* (programmes must be developed and delivered by consortia of higher education institutions from at least two EU Member States, fostering genuine European collaboration), *integrated curricula* (the programmes must offer integrated curricula with joint development, implementation, and quality assurance processes), *student mobility* (physical, virtual, or blended mobility must be an integral part of the programme, ensuring that students experience education in multiple European contexts), *European dimension* (the programmes must promote European values and perspectives, contributing to a European identity among graduates), *quality assurance* (joint

programmes must adhere to the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes [10], ensuring consistent high quality across participating institutions and *recognition* (the degree must be fully and automatically recognized across participating countries, eliminating barriers to academic and professional mobility for graduates.

#### **4. European Security and Defence Joint Master Programme (ESDM)**

##### **4.1. The Value Added**

The development of a European Security and Defence Joint Master Programme (ESDM) represents a pivotal step toward fulfilling the ESDC mission while integrating modern educational frameworks. By aligning with the joint European degree initiative, the ESDM aims to enhance its academic offerings, promote acknowledgement across Member States, and strengthen the shared European security culture. This approach not only advances sector-specific goals but also supports broader EU ambitions in higher education, harnessing collaboration with initiatives like micro-credentials and the European Universities programme to ensure both flexibility and excellence.

The organisation of the ESDM, in accordance with ESDC's mission to "[...] *provide training and education in the field of the Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)* [...]"[11], would contribute to "*enhancing the common European security and defence culture within the Union*", the overall goal of the ESDC as enshrined in the Council Decision (CFSP) 2024/3116 of 9 December 2024 on ESDC, in art. 3 [12].

The ESDM will provide the EU with highly educated personnel capable of undertaking expert positions in the CSDP realm. The audience will include civilian and military personnel from the Member States (MS) seeking to deepen their understanding and skills in CSDP, offering a blend of theoretical knowledge and practical

application through a flexible, modular structure.

Moreover, the ESDM will help ESDC in its reforming ambitions, focusing its efforts, rationalising its course portfolio and aligning the activities to high-quality standards through a common jointly agreed external quality assurance process [13] as requested by the EU Council recommendations [14] and meeting several other recommendations such as that of "[...] *experimenting the use of micro-credentials by higher education institutions and vocational education and training institutions, [...] to promote and encourage the uptake of micro-credentials by the wider education and training community*" [15].

The ESDM will comprise courses offered by the academies and universities from the ESDC network, along with a range of core, mandatory, and elective micro-credentials/courses from ESDC's existing offerings, which, collectively, fulfil the required ECTS credits for awarding a master's degree. This would be applicable as recommended by the Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials, in para 11 d.: "*Member States are recommended using micro-credentials that can be integrated in or that can complement degree programmes, where relevant*" [16]. The ESDC courses offered as electives should undergo a process of quality assurance in accordance with the agreed standards.

Stackability (one of the characteristics of micro-credentials, defined as the "possibility, where relevant, to combine different micro-credentials and build logically upon each other [17]) of ESDC micro-credentials is already the case in some of its courses that require participants a pre-requisite to be accepted to take the course. For example, the High-Level Course or the Advanced Modular Training require participants to have completed a CSDP Orientation Course. In this context, the High-Level Course (3 credits ECTS -

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) or the Advanced Modular Training (3 ECTS) would stack on the CSDP Orientation Course (2 ECTS), adding up to the total number of 5 ECTS. As many courses in ESDC are interrelated and sometimes even overlapping in some contents, the organisation and grouping of courses considering stackability would help the rationalisation of courses.

The ESDC courses that are part of the ESDM will continue to be accessible to regular participants from Member States, allowing individuals to take the courses as standalone micro-credentials or one-off modules, as per the usual format. The ESDM students should receive priority to enrol in the ESDC-selected courses, identified as electives.

#### **4.2. ESDM Consortium**

ESDC could serve as the coordinator of a consortium of academies and universities established to run the ESDM in accordance with the EU Council resolution [18]. The ambition should be aligned with the EU roadmap for implementing this initiative by 2029 [19].

The scope of the consortium will be limited to organising the ESDM and will be open to academies and universities capable and willing to execute or contribute to the ESDM's components (e.g. a common set of courses, internship coordination, and master's thesis supervision) and quality standards. The higher education institutions should meet certain specific criteria to function as part of a consortium: *“to be recognised and/or accredited as higher education institutions in their national higher education systems; to fully recognise the joint programme as a programme offered by their institution and to be entitled to legally offer this type of programme (level, orientation, discipline) as a joint programme, even if that institution is not involved in the awarding of the joint degree”* [20].

The consortium functioning and student exchange could be facilitated under the ERASMUS+ programme [21].

#### **4.3. Quality Assurance**

A quality assurance system for its courses is an ambition that ESDC members have discussed for many years and identified as an objective by both the Council Decision (CFSP) 2024/3116 of 9 December 2024 on the ESDC and the EU Policy for CSDP Training, with the latter pledging that: *“an improved quality assurance system for pooled and shared CSDP training is needed and will be further developed under the coordination of the ESDC [...]”* [22].

The EU Military Staff, as one of the main military players in the ESDC Executive Academic Board (EAB), has also militated for a quality assurance system for the EU military training and education, like the one NATO uses [23].

The use of the Sectoral Qualifications Framework for Military Officer profession (SQF-MILOF) for developing the ESDM curriculum will not only ensure that the learning is aligned with MS's expectations but will also support a quality assurance framework. In this context, the developers of SQF-MILOF anticipated that the *“SQF-MILOF is more than merely a taxonomy of learning levels. It is a package of products including adjacent areas of the learning process, such as professional development or quality assurance”* and that *“the SQF-MILOF encourages national training and education providers issuing military qualifications to consistently observe the principles of European quality assurance.”* [24].

The ESDC and the academies members of the consortium running the ESDM should aim at developing a cross-institutional quality assurance framework in accordance with the building blocks included in Annex I of the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education and ensure that the programme meets certain conditions, with regard to three groups of criteria (detailed

on multiple sub-criteria): organization and management, learning experience and European values, as described in Annex II of the same document [25].

#### **4.4. Existing Similar Programmes**

In 2017, in the framework of the Implementation Group (IG) of the European initiative for the exchange of young officers inspired by Erasmus (often referred to as "military Erasmus"), three MS (Austria, Czechia and Poland) initiated the planning of a trilateral Joint Master focused on CSDP, incorporating many of Common Modules developed by the IG [26], but the initiative exceeded the scope of basic education and was abandoned.

Several existing initiatives within the EU align to a certain extent with the objectives of the proposed ESDM. These programmes offer advanced education in EU security, defence, and related fields, often through joint degrees and collaborations among multiple institutions. Examples include:

- International Law of Global Security, Peace and Development (ILGSPD) – Erasmus Mundus Joint master's degree [27];
- Master's in international security – Sciences Po Paris School of International Affairs (PSIA) [28];
- Master of Arts in Global Peace, Security, and Strategic Studies – Vesalius College (Brussels) [29].

Other agencies in security and defence organise joint master programmes with flexible learning paths combining academic with specialized training components:

- Master of Arts in Civil-Military Interaction (MCMI) [30].
- European Joint Master's in Strategic Border Management [31]. This programme has been a direct application of the Sectoral Qualifications Framework for Border Guard, a project like SQF-MILOF.

Compared to these existing similar programmes, the ESDM stands out by offering an EU-labelled, operationally focused curriculum integrating CSDP policies and making use of micro-

credentials, aligning directly with ESDC's mandate and CSDP training policies and standards for interoperability and lifelong learning.

#### **5. EU Security and Defence Joint Master Programme (ESDM). Proposal**

**Type of degree:** Joint Master's Degree Programme (EQF level 7). The Consortium may decide to organise a shorter (60 ECTS) or longer (120 ECTS) programme. This proposal identifies the minimum and maximum number of ECTS for each component in each option.

**Aim:** to provide highly specialised education in the field of security and defence, with a focus on CSDP, exploiting ESDC's current course portfolio.

**Audience:** This programme is designed for civilian and military personnel seeking to deepen their understanding and skills in CSDP, offering a blend of theoretical knowledge and practical application through a flexible, modular structure. The candidates are proposed by national competent authorities and selected by the consortium governance body.

**Duration:** 2 to 5 years (part-time/flexible learning).

**Organised by** a consortium of at least three MS from the ESDC network. The consortium should have a commonly defined mission and a governance system where decisions are made. ESDC can create a new EAB configuration for managing the ESDM, following the rules of procedures set for such bodies, but the level of autonomy and relationship with the EAB proper and Steering Committee (SC) should be clarified. Most importantly, the consortium should be established and the EAB configuration should be set up as soon as possible and initiate the preparatory arrangements including legal and financial issues for such a degree.

**Prerequisite requirements:** 240 – 180 ECTS, the completion of the CSDP Orientation Course, minimum 2-3 years' experience in the field of security and

defence, English language C1 level.

**Potential Structure:**

Core Courses (Compulsory): 15 – 30 ECTS

- EU as a security and defence. Introductory seminar (residential, in Brussels). This could be Module 1 of the High-Level Course (HLC). Master students would be enrolled only on this HLC module.
- Mandatory academic pack of courses, to be decided by the consortium board, made available for the ESDM, under ESDC coordination (online). Potential modules:
  - International relations.
  - The global security context of European external action.
  - Conflict Analysis.
  - Security and defence strategies and policies.
  - Crisis management.

Electives (choose min. 15 – 30 ECTS from the ESDC courses listed below indicatively). The participants receive priority to enrol in selected courses.

- CSDP essential business (choose at least one course):
  - EU Integrated Crisis Management.
  - Advanced Modular Training (AMT) for CSDP Strategic Crisis Management.
  - Strategic Planning Process of Civilian CSDP Missions.
- CSDP horizontal business:
  - Strategic Communication for Peace, Security and Defence.
  - Mediation, Negotiation and Dialogue Skills for CSDP.
  - Comprehensive Protection of Civilians.
  - EU Addressing and Facing Hybrid Threats and Challenges.
  - The EU's Cybersecurity Strategy for the Digital Decade.
  - CSDP Capability Planning and Development Course.

Internship in EU or National Security/Defence Institution: 10 – 20 ECTS.

Research seminar/ CSDP Course on Research for CSDP: 5 – 10 ECTS.

Master Thesis (supervised research): 15 – 30 ECTS.

**6. Conclusions**

The proposed ESDM programme presents a strategic innovation in European higher education and training for security and defence, directly responding to the EU's ambition for strategic autonomy, operational readiness, and interoperability and supporting the consolidation of an EU CSDP strategic culture. Its core strength lies in its alignment with EU policies and strategies (CSDP, Strategic Compass, Civilian Compact, Integrated Approach to Conflict and Crisis) and the integration of the ESDC courses, as micro-credentials, into a modular, flexible, and professionally oriented programme, uniquely filling an existing gap.

The programme exploits the ESDC's credibility and MS cooperation to offer a joint EU-labelled degree, promoting the ESDC's role as a security and defence education provider. It also makes use of harmonisation mechanisms (e.g. SQF-MILOF) and envisaged quality assurance processes, ensuring a consistent level of education in security and defence across participants and institutions enrolled in the programme and consortium, respectively. However, the programme's success is dependent upon overcoming significant governance and coordination complexities, ensuring MS' commitment, and managing potential overlaps with existing programmes like Erasmus Mundus or those of national military education institutions. Moreover, the integration of micro-credentials and the cross-border recognition of such modular courses might face legal and administrative barriers.

If these challenges are effectively managed, the programme offers an opportunity to strengthen a common European strategic culture, reinforce civil-military synergies, and address emerging threats (hybrid, cyber, resilience) in a more coherent and integrated educational framework,



contributing directly to the CSDP operational requirements.

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