DEFENDING RIGHTS, RETHINKING SECURITY

RECOMMENDATIONS
TO ANCHOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN A REALIGNING SECURITY ORDER

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HUMAN RIGHTS COMPASS

European Center for Not-for-Profit Law

THE CONTEXT:
REARMAMENT AHEAD OF ITS SAFEGUARDS

The world is rearming.

European governments are setting new spending targets, building procurement frameworks, and designing coordination mechanisms and force structures, and they are doing so at speed.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), world military expenditure reached USD 2.9 trillion in 2025, marking the eleventh consecutive year of growth and the highest level ever recorded. European spending rose by 14 per cent in a single year to reach USD 864 billion, double the level of a decade ago.

In June 2025, NATO members agreed to spend 5 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defence by 2035, 3.5 per cent of which would be allocated to core military spending. Meanwhile, the EU launched the ReArm Europe Initiative and the White Paper on the Future of European Defence, with member states aiming to 'mobilise up to 800 billion euros to boost defence spending'.

At the same time, official development assistance (ODA) fell by 23.1 per cent in real terms over the same period to USD 174.3 billion– the steepest annual decline recorded by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

This has taken international cooperation back to its 2015 level, the year the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted – leaving it at 0.26 per cent of gross national income, far short of the 0.7 per cent target level agreed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1970.

In 2025, Human Rights Compass addressed the human rights consequences of this global realignment approach, proposing with a 'life-saving' logic to international aid.

This brief focuses on the key security concerns and the human rights consequences of rearmament, which is progressing faster than the safeguards intended to govern it — at a time of critical 'rupture'. We focus on the essential principles for both protecting human rights and ensuring sustainable peace in an era of 'might is right' policies.

Furthermore, the debate about what security is for and how to achieve it is taking place in places which very few people have access to, even though the issue concerns everyone. Our contributors believe in the importance of exchange between human rights defenders and security sector actors, and we are committed to finding ways to continue and deepen this conversation with human rights as a compass.

A Double Risk for Europe – and Beyond It

Europe is facing a risk with Russia as an aggressor: its war against Ukraine continues, its military spending in 2025 reached 7.5 per cent of GDP, or one fifth of government spending. This would be the highest SIPRI has recorded for Russia. Furthermore, hybrid operations across the continent include sabotage and arson, drone incursions into the airspace of EU and NATO member states, interference in elections and domestic politics. The repeated hybrid attacks are probing NATO defences, though being calibrated to stay below the threshold of a collective response.

The US withdrawal from Europe's security goes hand-in-hand with its realignment with Russia: the United States' military spending fell by 7.5 per cent in 2025 due to the end of supplemental appropriations for military assistance to Ukraine. Meanwhile, the priorities set out in its latest national security strategy are in the Western Hemisphere and the Indo-Pacific. Europe now discusses the possibility of responding to Russia's threats without US conventional forces.

China increased its military spending for the thirty-first consecutive year in 2025, reaching an estimated USD 336 billion. Taiwan recorded its steepest increase since 1988, Japan reached its highest military spending since 1958, and India and Pakistan engaged in a brief armed conflict involving combat aircraft, drones and missiles in May 2025.

Though the number of locations of armed conflict fell slightly (from 50 states in 2024 to 49 in 2025), armed conflicts in 2024 killed more than 233.000 people – 30 per cent more than a year before.

The Women, Peace and Security Index reveals that over 676 million women lived within 50 kilometers of an armed conflict in 2024 – a 74 per cent more than in 2010 – and that one in six people worldwide is exposed to conflict. Furthermore, the past five years have resulted in more battle-related fatalities than any five-year period since 1991, except for the year of the Rwandan genocide.

Security vs. Rights: A False Trade Off?

The dominant or 'realistic' approach pits security against rights, treating international law as a cost to be traded when threats increase. Or is it a false trade-off?

The Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) sets out how respect for human rights by security providers increases public trust in institutions and prevents conflict. For over two decades, the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights platform has been collecting good practices in the field.

The Women, Peace and Security Index shows the link between fragility and positive peace. The countries that perform worst on women's proximity to conflict also perform worse on access to justice and maternal mortality. The rate of political violence targeting women in these places is three times the global average.

The rules-based multilateral order is there to address these 'fragile' situations and prevent conflict, but it is indeed fraying in this field.

'Disrespect for international law is a matter of international peace and security,' – said Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, when addressing the UN Security Council in 2024. According to his analysis, the long-term security threat lies in the erosion of rules and accountability itself. An absence of accountability leads to impunity and wider instability, which are things that human rights aim to prevent.

The pattern is clearest in counterterrorism, where frameworks for countering violent extremism treat human rights as a compliance requirement rather than as a strategic component.

Security-first responses which disregard rights generate strategic costs: they exacerbate community grievances, undermine the legitimacy of the measures themselves, and create the conditions extremist groups exploit for recruitment purposes. The experiences of Afghanistan and Somalia support the point.

Security built on suppression is unstable and decays from within.

What Multilateral Instruments Deliver That War Does Not

In this sense, the war with Iran is a prime example of what happens when the legal framework that underpins comprehensive security is being hollowed out at a time it is most needed.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, concluded in July 2015 and endorsed by the UN Security Council (UNSC), placed verified limits on the Iranian nuclear programme through enrichment caps, stockpile ceilings and an inspection regime overseen by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

In President Trump's first term, the United States withdrew from the agreement in 2018 and reimposed sanctions. In response, Iran expanded its programme. The IAEA declared it non-compliant with its obligations in 2025. By late September 2025, France, Germany and the UK triggered the snapback procedure, under which the UNSC reimposed the sanctions lifted in 2016.

In February 2026, the United States and Israel launched strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, military infrastructure and leadership. A ceasefire took effect in April 2026 and did not hold; hostilities and a naval blockade continue to date.

While the strikes may have caused damage, they have not produced enrichment caps, an inspection regime, or any mechanism through which compliance can be established and verified. The negotiated instrument delivered measurable constraints that could be monitored; but what has replaced it does not.

This is the case for multilateralism stated in its most practical form, and it applies with equal force to the instruments that govern security around the globe.

Security, AI and New Challenges

This is all the more relevant given the current push for adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) and the new challenges for both security and human rights:

- Expanding surveillance and biometric data collection are often performed without legal safeguards or democratic debate. Systems that fuse facial recognition, digital tracking, mass databases and personalised enforcement in real time are now empowered by AI. China operates over 600 million cameras, and the US Department of Homeland Security increased its use of AI-based surveillance, including facial recognition and social media monitoring. The consequences (self-censorship, conformity, closing civic space) do not contribute to security;

- AI-driven systems anywhere are not gender-neutral. Women and marginalised groups can face disproportionate surveillance, profiling, harassment and restrictions, due to technology reproducing existing gender biases;
- Automated decision-making systems, including autonomous weapons and armed drones, are advancing faster than the norms meant to regulate them;
- The Interparliamentary Union (IPU) has recorded that AI now accelerates every stage of the kill chain, from finding targets to eliminating them and assessing the aftermath. The development and training behind these systems remain opaque and have produced documented errors, including failure to align with human intent;
- AI-enabled targeting and military decision-making risk reproducing gendered assumptions about who constitutes a threat. The impact on women and girls may remain invisible in datasets and without oversight.

Artificial intelligence is named a 'priority capability' in the 2025 White Paper on the Future of European Defence, and is among the categories eligible for common procurement under the proposed SAFE Regulation. This is an example of how procurement decisions can take precedence over the governance framework.

No Hard Security Without Soft Security?

The distinction between hard and soft security is more blurred than it seems, and the division is becoming increasingly artificial.

Today, democratic representatives and civil society are sidelined in much of the global debate on 'hard' security, defence and rearmament. There is no established forum in which the meaning of security and its societal role are examined from the ground up.

Public consultations tend to take place after contracts have been signed and systems running, at which point the role of civil society is limited to damage limitation. Access to the rooms where decisions are made, particularly budgeting decisions, remains restricted. Parliamentary oversight lags behind the pace of procurement.

At the level of the European Union, both the ReArm Europe plan and the White Paper are based on Article 122 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the Union, which bypasses the European Parliament. Without adequate parliamentary involvement, defence investments risk alienating public opinion in a policy area that requires broad societal consensus and where parliamentary oversight is widely seen as essential.

IPU identifies secrecy, off-budget expenditure, lobbying by defence contractors, technical complexity, emergency powers and public apathy as ongoing obstacles to scrutiny.

The credibility of democratic institutions, public trust and the integrity of elections are themselves hard security issues, because they determine whether a society can defend itself. Ukraine's experience illustrates this: the resilience of its population depends partly on its decision to preserve democracy, and on the ability to use democratic and rights-based ways of society to organise.

The cost of finding avenues of public participation in the security debate — one of components of 'soft security' — is relatively small compared to potential benefits. In the context of falling trust in institutions and growing foreign interferance in the domestic affairs of democracies, civil society, assemblies and parliaments can play a key role in countering disinformation, responding to crises, preventing abuse.

Building a security architecture is the work of governments, parliaments, multilateral institutions, security sector professionals and civil society together. Therefore, we assert that the choices being made now, at speed and with limited public deliberation, will determine whether the security being built protects the societies it is meant to defend. The recommendations that follow are offered in that spirit.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
TOWARDS SECURITY THROUGH RIGHTS

Human Rights Compass offers this analysis and its recommendations on the basis of a Human Rights Compass Convening of human rights defenders and experts, which was held on 26 May 2026. The brief and recommendations reflect the discussions at the Convening and are complemented by additional research. The policy brief has been debated extensively by participants of the Convening since and reviewed by a Human Rights Compass editorial committee. It is intended as a contribution to the debate, outlining essential recommendations while acknowledging that these are not comprehensive.

» Rule of Law, Accountable Governance and Human Rights are Components of Security

Governments, parliaments and multilateral institutions should incorporate the rule of law, accountable governance and human rights into the security architecture as core components, on an equal footing as capability targets and force structures. A comprehensive approach should place societal resilience and international humanitarian law at the centre and treat deterrence and weaponry as one part of security, rather than the entirety of it. Strategies should specify which rights and institutions architecture is designed to protect, setting out obligations that can be measured and enforced.

Every national security strategy, defence review and multilateral planning document should set out a protection objective with the same precision as its capability targets. Each objective should specify the institutions to be defended, the rights they secure and the official responsible for delivery. Where a target commits a state to a share of gross domestic product, the same document should also commit to providing the necessary judicial capacity, civil protection, anti-corruption and information integrity to make the investment effective.

Governments should identify the resilience component of security spending, report it alongside military expenditure, making trade-offs visible to parliaments. They should also report each year on delivery against the protection objective and give national human rights institutions (NHRIs) standing to comment before the report is debated.

The commitment is then translated into practice through existing instruments. Compliance with international humanitarian law should be incorporated into force generation, training curricula, rules of engagement and the criteria applied to arms transfers, basing agreements and security assistance. If a partner force falls below these criteria, the level of assistance should be adjusted or stopped, and this decision should be recorded.

» Empower Democratic Oversight to Match the Pace of Rearmament

Parliaments and independent oversight bodies should be resourced and empowered to keep pace with the speed at which rearmament is proceeding. Intelligence-sharing arrangements should be subject to public scrutiny, and new security legislation should be reviewed against democratic and human rights standards, including by the Venice Commission. All defence spending, including intelligence, contingencies and off-budget funds, should be subject to the regular budget cycle and audited by the same standards. Emergency financing should carry sunset clauses requiring a fresh parliamentary decision.

Including intelligence, contingency and off-budget items in the regular budget cycle, in a format that permits comparison across years, enables supreme audit institutions to apply the same standards as elsewhere and provides committees with a basis for questioning. Parliaments should have the power to summon ministers and senior officials in person, and audit institutions should hold full access to contracts and expenditure data.

Oversight capacity should be built into the procurement calendar. In other words, analysts, costing capability and committee powers must be in place before funds are allocated. Defence committees should have their own analytical staff, rather than relying on briefings from the ministries they scrutinise. An independent costing office serving the parliament would help provide fair financial estimates. Access to classified material should be

granted to a cross-party group with published rules on composition, to ensure that scrutiny is not solely the responsibility of the governing majority.

Security legislation should go through pre-legislative scrutiny against human rights standards. The external review should be published alongside the draft bill, and sufficient time allowed for it to be read. Intelligence-sharing arrangements should be based on statute, fall within the remit of an oversight body with access to the underlying material, and include a rule against transferring individuals where there is a real risk of contributing to ill-treatment.

» Surveillance and Emerging Security Tech: Govern Before Using

Before they are deployed, surveillance and emerging security technologies should be reasonably regulated, with legal safeguards, accountability considerations and democratic debate in place. This applies to using AI for surveillance, biometric data collection, automated decision-making and autonomous weapons. Companies supplying these tools should have clear human rights obligations set out in their contracts. Where a governance framework does not yet exist, procurement decisions should be put on hold until one is in force.

No capability category can be procured before the legal framework governing its use comes into force. Applying this sequencing rule to funding instruments would help to avoid situations where technology is deployed, there are prior contractual obligations and institutional interest in maintaining the status quo.

Surveillance and biometric data collection need statutory authorisation covering the purposes for which they can be used, as well as judicial authorisation for being used against specific individuals. They also require retention and deletion periods, and a notification process for those affected – once an operation permits it. Furthermore, there should be an accessible route to remedy for those affected.

Systems that select or engage targets require meaningful human control, a documented chain of accountability, testing and auditing of the data on which they were trained. A public register should document which technology is being deployed and under what rules.

Procurement terms should require human rights due diligence, disclosure of subcontractors, audit rights, and the right to terminate in cases of misuse. Export control decisions should apply the same standard to what is sold as to what is bought. Parliaments should debate each capability category before initial deployment. Supplier obligations should be part of the contract.

» Embed the Women, Peace and Security Agenda Throughout the Security Sector

'When women are at the negotiating table, peace is likelier, more inclusive and more durable' – reads a central premise of the Women, Peace and Security agenda (WPS). WPS should be embedded throughout the security sector, not merely ensuring the presence of women in security and peacebuilding. Women's organisations and gender experts should play a substantive role in security decision-making, budgeting and procurement.

The disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls may remain invisible in datasets and algorithmic assessments. Ensuring meaningful human control, gender-responsive risk assessments and participation of women in the design, procurement and governance of security systems is a part of responsible security policy.

Ministries of Defence should apply gender-responsive budgeting throughout the budget cycle, publish impact statements for major programmes, report sex-disaggregated data, and allocate funds for gender advisers, data systems and secure facilities. Supreme audit institutions should audit performance against those commitments and indicators, including off-budget items. Parliamentary hearings and expert panels should disclose the names of the experts they involve, as this influences the selection.

Rather than having a consultative role at the margin, gender advisers should have seniority and access to decision-making. Women's organisations should have permanent representation in the structures that inform the decisions of the defence and interior ministries and be able to contribute to threat assessments, risk models, planning assumptions, preventing and addressing violence and abuse.

» Protect Civic Space and Treat Human Rights Defenders as Partners

Civic space should be protected as a matter of security policy, and human rights defenders should be recognised as partners in creating a secure society. Protection must be provided for all human rights defenders, including climate and environmental defenders, LGBTQ individuals and women's groups. Security and counter-terrorism labels must not be used against human rights defenders and categorise dissent as a threat, nor should counter-terrorism financing measures cut defenders off from banking and funding. Where a measure restricts civic space, the state imposing it must demonstrate necessity and proportionality – and specify how long the restriction will last.

Governments should review the effect of their counter-terrorism financing rules on associations, replacing blanket restrictions with a risk-based approach. They should issue supervisory guidance to banks, making it clear that non-profit status is not a risk category. Furthermore, there should be a process established through which an organisation whose account has been closed can obtain reasons and seek redress within a defined timeframe.

No organisation should be labelled extremist, undesirable or a 'foreign agent' outside of a judicial process involving disclosure, representation, and the right to appeal. The surveillance of human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers should require judicial authorisation. They should be notified and offered a remedy once an operation permits.

Security ministries should appoint an official to engage with human rights defenders and maintain protection measures for climate and environmental defenders, LGBTQ people, and women's groups. They should also uphold the same standards abroad and aligning security assistance with civic space protection approach.

» Invest in Civil Society and Public Participation as Resilience-Building

Civil society coalitions, volunteer groups, local civic engagement – the classical first responders in crises – should be resourced and included in security planning. Public engagement on political and military matters is to be encouraged, providing civil society with necessary training and resources to engage the security sector as a partner. Governments and multilateral organisations share this responsibility.

Civil society organisations need training in security sector governance and budget analysis. Security professionals need training in working with civil society. Public education on security, arms control, and the decisions that underpin military spending should be promoted through schools, universities, and public broadcasters. The resulting civic capacity should be incorporated into resilience and preparedness planning.

A standing forum with defined access to defence and interior ministries that meets during the budget and strategy cycles, before the decisions have been made, would provide a space for public participation. Parliamentary committees should invite civil society experts as a matter of course when examining security legislation and expenditure, and they publish accessible versions of budget documents to enable external scrutiny. Support to civil society groups should be included in security and resilience budgets rather than development assistance; it should be multi-year and allow to cover core organisational costs.

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Human Rights Compass serves as a platform for real-time human rights policy analysis and strategic coordination through:

» Convening key human rights stakeholders for coordinated policy advice and action.
» Publishing policy briefs and analysis about the Top Human Rights Trends to inform and guide advocacy.
» Promoting principled responses to systemic challenges that undermine international human rights frameworks.

Human Rights Compass's Convenings brought together over 120 human rights defenders, policy analysts and multilateral actors to examine how the ongoing changes affect international justice, foreign aid and human rights protection, and to promote appropriate solutions.

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