



## EU – GCC DIALOGUE ON ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION PHASE II

A Project funded by the European Union

# 4. ACTIVITY REPORT

## EU Defence Technology Forum

A project implemented by DAI  
in consortium with AHK and  
ICCS



German Emirati Joint Council  
for Industry and Commerce  
المجلس الألماني الإماراتي  
المشترك للصناعة و التجارة

# Activity Report

## EU Defence Technology Forum

7 May 2026

### Summary

Table 1: Summary of EU Defence Technology Forum 2026

cat	Description
<i>Theme</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Dialogue between GCC and EU representatives on advanced Defence Technology cooperation under the Economic Diversification Phase II initiative.</li></ul>
<i>Purpose</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Provide a platform to bring together senior institutional, industry, and policy stakeholders from the EU, the UAE and the GCC countries to discuss and align on the evolving defence technology requirements and strategies.</li><li>Offer opportunities for collaboration between European and local stakeholders, exploring new avenues for joint innovation, industrial collaboration, and knowledge exchange.</li></ul>
<i>Date and time</i>	7 May 2026
<i>Venue</i>	Four Seasons Hotel Al Maryah Island, Abu Dhabi
<i>Organised by</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>DAI (EU-GCC Economic Diversification Project)</li><li>German Emirati Joint Council for Industry and Commerce (AHK UAE)</li></ul>
<i>Supported by</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Delegation of the European Union to the United Arab Emirates</li><li>Delegation of the European Union to Saudi Arabia</li></ul>
<i>Format</i>	In-person
<i>Language</i>	English
<i>Main Target Audience</i>	Senior government, military, policy, and defence industry stakeholders from the EU, UAE, and GCC, including defence technology and innovation partners
<i>Number of Participant</i>	148

### Performance Reporting

#### 1. Forum Delivery

##### 1-1. Welcome and Opening Remarks

<b>Time</b>	9:00 am – 9:20 am
<b>Speaker</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Welcome Remarks – H.E. Lucie Berger</b>, EU Ambassador to the UAE</li> <li>• <b>Keynote - H.E. Andrius Kubilius</b>, European Commissioner for Defence and Space (per video message)</li> </ul>

### 1-2. Panel Discussion "Shifting Geopolitical Landscape – New Policy Approaches in the Defence Sector"

<b>Time</b>	9:20 am – 10:15 am
<b>Moderator</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joren Selleslaghs, Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Belgium</li> </ul>
<b>Speakers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>H.E. Lucie Berger</b>, EU Ambassador to the UAE</li> <li>• <b>H.E. Dr. Oleksandr Balanutsa</b>, Ukrainian Ambassador to the UAE and former Deputy Minister of Defence</li> <li>• <b>Tim Vallings</b>, VP Strategic Accounts, ICEYE (Finland)</li> </ul>

The panel focused on how the war in Ukraine has accelerated changes in European defence policy, cooperation, and preparedness, setting a precedence for arising global conflicts, such as across the Gulf regions currently.

Her Excellency, Lucie Berger, explained that the EU is increasing defence investment and strengthening cooperation in areas such as drones, AI, cyber capabilities, and electronic warfare, with the goal of building stronger capabilities by 2030. She highlighted the importance of integrating Ukraine’s operational experience into future European defence programmes.

His Excellency, Oleksandr Balanutsa, stressed the importance of proactive preparation and resilience, noting that countries should build defence capabilities before crises emerge. He highlighted Ukraine’s ability to rapidly innovate, adapt, and scale production during wartime, and emphasised Ukraine’s willingness to share expertise, training, and operational knowledge with international partners.

From an industry perspective, Tim Vallings discussed the growing focus on sovereign technologies, localisation, and dual-use innovation since 2022. He noted that while governments are increasing investment and procurement mechanisms, bureaucracy and slow implementation remain major challenges. The panel concluded that EU-GCC cooperation in areas such as technology transfer, training, supply-chain resilience, and joint procurement presents significant opportunities for both regions and key industry players.

### 1-3. Fireside Chat “Defence Industry Perspectives in the Current Geopolitical Context”

<b>Time</b>	10:30 am – 10:50 am
<b>Moderator</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Iti Press, Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Estonia</li> </ul>
<b>Speaker</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Julien Fabreguette</b>, Senior Vice President Industrial Strategy &amp; Partnerships, EDGE Group</li> <li>• <b>Pavol Čahoj</b>, President of the Slovak Association of Defence Industry (Slovakia)</li> </ul>

The discussion explored how defence industries are adapting to evolving geopolitical realities and battlefield demands. Pavol Čahoj explained that companies are increasingly developing solutions based on

direct feedback from soldiers and end users, while also focusing more on local production and national self-sufficiency.

Julien Fabreguette articulated the industry’s shift towards faster development cycles, rapid testing, and agile innovation. Lessons from Ukraine, he noted, are reshaping the sector by prioritising speed, adaptability, and continuous improvement.

Both speakers emphasised the importance of collaboration between Europe and the Gulf, combining European expertise with the UAE’s infrastructure, investment, and industrial capabilities. Technology transfer, co-investment, and shared intellectual property were highlighted as key pillars for successful long-term partnerships.

#### 1-4. Panel Discussion "The Future of Defence: Technology, Innovation and Industrial Partnerships"

<b>Time</b>	10:50 am – 12:05 am
<b>Moderator</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Radovan Hudak, Economic, Embassy of the Slovak Republic</li> </ul>
<b>Speaker</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Manuel Pascua</b>, UAE Country Manager, INDRA Group and Chief Executive Officer of Pulse Nova (Spain)</li> <li>• <b>Markus Staudt</b>, Director Sales, Quantum Systems (Germany)</li> <li>• <b>Matthieu Clermont</b>, Regional Director, Safran Electronics and Defence, and CEO, Vision for Optronics &amp; Navigation (France)</li> <li>• <b>Heléne Bittmann</b>, Managing Director, SAAB UAE (Sweden)</li> <li>• <b>Riccardo Bonalumi</b>, Chief Executive Officer &amp; General Manager, MAESTRAL (Italy)</li> <li>• <b>Hlačik Zdeněk</b>, Sales Director / VP for Business Development, Aero Vodochody (Czech Republic)</li> </ul>

The discussion revealed a strong alignment between all speakers around several core themes shaping the future of defence cooperation between European Companies and the UAE for shared prosperity. While each speaker approached the topic from a different industrial or national perspective, their points consistently reinforced one another and built towards a shared vision of faster, more integrated, and more resilient defence ecosystems.

One of the clearest overlapping themes was the importance of localisation and sovereign capability development. Manuel Pascua, Heléne Bittmann, and Riccardo Bonalumi all stressed that defence partnerships are no longer based solely on exporting products, but instead on building long-term industrial cooperation, local production, and integrated capabilities within the UAE. This was reinforced by Hlačik Zdeněk, who highlighted the need for sustainable and collaborative production models that can endure long-term geopolitical tensions.

Another major point of convergence was the need for speed, agility, and adaptability in defence innovation. Nearly every speaker referred to lessons learned from Ukraine, particularly the need to shorten development cycles, rapidly adapt technologies, and respond more quickly to operational demands. Markus Staudt emphasised continuous battlefield feedback and open-system architectures, while Bonalumi focused on agile engineering and reducing production lead times. Pascua and Bittmann similarly stressed faster testing, rapid software adaptation, and more efficient product development processes. Together, these points supported the broader conclusion that traditional defence procurement and innovation cycles are no longer sufficient in modern conflict environments.

Interoperability and collaboration also emerged as a shared priority. Bittmann strongly emphasised interoperability between systems and partners, while Staudt discussed the importance of open interfaces and third-party integration. Matthieu Clermont expanded on this by linking industrial cooperation to political alignment and shared strategic interests between the EU and Gulf countries. Across the panel,

speakers agreed that no single country or company can independently meet future defence challenges, making international cooperation, technology sharing, and industrial partnerships increasingly essential.

The speakers also reinforced the idea that resilience is not only technological, but also industrial and strategic. Several participants highlighted the importance of supply-chain resilience, maintaining local industrial presence, and creating sustainable production ecosystems that can respond during crises. This tied closely into discussions around reducing bureaucracy and accelerating procurement processes, which Clermont and others argued are necessary to enable innovation at the speed now required by geopolitical realities.

The main outcome of the panel was a shared understanding that the future of defence will depend on integrated partnerships rather than transactional supplier relationships. The discussion highlighted a growing alignment between European and Gulf priorities in areas such as local manufacturing, technology transfer, interoperability, AI, cyber capabilities, and rapid innovation. It also reinforced the view that Ukraine's wartime experience is reshaping global defence thinking, particularly around agility, operational readiness, and the ability to adapt quickly under pressure.

Overall, the panel demonstrated that Europe and the Gulf increasingly see one another as long-term strategic partners, with strong mutual opportunities in industrial cooperation, technology development, and defence resilience.

## **Lesson Learned**

The forum highlighted how rapidly the global defence landscape is evolving in response to geopolitical instability, technological change, and the lessons emerging from the war in Ukraine. Across all discussions, speakers consistently emphasised the need for greater preparedness, faster innovation, stronger localisation strategies, and closer international cooperation.

A key takeaway was that defence strategies must become more proactive rather than reactive. Ukraine's experience demonstrated the importance of resilience, operational readiness, and the ability to adapt quickly during crises. Traditional procurement and development cycles were widely viewed as too slow for modern security challenges, with increasing focus now placed on agile innovation, rapid testing, interoperability, AI, cyber capabilities, drones, and continuous adaptation based on operational feedback.

The discussions also reinforced the growing importance of sovereign capabilities and localisation. Many countries are seeking stronger domestic production, local expertise, and reduced reliance on external suppliers. However, speakers stressed that successful localisation requires long-term investment in technology transfer, training, industrial partnerships, and capability development.

A major outcome of the forum was the strong alignment identified between European and GCC priorities in defence technology and industrial cooperation. European countries offer advanced technologies, R&D expertise, and operational experience, while GCC countries provide strong investment capacity, modern infrastructure, and ambitious localisation strategies. Together, this creates significant opportunities for joint innovation, co-production, supply-chain resilience, and long-term industrial partnerships, particularly in areas such as AI, cyber security, autonomous systems, radar technologies, and critical infrastructure protection.

Overall, the forum concluded that future defence resilience will depend on faster innovation, stronger EU-GCC collaboration, local industrial capability, and the ability to remain flexible and adaptable in an increasingly complex security environment.

## Annexes

### Annex 1: Agenda

<b>8:30 - 9:00: Registration and Welcome Coffee</b>
<b>9:00 - 9:20: Welcome &amp; Opening Remarks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Welcome Remarks – H.E. Lucie Berger</b>, EU Ambassador to the UAE</li><li>• <b>Keynote - H.E. Andrius Kubilius</b>, European Commissioner for Defence and Space (per video message)</li></ul>
<b>9:20 - 10:15: Panel Discussion "Shifting Geopolitical Landscape – New Policy Approaches in the Defence Sector"</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>H.E. Lucie Berger</b>, EU Ambassador to the UAE</li><li>• <b>H.E. Dr. Oleksandr Balanutsa</b>, Ukrainian Ambassador to the UAE and former Deputy Minister of Defence</li><li>• <b>Tim Vallings</b>, VP Strategic Accounts, ICEYE (Finland)</li></ul> <p><u>Moderation</u>: Joren Selleslaghs, Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Belgium</p>
<b>10:15 - 10:30: Coffee Break</b>
<b>10:30 - 10:50: Fireside Chat "Defence Industry Perspectives in the Current Geopolitical Context"</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Julien Fabreguette</b>, Senior Vice President Industrial Strategy &amp; Partnerships, EDGE Group</li><li>• <b>Pavol Čahoj</b>, President of the Slovak Association of Defence Industry (Slovakia)</li></ul> <p><u>Moderation</u>: Iti Press, Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Estonia</p>
<b>10:50 - 12:05: Panel Discussion "The Future of Defence: Technology, Innovation and Industrial Partnerships"</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Manuel Pascua</b>, UAE Country Manager, INDRA Group and Chief Executive Officer of Pulse Nova (Spain)</li><li>• <b>Markus Staudt</b>, Director Sales, Quantum Systems (Germany)</li><li>• <b>Matthieu Clermont</b>, Regional Director, Safran Electronics and Defence, and CEO, Vision for Optronics &amp; Navigation (France)</li><li>• <b>Heléne Bittmann</b>, Managing Director, SAAB UAE (Sweden)</li><li>• <b>Riccardo Bonalumi</b>, Chief Executive Officer &amp; General Manager, MAESTRAL (Italy)</li><li>• <b>Hlačik Zdeněk</b>, Sales Director / VP for Business Development, Aero Vodochody (Czech Republic)</li></ul> <p><u>Moderation</u>: Radovan Hudak, Economic, Embassy of the Slovak Republic</p>
<b>12:05 - 12:15: Closing Remarks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>H.E. Lucie Berger</b>, EU Ambassador to the UAE</li></ul>
<b>12:15 - 13:30: Networking Lunch</b>