

Europe's security without America: an imperative of the moment or a dangerous idea?

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For many years, a variety of concepts linked with the so-called European security and defence identity had appeared, vanished and re-emerged in the public space. Numerous terms and ideas related to this concept have been enjoying life of their own. Thus, they have been diverting attention from solutions that are more concrete and realistic from the point of view of Europe's genuine security needs and real strengths of NATO and the European Union. Today, it seems that the task of devising effective relations and coming up with a division of labour between the two organisations is of key importance.

The paradox is that the more intensive the debate on Europe's emancipation from the US security umbrella is, the less enthusiastic many European capitals are about it. This is due to the shock caused by the brutal war Russia has unleashed against Ukraine, and to the clash with the hard realities of defence (and its funding). However, at the same time, Donald Trump's decisive victory in the US presidential election may result in a significant shift in Washington's policy towards Europe, which will force the latter to consider new efforts and new scenarios to guarantee its own security.¹

Various motivations and different concepts

Firstly, Trump's second presidency is already a reality. His critical views on the alleged exploitation of US taxpayers to fund Europe's security have not changed (including statements offered during the election campaign, questioning Washington's commitment to automatically honour Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty). This situation has spurred many new suggestions regarding a Europeanisation of the security policy within, outside, or even instead of NATO. The main motivation is fear that Trump's policies could threaten the Alliance's cohesion or even its very existence. Not even the lack of the US Senate's approval (which is required for the US's exit from NATO) could stop the president from withdrawing US forces from the organisation and from Europe in general, and/or from freezing the financial contribution that is necessary for their operation. Thus, intensive efforts are underway to devise concepts to enable Europe to take greater responsibility for the security of their continent.

¹ These options are already under consideration, see e.g. D. Zandee, R. de Baedts, *The US elections and the future of NATO. A scenario analysis*, Clingendael, October 2024, clingendael.org.



Secondly, creative thinking is the result of a growing awareness of the inevitability of a shift in the trajectory of the US military effort (with consequences for Europe) due to China's aggressive policies, particularly in Asia. A potential military confrontation between the US and China (e.g. over Taiwan) significantly complicates defence planning, as it would entail transferring a significant portion of US military assets from Europe to the Indo-Pacific region.²

Thirdly, the fact that most European capitals have become aware of the need to make up for their own defence deficiencies at a time of unprecedented challenges to Europe's security is a positive development.

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Russia's war against Ukraine is the biggest military conflict in this part of the world since 1945, with Russia (backed by China and rogue states such as North Korea and Iran) challenging the entire international order. Moscow is already conducting a massive hybrid attack in Europe (disinformation, cyber-attacks, subversion, sabotage, operations involving migrants, and reconnaissance of critical infrastructure). If it is successful in crushing Ukraine's resistance, it may directly target NATO states.

Fourthly, the concept of a Europeanisation of the security policy also stems from the ongoing process of expanding the EU's mandate in the security and defence policy. The Treaty of the European Union contains a mutual assistance clause (Article 42.7); specific funds and structures are in place to support the arms industry (with new ones being set up, such as the EU's defence commissioner), defining the organisation's tasks in this respect. Many issues that used to fall within the competence of NATO are now being dealt with by the EU (for example, legal matters regarding so-called military mobility and the required security standards for critical infrastructure components). This fact represents a significant argument for those in favour of transforming the current, limited, format of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy into collective military commitments. Proponents of this solution see the collective defence aspect as a natural goal of the evolution of the EU's institutions and their mandate.

Fifthly, anti-American sentiment is present in Europe. This was evident in the significant successes achieved by the extreme left and extreme right parties in recent elections across various EU countries. What unites these parties is their affinity towards Russia and their dislike of 'American imperialism'. However, it should be noted that even some mainstream political forces do not shy away from populist slogans highlighting 'Europe's emancipation'. To this day, even more sophisticated French views, in their various forms, continue to endorse General Charles de Gaulle's main strategic idea that Europe (led by Paris) should have greater agency in the security field, to avoid being 'a pawn in the game between Washington and Moscow' (or Beijing). In addition, distrust of the US is fuelled by lobbying activity carried out by some European companies (countries) which simply do not want to compete with American businesses operating in the defence realm.

Concepts for a Europeanisation of NATO

Some concepts, such as the European pillar of NATO, are based on the idea that the influence and the contribution of European countries within the Alliance itself should be boosted. It is worth recalling that a Eurogroup already operated within NATO. Established in 1968 at the initiative of London, it comprised of 11 countries and for many years was involved in mobilising and helping European allies to increase their commitment to collective defence. Many of its meetings were informal; Eurogroup

² See R. Pszczel, J. Jakóbowski, M. Bogusz, *New horizon. Implications for Poland's security of NATO's approach to the Indo-Pacific*, OSW, Warsaw 2024, osw.waw.pl.

ministers also undertook important work in the US, highlighting the value of Europe's contribution to NATO to local policymakers (at present no such body exists).

According to other initiatives, the EU should assume greater responsibility for Europe's security. Although statements and declarations which endorse this proposal usually contain assurances that the EU should only act in full synergy

with NATO and respect its collective defence mandate, they frequently contain references to European autonomy in the field of security and defence (a concept promoted in particular by Paris), which undermine these principles.

The term 'European Defence Union' (EDU) has also entered the political vocabulary, and in some ways, it is reminiscent of the draft 1952 treaty which attempted to establish a European Defence Community but was never ratified.³ The concept of EDU recently re-emerged in efforts to boost the European defence industry. The re-appointed European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, has for many months promoted the concept of an EDU as a natural goal of the EU's development.⁴

The concept has no agreed interpretation and has found its way into various political declarations (for example, into a declaration by the European People's Party, a key political group in the European Parliament) which openly endorse the establishment of EU armed forces.⁵

Recently, a more general term 'Europeanisation of NATO' has also gained popularity. Some authors define this task as an indispensable process within the Alliance (which aligns closely with the concept of the European pillar), in which a group of European NATO members could coordinate efforts to take over greater responsibility for Europe's collective defence from the US. Others argue that the EU should gradually assume full responsibility for NATO's collective defence tasks.⁶ At first glance, it may seem that what unites these elements is President Emmanuel Macron's position endorsing a 'concept of strategic defence of the continent based on its own capabilities' within the Alliance and, importantly, also outside it 'when necessary'. This concept is uniquely French, as it expresses Paris's ambition to play a leading part in the field of European security, regardless of the institutional framework (it allows for both the UK's participation in the project and the involvement of the European Political Community, which is promoted by France).⁷

The (political) challenge of a definition

Even if we reject (as extreme) those proposals involving a Europeanisation of security on the continent, which are driven by ideological motives rather than the genuine intention to improve security, the remaining proposals still exhibit numerous shortcomings.

The first such weakness involves the lack of clarity. What does the term 'Europe' encompass? The European Union, NATO members which are simultaneously members of the EU, or all allied states on the

³ '(Did you know) that a 1952 treaty created a European Army within NATO', SHAPE, shape.nato.int.

⁴ 'President von der Leyen unveils plans for defence strategy at EDA conference', European Defence Agency, 30 November 2023, eda.europe.eu.

⁵ 'If you want peace, prepare for war', European People's Party, 2 October 2024; 'A Europe that protects and that stands for true peace: building a European Defence Union', European People's Party, 7 October 2024, eppgroup.eu.

⁶ This concept has been promoted for many years, see e.g. S. Biscop, 'EU-NATO Relations: A Long-Term Perspective', *Nação e Defesa* 2018, no. 150, p. 93, egmontinstitute.be.

⁷ Ł. Maślanka, 'President Macron proposes a European defence initiative', OSW, 29 April 2024, osw.waw.pl.

continent? This is a fundamental question, as a narrower definition would inevitably limit or diminish the involvement of the UK, Norway, and Turkey in Europe's defence. In the context of an existential challenge faced by the continent, such an approach seems not only unwise but potentially perilous.

On the other hand, the concepts emerging in public debate which advocate for the EU to swiftly assume NATO's collective defence responsibilities create a dangerous

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illusion. As Jens Stoltenberg noted just before leaving his post as NATO Secretary General, 80% of NATO's defence spending is generated by non-EU countries. If this proportion does not change soon, on what basis can countries contributing only 20% of the resources justify their entitlement to shape defence policy priorities within NATO, let alone influence their implementation?

Stoltenberg also warned against violating the canon of NATO-EU relations, which is sometimes referred to as the 3D principle. It was formulated in 1999 by Madeleine Albright and has been codified in many NATO documents: no decoupling, no duplication, no discrimination. He pointed to various problems ensuing from ideas aimed at the EU devising parallel military standards (these could hinder the functioning of NATO's defence planning), those advocating a significant development of the EU's intervention forces (in the era of limited resources, this would simply be a wasteful exercise in the context of the efforts spent on building up NATO forces) and the duplication of military command structures (the EU is nonetheless authorised to use them for its operations).⁸ Promoting the notion of Europe's rapid emancipation from the US also indirectly generates specific consequences for the defence industry.

The lack of detailed proposals for an urgent increase in the level of real security in Europe is another weak point of many of the proposed concepts. There is no universal recognition of the need for a strategic response to immediate and existential threats. The proposals put forward are dominated by technocratic suggestions, concepts for an institutional reform (e.g. the introduction of majority voting in the EU on security issues), calls for new visions (much is expected for example from the EU White Paper on security policy, which is currently under preparation⁹), or adaptation of the meeting formats (essentially involving more high level meetings).¹⁰

Such proposals overlook the political reality within the EU, characterised by disagreements over key threat assessments and the credibility of the security guarantees the EU could provide. As a commentator for *The Economist* put it, frontline states (especially in Central Europe) tend to prefer the temporarily uncertain US guarantees to the permanently unreliable ones provided by the so-called 'old Europe'.¹¹ Experts from the latter, on the other hand, believe that enthusiasm for the idea of raising the EU's importance at the expense of NATO will magically increase as soon as the Paris–Berlin tandem allows other capitals, including Warsaw, to take part in decision-making consultations.¹² In fact, the very debate on NATO's uncertain future favours bilateral rather than multilateral solutions.

⁸ Speech and conversation with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the German Marshall Fund event, Reflections on a Challenging Decade, NATO, 19 September 2024, nato.int.int.

⁹ See e.g. N. Koenig, 'From Soft Talk to Hard Power: Ten To-Dos for the European Defence Union', Munich Security Conference, September 2024, securityconference.org

¹⁰ See S. Everts, B. Zorić (eds.), *Ten Ideas for the New Team*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Chaillot Paper 185, September 2024, p. 21–24, iss.europe.eu.

¹¹ Charlemagne, 'Coming for EU', *The Economist*, 12 October 2024, p. 19.

¹² See S. Besch, L. Fix, 'A European Plan for Trump (and Harris)', *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 4 September 2024; M. Droin, G. Weber, 'A Weakened Franco-German Engine Can Still Power Europe', *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 26 July 2024, ip-quarterly.com.

An abstract nature of numerous theoretical concepts also arises from an analysis of coordinated NATO and EU documents. Notably, the communiqué issued after the recent NATO summit in Washington makes no mention of the EDU or the European pillar. Instead, it warns against an unnecessary duplication and discrimination while commending the added value of new defence capabilities developed by European states.¹³ Similarly, EU documents discuss the EU's stronger involvement in security and defence as complementary to NATO, rather than as a replacement for it.¹⁴

Obstacles to implementing the vision

A comparison of the actual potential of defence capabilities of the United States and Europe can serve as a useful test of the attractiveness (credibility) of European ideas.

Most European countries, including the largest ones, are facing major fiscal policy challenges, such as rising public debt, low growth rates or, in the case of the UK, the costs of Brexit. Combined with the success of populist parties in many countries (which frequently promote pacifist views), these challenges will significantly hamper the effort to increase defence budgets, irrespective of the intentions of the governments of these states.

The situation in the US is markedly different: the dispute is about whether defence spending should be increased to 4 or 5% of the country's GDP (currently it is 3%).

In 2025, various groups will likely

compete in the US Congress for priority projects to be financed using the planned extra funds (for example, in 2023 the Congressional Budget Office stated that in the coming decade more than \$750 bn should be earmarked for the modernisation of the nuclear forces alone). The increase in Europe's defence spending (by around 50% since 2000) is a positive development, but it should be noted that over the same period the US has increased its spending by 60%.

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The issue of intermediate- and medium-range land-based missile systems (with ranges between 500 km and 5,500 km, which were banned by the INF Treaty until 2019) serves as an excellent example of the disparity between Europe's ambitions and its actual capabilities. There is no doubt that European allies require these systems in their arsenal. Russia, for example, has at its disposal Iskander ballistic missiles that are capable of carrying conventional and nuclear warheads at a distance of several hundred kilometres. If launched from Kaliningrad Oblast, these missiles can reach numerous capitals within minutes.

At a recent NATO summit in Washington, President Biden's administration announced that it would be ready to fill this gap by deploying three types of US-made missile systems in Germany in 2025: the SM-6, the Tomahawk, and the Long Range Hypersonic Weapons (LRHW) systems, which are capable of hitting targets from land at a distance of over 3,000 km.¹⁵ This will potentially enable Europe to significantly improve its deterrence capabilities and conduct possible strikes deep into Russian territory in the event of war.

¹³ Washington Summit Declaration issued by NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C. 10 July 2024, NATO, point 29, nato.int.

¹⁴ See e.g. The Versailles declaration, informal meeting of heads of state or government, 11 March 2022, par. 8, consilium.europa.eu.

¹⁵ See J. Tarociński *et al.*, 'Enhancing deterrence in Europe: a return to intermediate-range missiles', OSW, 16 July 2024, osw.waw.pl.

What does the European alternative look like? On 12 July 2024, France, Poland, Germany, and Italy announced their intention to produce cruise missiles with a range of more than 1,000 km. However, even if this project is fully realised, developing such systems will take a long time and it is unlikely that the armed forces of European countries could start using this type of capability sooner than 2030. Thus, in the foreseeable future, US-made systems will remain the sole viable option in this category of weaponry. The situation is similar in other areas of defence weapons which are of key importance to the continent's security.

The US nuclear umbrella remains the only truly reliable shield capable of deterring Russia's diverse range of nuclear delivery systems.

In contrast, British and French nu-

clear resources are relatively limited, and the likelihood that they could influence the Kremlin's strategic calculations – particularly as Russia increasingly issues threats against NATO members – is low. Indeed, Paris has initiated a dialogue with its partners regarding the potential use of its *force de frappe* to support other European states. However, this debate, which has already been ongoing for several months, has yet to produce concrete results, and it is unlikely to do so in the near future. Although France has returned to NATO's integrated military structure (from which it was removed by de Gaulle in the 1960s), it remains the only ally that is not a member of the Nuclear Planning Group and does not appear inclined to significantly reduce its autonomy in this sphere.

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The most serious deficiencies on the part of European allies involve the so-called critical enablers. In categories such as military satellites, large unmanned systems, space technology, strategic transport, reconnaissance aircraft, and refuelling platforms (air-to-air or at sea), the degree of their dependence on the US is very high. Even if an integrated European action plan were to be agreed, its implementation would cost several hundred billion euros and would last nearly a decade.

The quantitative examples presented above are only a part of the problem because the qualitative aspect should also be taken into account. Although the combined armed forces of European NATO members total almost 2 million soldiers (for comparison, Vladimir Putin's recent decrees aim to establish a 1.5 million-strong Russian army, a goal most experts consider unfeasible due to demographic, social, and fiscal constraints), only a small portion of these forces are adequately equipped, configured, and prepared to participate in a potential full-scale military confrontation (namely, a war with Russia). This is one of the reasons why US forces continue to represent the largest and strongest allied contingent on the eastern flank. Another important factor is their experience in planning and conducting multi-domain operations (it is no secret that the main staff resources in NATO military structures are provided by US officers). Combined with the United States' invaluable contribution to Europe's collective defence in areas such as intelligence, cutting-edge technology, diplomacy, and the global economy, this corroborates a picture of strategic dependency which seems extremely difficult to be eliminated over the coming decade or so.

Fear is a bad advisor

The risks arising from Trump's re-election for US engagement in Europe (let alone aid to Ukraine) should not be underestimated. However, the American public continues to strongly support NATO, including more critical MAGA groups (an acronym for Make America Great Again, a slogan used by the president-elect and his supporters), and in principle is not opposed to supporting Kyiv, as long as this does not represent an excessive burden for the US.¹⁶ This represents significant political capital.

¹⁶ I. Daalder, D. Smeltz, 'How Trump Republicans really feel about NATO', Politico, 5 July 2024, politico.eu.

It is not certain that Trump's re-election will automatically weaken the organisation. His vocal criticism of the European NATO allies over their insufficient defence spending has already contributed significantly to a major improvement in this area. In addition, his first term also resulted in an effective increase in US engagement in Europe. Given Trump's inclination towards a transactional approach to politics, the stakes in both the negotiations and the broader geopolitical dynamics are high, which was emphasised by both the former and the incumbent NATO Secretary Generals.

The opposite approach, based on the assumption that Trump is likely to undermine US guarantees for Europe and that efforts

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to construct an alternative to NATO in its current form must start today, may instead bring far worse outcomes. In such a scenario, a plan B would inevitably become a plan A. It should be remembered that isolationism has considerable support in the US. Proponents will embrace Europe's declared readiness to pursue the concept of European autonomy, using it as a justification for 'putting NATO to sleep'. In this scenario, the US would play the role of a 'passive' member of the organisation (for example, offering Europe a nuclear umbrella, without committing to its conventional defence).¹⁷ To some degree, this would involve a return to NATO's early years, when – apart from the North Atlantic Council – no integration structures (such as SHAPE) existed, defence planning was separate for North America and Europe, and the US military presence in Europe was viewed as temporary. It was only the war in Korea in the mid-1950s that changed this state of affairs.

A positive alternative

If politics is indeed the art of the possible, then security policy should be dominated by an even stronger commitment to viable and reliable solutions. As long as Europe does not follow the risky path of prematurely burying NATO (or duplicating it in an unwise manner), it definitely is capable of tackling a number of creative and important tasks. Making use of the EU's new security instruments to genuinely enhance – rather than merely to aspire to the European allies' contribution to the security of their continent is the imperative of the moment. It is essential to generate the collective will to reach the necessary defence spending threshold of 3% on average, regardless of other priorities. Individual countries should be encouraged to join forces to reduce costs and conduct joint investment initiatives in this area. Since Europe is relatively wealthy, it should be capable of increasing and utilising European defence funds and creating effective stimuli to enhance the potential of European defence industries. By conducting a well-prepared information policy, political leadership can win the public's support for tough decisions. This is the only way to create well-equipped and trained brigades and divisions ready to defend Europe and to systematically close the gap between European and American military capabilities and technologies.¹⁸

Numerous valuable new ideas, worthy of consideration and potentially swift implementation, have been voiced. They address directly the problem of fiscal constraints. These include, for example, the case for using Eurobonds to fund defence expenditure, adopting directives committing EU member states to maintain the necessary armaments stocks, reducing the constraints linked with the fiscal deficit for security-related expenditure,¹⁹ improving lending options (for example by lifting restrictions

¹⁷ S. Maitra, 'The Path to a 'Dormant NATO'', *The American Conservative*, 29 December 2023, theamericanconservative.com.

¹⁸ For several interesting ideas see C. Grand, 'Defending Europe with less America', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 3 July 2024, ecfr.eu.

¹⁹ A proposal put forward by Poland's minister of finance, see 'Poland pushes EU to exempt its defence spending from fiscal rules', *Financial Times*, 13 October 2024, ft.com.

on defence projects applied by numerous European financial institutions) or even creating a unique NATO bank.²⁰

Regarding the institutional aspect, it is crucial to channel the political energy to develop clearer relations and more effective cooperation between NATO and the EU, rather than create sophisticated models for decoupling Europe from America. This is an opportunity for the new NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte and the leadership of EU institutions. Significant groundwork is required to enhance consultations and foster synergy between the international structures of these two organisations. For example, liaison offices could be established at NATO Headquarters and within the European Commission or European External Action Service in Brussels. Additionally, greater emphasis should be placed on mutual education at the working level. In other words, concrete, low-cost measures should be taken to improve essential cooperation and prevent unnecessary duplication – particularly, in areas such as the resilience of critical infrastructure.

Achieving joint success in addressing specific problems, such as those relating to military mobility in Europe and mutual access to defence markets for EU and NATO members, will enhance the attractiveness of these institutions on both sides of the Atlantic. This, in turn, will weaken the arguments voiced by critics of the current transatlantic ties.

Conclusions

Even the most creative ideas regarding institutional change cannot swiftly substitute the strategic importance of the American contribution to European security. It is hard to envision NATO surviving without the US, at least not in a form capable of providing its member states with a level of security comparable to the current arrangement, with Washington at NATO's helm.

Trump's second presidency paves the way for the possible emergence of various scenarios, some of which could pose significant risks to the future of the Alliance. Should any of the negative scenarios materialise (involving the United States' partial or full withdrawal from NATO), Europe will need to seek an entirely new model of organising its security. However, for the time being, this is not the case and today's fears should not hinder the ability to rationally assess the realities of Europe's defence. These, in turn, clearly suggest that, for many years to come, a satisfactory level of security can only be maintained with a significant US commitment to Europe's potential defence.

To achieve this objective, an optimal policy requires Europe to actively work towards preserving the American presence by convincing the new American administration of the benefits that Washington gains from its participation in NATO. Concurrently, Europe must focus on developing its defence capabilities, reaching an agreement on the division of security policy roles between NATO and the EU, and adhering to the three Albright principles, which hold intrinsic importance. These combined efforts will bolster lobbying initiatives. Solving this complex equation with multiple variables is achievable and, at present, represents a far more realistic approach than pursuing various concepts promoted under the slogans of European autonomy, the EDU, or a NATO deprived of the key contribution provided by the US.

²⁰ P. Wintour, '“Trump-proof” European security by setting up “Nato bank”, thinktanks urge', *The Guardian*, 9 October 2024, [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com).