

NATO's shadow

Can Europe free itself from security dependence on United States?



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ANALYSIS
EXCLUSIVE

For over seven decades, Europe's security architecture has been shaped under the heavy and extensive shadow of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the decisive power of the United States. From the Cold War era to the Balkan conflicts and post-9/11 missions, Washington has been not only the primary patron but often the field commander of the continent's security. This dependency-based relationship brought unprecedented stability and protection to Western Europe, but it simultaneously severely restricted its strategic choice and room for independent action. Today, this longstanding dependence has become one of Europe's greatest geopolitical questions: Can, or should, a continent with such civilizational heritage and economic capacity take full control of its own security destiny? This fundamental question is no longer an academic debate but has been propelled into the realm of action under the pressure of a new and harsh reality. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, while strengthening NATO solidarity, sounded a serious alarm for Europeans; a warning revealing how fragile their security is and how dependent it remains on the changing will and priorities of Washington. Fluctuations in US policy from Trump's "America First" era to Biden's increasing focus on competition with China, coupled with uncertainty about the continuity of American commitments in the future, have compelled Europe to consider "strategic autonomy" and strengthening NATO's European pillar with unprecedented urgency. But does this ambition align with complex practical obstacles such as budgetary gaps, disparities in military capabilities, and the divergent inclinations of the EU's 27 member states? This analysis argues that the answer to this question will shape not only the future of the continent's security but also the global balance of power. In the decades following World War II, Europe built its security



Soldiers of the Eurocorps hold the European flag during a ceremony in front of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, June 30, 2014.
● JEAN-MARC LOOS/REUTERS

pillar on NATO and US strategic support. This deep dependence guaranteed the continent's security during the Cold War and continued as a stabilizing umbrella thereafter. However, recent geopolitical shifts, including the reorientation of US priorities towards competition with China, fluctuations in allied commitments under different Washington administrations, and the shock of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have raised serious questions about the sustainability of this security model. The question of whether Europe can achieve greater security autonomy is now at the heart of strategic debates. On the path to security autonomy, Europe faces major obstacles. The first challenge is the deficit in critical military capabilities that have been carried by the US for decades; ranging from missile defense systems and strategic logistics to intelligence and nuclear capabilities. Second is the issue of coordination and consensus among the EU's 27 members with sometimes conflicting interests, which can subject any joint initiative to delay and compromise. Third is the heavy financial burden of building independent security structures, while many European countries face budgetary constraints. Nevertheless, steps such as NATO's "European pillar," the "Strategic Transportation" plan for troop movement, or the "Strategic Compass" initiative indicate a will to enhance capacity. Europe's efforts to gain greater

autonomy do not necessarily imply the dissolution of NATO or severing ties with the US, but rather find meaning within the framework of a "more logical burden-sharing" and "strategic self-reliance." This concept means that Europe should be able to independently manage crises in its vicinity, while still relying on the transatlantic alliance for extra-regional threats or confronting global major rivals. This two-tiered approach addresses Europe's immediate security needs while preserving America's role as an ultimate guarantor. However, achieving this delicate balance requires sustained investment, unprecedented political convergence, and a clear definition of responsibilities on both sides of the Atlantic. This analysis posits the following potential scenarios for this divergence:

Scenario 1: Gradual consolidation of strategic self-reliance

In this scenario, Europe steadily and continuously strengthens joint defense initiatives like the "Strategic Compass" and NATO's "European pillar." Military investments increase, defense industry coordination improves, and joint command structures are enhanced. However, this process does not signify replacing NATO; instead, Europe becomes a "more capable partner" within the transatlantic security umbrella. The US, while welcoming a reduced burden of responsibility



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in Eastern Europe, maintains its role as the ultimate guarantor of the continent's security. This path represents the most balanced and least costly route for Europe but requires maintaining European solidarity and sustained US commitment despite changes in administration.

Scenario 2: Strategic divergence due to a US pivot

Under pressure from intensifying competition with China and domestic isolationist tendencies, the US gradually shifts its focus and resources from Europe to the Indo-Pacific region. This forced retreat delivers a major shock to Europe, compelling it to hastily and expensively pursue entirely independent defense structures. In this case, a core group of leading European countries (such as France and Germany) might form a "European Defense Union" parallel to NATO. This scenario is destabilizing, increases the risk of security vacuums and internal competition within Europe, and could lead to a return of balance-of-power politics among European powers.

Scenario 3: NATO collapse and return to national balance of power

In the most pessimistic scenario, a US withdrawal from NATO or a severe weakening of the Article 5 commitment leads to the alliance's complete disintegration. In this situation, each European country would be forced to assume responsibility for its own security individually, rapidly pursuing military modernization and potentially nuclear armament. Europe becomes a continent of armed and potentially rival states where multilateral cooperation is minimized. This scenario evokes a return to pre-World War I and II nationalist rivalries, severely threatens global stability, and creates an ideal environment for exploitation by powers like Russia.

Scenario 4: NATO renaissance and the consolidation of dependence

A significantly more aggressive and extensive move by Russia (e.g., an attack on a NATO member country) or the emergence of another existential common crisis could lead to a revival and consolidation of NATO. In this case, a shared sense of urgency overshadows internal disagreements, and Europeans prefer once again to rally fully under US leadership and protection. European defense investments would focus more on the agenda set by NATO, and movements for security autonomy would be marginalized. This scenario reinforces the traditional dependency and postpones any significant effort towards European strategic autonomy for decades to come. In conclusion, a complete break from security dependence on the United States appears unrealistic in the short and even medium term. However, moving towards "self-reliance within the alliance" is an inescapable necessity. Internal pressures in the US to reduce foreign commitments, the rise of China as a systemic rival capturing Washington's attention, and the persistent threat from Russia compel Europe to assume a greater share of its own security. The likely outcome of this process will be a Europe that remains under NATO's shadow but has thinned that shadow and made its own role more prominent. The future of the continent's security will be determined not by a rupture from America, but by a redefined and more mature version of this historically asymmetric partnership.



Can a collision between USA, Europe be avoided?



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If the US president was Moscow's Manchurian candidate, he could not do better—he has just imposed punitive tariffs on the European countries that oppose his Greenland takeover bid. And Donald Trump has achieved what people thought impossible – to unite Europe and unite the kingdom of Denmark.

At the same time, he has done Europe an inestimable service. Both in his first term of office and last year Trump made plain to Europe they must pay their share of the defense burden. At the NATO summit in The Hague last June America's NATO allies committed to spending five percent of GDP on defense, and it is clearly Russia's invasion of Ukraine that has woken Europe from its lethargy. Former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger is credited with saying, "Who do I call if

I want to speak to Europe?", but now the contours of a defense structure are emerging. EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen and her vice-president Kaja Kallas, who is in charge of foreign affairs and security, play a prominent role. It was Kallas who in March last year presented Readiness 2030, Europe's plan to allocate up to €800 billion on defense spending. Also, in March the UK and France launched a plan to establish a "coalition of the willing" to provide support for

a peace plan for Ukraine. The coalition, which consists of 35 countries, is behind the 20-point peace plan in response to the 28-point plan concocted by US envoy Steve Witkoff and Russian envoy Kirill Dmitriev. There is a great deal of tension between the USA and Europe, which was accentuated by Vice President JD Vance's address at the Munich Security Conference in February last year. Here he raised the issue of the challenge from mass migration and lectured

on democratic values. In addition, the National Security Strategy claimed that Europe faced "civilizational erasure", and now Trump's Greenland policy threatens a collision. In an extensive interview with the New York Times Trump explained his psychological need for ownership, even at the cost of the NATO alliance. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen has warned that if the US chooses to attack another NATO country militarily, "then everything stops, including

NATO and thus the security that has been established since the end of the Second World War". Nevertheless, Trump forges ahead under the mantra of "national security", although there is the suspicion this is a fig leaf for a real estate deal. As his new envoy for Greenland, Louisiana governor Jeff Landry admitted, "Our president is a business president." For this reason, US secretary of state Marco Rubio agreed to meet with the Danish and Greenland foreign ministers, but