

Europe Against Russia Without the US? Not Europe's Preference but Possible

Karl-Heinz Kamp, Associate Fellow, Center for Order and Governance in Eastern Europe, Russia and Central Asia

The dissolution of NATO would be a disaster for both Europe and the United States. However, Europe must come to terms with the idea of America largely decoupling from it. In such a case, the European members of NATO would be well-advised to build up their own defenses against a Russia that is in decline. Europe has the economic strength, financial resources, and defense industrial base to take this step in the coming years. All that is needed is political will.

At least another transatlantic embarrassment was avoided at this year's Munich Security Conference (MSC). Whereas US Vice President JD Vance had treated European allies with contempt the previous year, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio sounded much more conciliatory this time around. In substance, however, he too presented the idea of a white and nationalist "West" that has little in common with most European notions of the transatlantic community. That is why the audience's exuberant applause for Rubio sounded more like a European case of Stockholm Syndrome than relief at a repaired relationship. The transatlantic gap has not narrowed.

A SILVER LINING

At MSC 2026, representatives of European governments – led by German Chancellor Friedrich Merz – did show more confidence in Europe's ability to stand on its own two feet militarily in the future. Afterward, the general consensus was that there was no desire to abandon

the transatlantic security alliance, especially since an improvement in relations after Donald Trump's term ends is not unlikely. Yet there is now a clear desire among Europeans to prepare for this eventuality, whether likely or not. How justified is such self-confidence? More concretely: what is the state of Europe's defense against an aggressive Russia, which is said to be ready to attack by the end of the decade?

Without a doubt, a definitive break in transatlantic security relations would be a disaster because it would probably mean the end of NATO as the most successful security alliance in history. The United States would also suffer damage; its status as a world power depends not only on military capabilities but also on viable alliance systems.

But even if the United States were to terminate the North Atlantic Alliance, there have been signs of cautious optimism in recent months regarding Europe's defense against Russia. Moscow's military capabilities for attack and Europe's

capabilities for deterrence and defense are not static but are developing very dynamically in opposite directions. Russia's military and economic situation is deteriorating with every day of fighting in Ukraine, while Europe's defense capabilities are slowly but steadily improving.

RECOGNIZING RUSSIA'S WEAKNESSES

While the Russian economy showed remarkable resilience in the first two years of the war, it appears to have passed its peak in 2024. Economic growth, which was already mainly driven by the arms industry, is trending toward zero. In 2025, [revenues from oil and gas sales fell by 24 percent](#). A [further decline of 46 percent](#) is expected for 2026. Because energy revenues account for more than a quarter of the Russian state budget and the price of oil – despite the current Iran crisis – will continue to fall due to international oversupply, such losses create enormous fiscal pressure. Investments now flow almost exclusively into

the arms industry, significantly setting back the civilian economy and sharply reducing Russia's role in areas such as advanced technology. According to a study by the British Foreign Office, Western sanctions had deprived Russia of at least \$450 billion in war-financing funds by mid-2025 despite their imperfections.

Added to this economic weakening is a political one caused by the loss of important allies such as Syria, Venezuela, and possibly Iran. Also, the visibly limited capabilities of Russian weapons systems significantly weaken Russia's role as an international arms exporter. Moscow's claim to be a great power is diverging even further from economic and political realities.

Militarily, Russia has always had an advantage with respect to its land forces in terms of both personnel strength and firepower or ammunition supplies. In addition, it has a greater capacity for military mobilization and a greater tolerance for casualties. Although the Europeans have qualitative advantages in terms of weapons technology and soldier training, these cannot compensate for their (self-inflicted) lack of heavy weaponry. However, Russia's war on Ukraine is also depleting Russian weapons stocks. Its supply of stored (older) systems, which are being sent back to the battlefield after being modernized, is running out.

When it comes to air forces, Europe is superior to Russia in terms of both quantity and quality. Yet Europe also has clear and well-known weaknesses related to ammunition stocks and air defense. Europe has clear advantages in terms of naval forces. However, anti-submarine warfare and the hybrid domain remain problematic due to security risks associated with undersea cables.

In the field of space, Russia is particularly affected by Western sanctions. Russian space systems are correspondingly outdated. In contrast, Europe has Galileo, a reliable positioning system. Galileo

is currently being further expanded to make it independent from the Global Positioning System (GPS) of the United States.

These weaknesses mean neither that a complete collapse of the Russian economy is to be expected, nor that Moscow will be unable to continue its war on Ukraine. Russia is compensating its deteriorating economic situation with propaganda. The high number of casualties – currently estimated at around 1.3 million dead and wounded – appears to have no influence on the government's actions.

Even if Russia could partly replace its losses from the war in the coming years, it is rather unlikely that it will be able to build up significant military potential for an attack on NATO territory in that time. An economy whose nominal gross domestic product (GDP) is roughly equivalent to that of Italy and continues to decline hardly seems in a position to do so.

CAPITALIZING ON EUROPE'S STRENGTHS

Despite complaints about economic stagnation and reform gridlock, the European Union remains the world's second largest economic power. At around \$25 trillion, the GDP of the European NATO countries plus Canada is more than ten times larger than that of Russia. The economic conditions for a significant military build-up are therefore fundamentally in place.

Politically, most Europeans have set the course in the right direction. As a result, European defense spending (including Canada) has almost doubled between 2023 and 2025 to around \$580 billion. This is reflected in a visible strengthening of military capabilities. Although considerable gaps remain due to years of neglect, these can be gradually closed by 2030. To accomplish this, the increase in defense spending needs to continue until the end of the decade, and militarily

important countries such as France must also contribute accordingly. In addition, improvements in the defense industrial base and the expansion of the armed forces are necessary.

UNDESIRABLE BUT POSSIBLE

The dissolution of NATO would be a security policy turning point with grave consequences for both Europe and the United States. At the same time, Europe must prepare itself for a possible far-reaching strategic decoupling from its transatlantic ally. In such a scenario, the European NATO states would, in principle, be able to build up a credible defense against a weakened Russia on their own thanks to their economic strength, financial resources, and defense industrial base.

For Germany, this leads to three conclusions:

1. **The significant increase in defense spending must be sustained.** Since further debt is out of the question, this will require budgetary reallocations at the expense of other expenditures. For example, these investments must flow into ammunition procurement where Germany is still far from the 30-day stockpile required by NATO (Germany's current artillery ammunition stocks are only sufficient for one to two days of intense combat).
2. **The personnel strength of the Bundeswehr must be significantly increased.** This will not be possible without a return to conscription. The current model of freedom of choice is due to sensitivities within the governing coalition but is not sustainable to meet demand.
3. **Ukraine must not only continue to be supported but also be more tightly integrated into the European security order.** This is needed for much

more than sending a political signal. Doing so will help spur innovation in Europe's defense industry, which will simultaneously benefit Germany's defense industry.

European self-assertion is possible. However, it is not achieved through unrealistic demands for a joint European aircraft carrier or occasional calls for joint nuclear forces. Rather, it must be achieved through the political will to make difficult decisions and change budget priorities.

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Rauchstraße 17/18
10787 Berlin
Tel. +49 30 254231-0
info@dgap.org
www.dgap.org
X @dgapev

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