

To Ensure Its Security, Europe Needs a Stronger Hand in NATO

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Under Donald Trump, American national interest and NATO's multilateral security commitment are not aligned. While Europe cannot – and should not – reject the United States, it must take ownership of its security. European NATO members should continue to work for American involvement in Europe, but this must become an added benefit to European defense, not its foundation.

THE SHIFT

BLATANT US HOSTILITY TOWARD EUROPE

US President Donald Trump's challenge to the international order is about the purpose of power. While Germany and Europe see their power mostly in the service of building common institutions and promoting liberal values, Trump uses American power in the service of a narrowly defined national interest, with the aim of gaining advantage in a great power game at the expense of less capable and assertive powers. This view is not without a long tradition in American politics; what is new, however, is the blatant hostility toward Europe.

To the Trump administration, American security interests are no longer intertwined with those of Europe. Trump's America does not see itself as the guarantor of a liberal international system but as a dealmaking champion in a dog-eat-dog world. To maintain a dominant position in such a world, Trumpists believe, the United States must stop wasting blood and treasure on defending a free Europe whose liberal values they despise.

Thus, the shift in security policy is not a matter of degree or style, but a substantial disruption. Even though US officials still speak of their [ironclad](#) commitment to Article 5 of the NATO treaty, confidence in NATO's core idea of collective defense is dwindling. US leadership within NATO has long had an integrating effect on the Alliance. Now, the United States is seeking to fragment Europe. To ward off this pressure, Europe must adapt. As Belgian Prime Minister Bart de Wever said at Davos in reaction to Trump's bullying over US claims on Greenland: "Being a happy vassal is one thing. Being a miserable slave is something else."

It is conventional wisdom that Europe needs to do *more* to ensure its security. Trump's new order means that Europe needs to do *anything and everything* to ensure its security. This cannot happen overnight, but it must happen for Europe to assert its sovereignty and freedom.

THE IMPLICATION

US POWER AS A BONUS TO EUROPEAN DEFENSE

The American undermining of NATO weakens European states' military capacities as a whole. The US military provides a large share of NATO's underlying defense architecture. European militaries rely on American transport, command and control, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems. The Commander of NATO's Allied Command Operations (SACEUR) is invariably an American.

The credibility of Europe's NATO-backed deterrent is therefore in question. While Russia and other adversaries cannot entirely discount American support for European security, European states cannot rely on it as the foundation of their security. Moreover, the [strategic ambiguity of the French nuclear deterrent](#) remains a far-from-perfect substitute for American-enabled NATO nuclear sharing. Finally, given the growing unreliability of American commitments to NATO, the deep intertwining of European and US military forces ultimately weakens NATO's overall defense posture.

Nevertheless, Europe cannot afford a decisive rupture with the United States – as demonstrated, for instance, in trade relations and in support for Ukraine's defense. Managing American volatility within established frameworks yields better results than allowing American hostility to continue unchecked. Prolonged uncertainty remains preferable to certain separation. Still, European NATO members cannot afford to cling to the status quo without credible alternatives. They cannot mortgage future security autonomy to secure present American cooperation. American security guarantees must therefore be treated as a bonus to European defense, not as its foundation.

THE RESPONSE

STRATEGIC EUROPEANIZATION OF NATO

Europe must act in a coordinated and sustained manner to gradually Europeanize NATO's capabilities, responsibilities, and decision-making, rather than merely strengthening a European pillar within the Alliance. Defense readiness should therefore be measured less by spending targets and more by progress in closing key capability gaps essential to credible deterrence. Alongside continued investment in conventional forces, this must include NATO command structures, ISR, and other strategic enablers. At the same time, expectations must remain realistic: A full replacement of US capabilities [is not feasible in the short term](#), requiring prioritization and temporary trade-offs.

At present, key leadership positions within NATO's command structure remain under US leadership, with their organizational and administrative backbone heavily staffed by US personnel and dependent on US capabilities.

While a comprehensive replacement by European staff would formally align with US calls for greater European

responsibility, it would entail significant political risks. A more pragmatic approach is the gradual Europeanization of selected commands, encompassing both leadership and staff functions. Suitable starting points include regional as well as support and enabling commands: Joint Force Command (JFC) Brunssum, central to NATO's eastern flank defense

operational coordination. This imbalance allowed the United States to curtail much of Ukrainian armed forces' targeting intelligence in March 2025, effectively ["suffocating"](#) Ukraine into making extreme concessions in pursuit of a ceasefire. European advances in [intelligence sharing](#) only partially mitigate this American leverage.

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and currently under all-European command, should be permanently led by a European. The same applies to the Joint Support and Enabling Command in Ulm, which is critical for logistics, mobility, and reinforcement. In a further step, the JFC Naples – responsible for the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and parts of the Middle East and North Africa – should also be placed under permanent European command. NATO's three domain commands – maritime (Northwood), land (Izmir), and air (Ramstein) – could in turn become or remain US-led. This would shift clear leadership responsibility in all phases of NATO's operational continuum – peace, crisis, and war – to Europeans.

With its extensive fleet of satellite, air-borne, ground- and sea-based radar and reconnaissance platforms, as well as its capacity for real-time data exploitation, the United States provides indispensable capabilities for coordinating battlefield operations and long-range precision strikes, forming a core element of NATO's deterrence. European ISR capabilities remain too limited in scale to generate comparable real-time situational awareness or

This makes a substantial expansion of European space-launch and satellite-based ISR capabilities essential, particularly to reduce dependence on US commercial providers. National initiatives, such as Germany's space strategy and planned investments of around EUR 35 billion, can serve as catalysts by expanding production capacity, but effective coordination remains necessary to avoid duplication and ensure interoperability.

The European Sky Shield Initiative should be expanded into a fully NATO-compatible, multinational air and missile defense program that overcomes national divisions in procurement strategies for different systems, ensures full interoperability, and enables seamless integration into NATO's air and missile defense architecture, while reducing reliance on exclusively American systems. In addition, Europe must reduce key dependencies on the United States, particularly in strategic air transport, air refueling, and long-range precision strike capabilities. Joint procurement initiatives through a coalition of the willing are especially suitable, enhancing interoperability and exploiting economies

of scale, despite the known risks of multinational defense projects. Capabilities such as attack and ISR drones also require new procurement and financing models that allow for funding continuous industrial innovation alongside rapid scaling of production. Finally, France, together with the United Kingdom, should launch a structured European dialogue on nuclear deterrence, in which Germany should play an active role.

The transatlantic security partnership embodied by NATO is not yet dead. NATO members should continue to seek a United States that remains committed – however uneasily – to multilateral security. Such support, however, must become an enhancement of European defense capabilities, not its foundation. European sovereignty – including strategic enabler systems, strategic thinking, and a resilient industry – is a necessary adaptation to a changing world order, strengthening deterrence and collective defense as a shared policy.

During the Cold War, European anxieties were captured in a pithy dilemma: Would the United States be willing to [risk New York to save Paris](#)? Europe can no longer afford to let this question determine its future. It, too, must be able to decide on its security.

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