The Future of European Security: Alternative Strategies

Andy Collingwood

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Image: First day of NATO defense ministers meeting is held at NATO headquarters in Brussels, Belgium (Shutterstock)

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Through research, analysis, publication, debate, and scholarly exchanges, the Danube Institute engages with center-right intellectuals, political leaders, and public-spirited citizens, while also fostering dialogue with counterparts on the democratic center-left. Its activities include establishing and supporting research groups, facilitating international conferences and fellowships, and encouraging youth participation in scholarly and political discourse. By drawing upon the expertise of leading minds across national boundaries, the Institute aims to contribute to the development of democratic societies grounded in national identity and civic engagement.

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About the Author

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The Future of European Security: Alternative Strategies

Abstract

The rise of China and the consequent end of the unipolar world order is creating powerful incentives for the United States with draw down from Europe – and perhaps leave altogether. This would represent a massive change for Europe, and one that is not broadly understood.

Europe would face three risks in the event the United States withdrew from the continent. First, the return of intra-European security competition. Second, fragmentation as external powers used divide-and-rule tactics and turn Europe into a playing field. Third, a failure to emerge as an independent pole in the global system.

This paper seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- Explain the role of the United States in building the security architecture of Europe 1945-present.
- Demonstrate that the withdrawal from Europe by the United States is driven by strategic imperatives that transcend any one presidential Administration.
- Explore in detail the three risks mentioned above.

The paper concludes by outlining a realistic and politically achievable policy solution that could mitigate the three risks. Crucially, it is a solution that would respect the sovereignty of individual nation states in Europe.

Introduction

It looks increasingly as though the United States will leave Europe. Although widely portrayed as a policy novelty of US President Donald Trump, the redistribution of American resources from Europe to the Indo-Pacific theatre is a longstanding bipartisan imperative driven by the rise of China as a peer competitor, the advent of a multipolar world order and the effect that these developments have on the basis of American power.

The consequences of a US withdrawal are profoundly misunderstood and widely underestimated. While much commentary focuses narrowly on the loss of US military support against Russia, the strategic position Europe now confronts is far graver and more systemic in nature. After 1945, the United States first stabilised Europe's war-torn economies, then became its hegemonic security guarantor, and finally acted as its nation-builder, shaping polities and institutions to fit an American-led liberal international order. Europe's entire postwar security architecture, political economy, and liberal order were thus constructed by Washington and remain predicated upon American presence.

This European order appears to be near its end. With the departure of the United States, three interlocking dangers would emerge. First, the return of intra-European security competition. Second, fragmentation into a playing field on which great powers and regional flanking powers pursue their own interests through coercion, alliances, and divide-and-rule tactics. Third, failure to emerge as an independent pole in the international system, as regulatory influence is progressively weakened and ultimately lost. The *sine qua non* of the European Union itself – strength through unity and its seamless internal market – would eventually be at risk.

European leadership has failed to grasp the scale of this challenge. This paper has four objectives. It seeks to:

- explain the European strategic order built by the United States after the Second World War;
- demonstrate why the potential for American withdrawal is driven by powerful strategic imperatives that transcend any single presidential administration in Washington;
- analyse the aforementioned three core risks that Europe will face if that withdrawal occurs; and
- propose a realistic, politically achievable policy solution that can address those risks while respecting the fundamental sovereignty of European nation states.

The stakes could hardly be higher. Europe is entering a new and uncertain era. How policymakers respond will, more than any economic or social policy programme, determine whether Europe is able to prosper in the coming decades.

President of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump presenting at the 2018 NATO Summit (Shutterstockj

The Europe That Washington Built

Introduction

After World War II, the United States sought to create an order that would militarily, economically and diplomatically bind together its allies. To this end, it founded NATO (1949) and signed bilateral defence treaties with non-European nations like Japan and the Philippines. It also championed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT, 1947), which later evolved into the World Trade Organization (WTO, 1994), and the Bretton Woods economic system (1944) that may be said to have included the World Bank (1944), the International Monetary Fund (1944) and the use of the US dollar as the global reserve currency.

The postwar involvement of the United States in Europe's security architecture has been pivotal to the continent's strategic posture. Washington's role evolved in three stages. First, between 1945 and 1950, the United States shifted from reluctant intervention to active engagement with the continent in response to the catastrophic economic effects of the World War II and the fear of communist influence. Second, between 1955 and 1990, the United States acted as hegemonic stabiliser, guarantor of deterrence, and military alliance builder in response to the Cold War's strategic dynamics. Finally, between 1991 and 2010 the United States become an expansionist unipolar power and nation-builder within Europe.

In form, this involvement manifested through economic aid programs, NATO, forward-deployed troops, nuclear deterrence, diplomatic leadership, and a network of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to promote democracy, liberal economics and multilateralism. In practice, this meant underwriting Europe's economic revival to foster political stability, deterring Soviet/Russian aggression through collective defence, intervening in regional crises, encouraging integration to mitigate intra-European rivalries, and involvement in the domestic politics of nation states.

1945 - 1950: A Call to Active Engagement

After the cessation of hostilities in World War II, the United States realised that its interests were not served by European instability[1]: an impoverished Europe would have a negative effect on America's own economic health and dent its prospects of holding back the westward spread of communism.

Washington therefore shifted from its pre-war preference for isolationism toward a policy of active engagement with Europe. From 1948 until 1952, the United States provided massive economic assistance to Europe via the Marshall Plan. This programme channelled more than $13 billion[2] in aid (equivalent to about 5% of US national income at the time, which would be $1.5 trillion today) to rebuild Western Europe's war-torn economies and prevent communist takeovers.3

In a sense, the United States was using its position as the sole postwar economic superpower to underwrite the stability of Europe. Paul Kennedy, the J. Richardson Dilworth Professor of History at Yale University, has noted that the United States was the only great power to have become richer during the course of World War II: "Its standard of living was higher than any other country's, but so was its per capita productivity,"[4] Professor Kennedy wrote. At the conclusion of the war, he continued, "Washington possessed gold reserves of $20 billion, almost two-thirds of the world's total of $33 billion."

In underwriting European stability in this manner, however, the United States also benefited. Firstly, through the creation of large, wealthy markets for American goods. Secondly, by fostering an economic stability that could help forestall the spread of communism. Thirdly, by tying Europe into the American financial and economic system.

The Truman Doctrine (1947) marked the United States's first explicit postwar security commitment to Europe. President Harry S. Truman articulated this policy in his 12 March 1947 address to Congress ("It must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.")[5] The Truman Doctrine reframed US foreign policy from non-intervention to selective support for favoured regimes. In practical terms, this involved military and economic aid to bolster anti-communist forces and to deter Soviet meddling in the Mediterranean and beyond.[6]

The culmination was the founding of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Signed on 4 April 1949, the 12 signatory states of the North Atlantic Treaty were bound to mutual defence, specifically through Article 5, which defined the case for the alliance and committed each party to consider an armed attack against one member state to be an armed attack against them all. The Treaty further required that each member state, upon an attack on another signatory nation, to take "such action as [the member state] deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."

In practice, NATO entailed the deployment of US troops (peaking at some 475,000 in the 1950s[7]) in Europe and the extension of the so-called American "nuclear umbrella"[8] over the eleven other signatory states. John Ikenberry, the Albert G. Milbank Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University, argued that American officials and planners, during and after the war, "shared a central conviction that the United States, because of its power and interests, needed to underwrite a new postwar international order."[9]

1950 - 1990: Deterrence and Alliance Management

From the early 1950s to 1991, Europe became evermore integrated economically. Furthermore, and after the aforementioned American stabilisation efforts of the immediate postwar years, Western Europe's economy grew markedly. For instance, up until the 1950s, the United States had a large productivity lead over Europe; however, after this period, and until the end of the Cold War, Europe's labour productivity grew more rapidly than in the United States.[10] By the mid-1990s, real PPP GDP per hour worked the leading European countries had surpassed that of the United States. From having less than half the PPP GDP per capita of the United States in 1950, Europe climbed to 71% in 1991.[11]

During this period, therefore, the focus of the United States switched from the economy to security, and the centrepiece of its role as hegemonic stabiliser in Europe was NATO. Broadly speaking, Washington pursued a three-pronged policy. First, it further integrated and developed NATO as a powerful deterrent. In practice, this meant permanent military basing (e.g. in West Germany), joint exercises (e.g. REFORGER[12]), and a 'forward defence' posture along the frontier with Soviet-aligned forces. This integration and powerful deterrence continued up to the dusk of the Cold War: as late in the day as 1983, US President Ronald Reagan stationed Pershing II missiles in West Germany.

Secondly and concurrently, the United States pursued arms control initiatives with the USSR, such as the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT). Thirdly, it responded diplomatically and through sanctions to isolate the Soviet Bloc, such as those which took place after the events like the Hungarian Uprising (1956), the Prague Spring (1968) or the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

1990s and the 21st century: An Opportunity for Empire Building

After the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, the United States sought to expand the order it had bound together during the Cold War. To this end, it shifted toward integrating the former Soviet Bloc states into the Cold War-era Atlantic alliance. In form, this was achieved through the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU, and new nation-building efforts within the former Soviet states.

In practice, this meant US-led interventions to halt ethnic conflicts (e.g. Bosnia 1995, Kosovo 1999), and expanding the NGO complex through publicly funded institutions, like the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and privately funded institutions, such as the Open Society Foundations, in order to foster a "Europe whole and free".[13] Regarding the wars in the Balkans in the 1990s, Ambassador Alexander Vershbow, the US Permanent Representative on the North Atlantic Council, stated that, "The United States wants to do for Southeast Europe in the new century what was done for Western Europe in the last one, drawing upon a number of complementary institutions to help the region's states build a future based on cooperative security."[14]

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US policy thus shifted to an effort to extend the Cold War order throughout Eastern Europe. This nation-building and order extension process demanded that Washington ensure that the post-Soviet Bloc nations had a political class open to the domestic and foreign policies that would facilitate integration with the existing order. The most prominent phenomenon of this process were the so-called colour revolutions. These political movements benefited from direct financial support from the US Government. However, there was also a longstanding effort from the US state and private organisations supported (at least tacitly) by Washington, to construct a socio-political narrative: this was achieved through backing of charities, think tanks, media groups, political parties and civil society groups that looked favourably upon western integration.

In the last decade of the 20th Century and the first two decades of the 21st, a series of political events took place in European nations that are often referred to as colour revolutions. Although the terminology is not set in terms of what counts as a colour revolution and what does not, these changes were an important part of Eastern Europe's westward political shift. Between 1990 and 1997, the Bulgarian protest movement, sometimes referred to, in two separate periods (1990-1991 and 1996-1997), as the 'Rose Revolution', received financial support from the US to counter hostile elements within the Bulgarian state apparatus and promote neoliberal economic reforms. A more famous 'Rose Revolution' took place in Georgia in 2003. It also enjoyed significant financial support from USAID and George Soros's Open Society Institute, and resulted in the government of Eduard Shevardnadze being overthrown by the pro-Western, neo-liberal reforming party of Mikheil Saakashvili.

Earlier, in 2003, the United States aided the Serbian 'Bulldozer Revolution' that successfully overthrew the government of Slobodan Milosevic. Similar support was provided to the temporarily successful Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2003 and the unsuccessful Denim Revolution in Belarus in 2006. A better result for Washington came from the 2009 Grape Revolution in Moldova.

On 22 November 2023, then-Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán gave a speech in Zurich, Switzerland that attempted to describe this nation-building and political activism within a broader historical context. Orbán noted that, during the Cold War, Europe had lost its independence: the Eastern half of Europe was occupied by the USSR, and the Western half came under the influence of the United States.

He said that it is obvious which half was preferrable, given the "dictatorship, inhumanity, cruelty, economic backwardness, intellectual hopelessness and impoverishment"[15] of Soviet rule. Orbán observed that the American systems of hegemonic influence, more civilised and subtle as they were, not only remained but expanded in the wake of the Soviet retreat.

The result of this process was the construction of the now infamous 'rules based international order', in which nations were tied to the same economic and foreign policies, and the Overton Window for social policies was narrowed and pushed ever-farther leftward. The aforementioned John Ikenberry described this as building a "liberal international order" in which institutions like NATO offered Europeans assurances against both domination or abandonment. The emphasis since the end of the Cold War has definitely been on the *liberal*.[16]

Conclusion

In the years after the end of World War II, Washington essentially offered a deal to the countries that had been defeated, destroyed or bankrupted by the six years of hostilities, but did not fall within the Soviet sphere of influence. The United States would provide the trade access to its market (and the financial liquidity) that Europeans needed to reindustrialise and get rich again. Meanwhile, the US military would provide security and deterrence. Finally, the United States itself would keep the peace as a hegemonic stabiliser. In return, US corporations and capital would enjoy full access to Western European markets (including those that had formerly been behind imperial preference walls), while European nations themselves would forego full strategic independence.

Americans have long chafed at the cost of defending Europe even as European nations provide for their citizens far more comprehensive social care than their US counterparts enjoy. As far back as 1951, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, as NATO's first Supreme Allied Commander Europe, said of US engagement with Europe, "If in 10 years, all American troops stationed in Europe for national defence purposes have not been returned to the United States, then this whole project [NATO] will have failed."[17] Nevertheless, each phase of US engagement served American economic and strategic interests.[18] As we shall see, we are now entering a world in which strategic and security interests are likely to have primacy over economic and ideological interests. And US interests thus demand a withdrawal from Europe.

Group of Chinese army soldiers in uniform lining up in Tiananmen, Beijing (Shutterstock)

The Rise Of China And The End Of Unipolarity

The first 25 years of the 21st century have been defined by the rise of the People's Republic of China as a global power. This ascent has reshaped international relations and the strategic posture of almost every nation in the world. China's nominal GDP grew from just under $3 trillion in 2000 to more than $27 trillion by 2024.[19] In Purchasing Power Parity terms, it overtook the United States as far back as 2014,[20] more than a decade ago. This trajectory, building on reforms initiated in the late 20th century, has not only positioned China as the world's largest economy and manufacturing hub, but has also enabled substantial investments in its military capabilities.

Economic Foundations: A Brief History of China's Economic Development

China's economic resurgence traces back to Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening Up" policy, unveiled at the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978. This marked a pivot from Maoist central planning to market-oriented reforms, prioritising pragmatic growth over ideological rigidity ("It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice."[21]) Deng articulated this vision in 1985: "All our reforms have the same aim: to clear away the obstacles to the development of the productive forces."[22] Often associated with the phrase "to get rich is glorious," this ethos – though not a verbatim quote, and perhaps even apocryphal – reflected Deng's push for wealth creation. In practice, these reforms involved dismantling agricultural collectives, establishing special economic zones, like Shenzhen, and attracting foreign investment.

Generally, scholars delineate China's post-1978 economy into several phases. The period from 1978 to 1991 emphasised institutional changes, including de-collectivisation and the rise of township-village enterprises, which stoked rural productivity. Barry Naughton, Professor of Chinese Economy at the University of California, San Diego, argued that China achieved "unprecedented success" during this period. He further contends that there is "little debate about the nature and cause of this achievement: China shifted to a market economy, growth accelerated, and rapid structural and technological upgrading followed China shifted to a market economy, growth accelerated, and rapid structural and technological upgrading followed."[23] This "unprecedented success" can be seen in China's GDP growth, which averaged over 9% per year between 1978 and 1991.

The second phase (1992-2000) intensified marketisation, catalysed by Deng's 1992 Southern Tour, where he advocated more rapid steps: "You should be bolder in carrying out reform and opening up, dare to make experiments and should not act as women with bound feet."[24] This period was marked by a strong emphasis on export-driven growth. China's merchandise exports rose from $84.94 billion[25] in 1992 to $249.20 billion[26] in 2000. This export surge was closely tied to foreign direct investment (FDI). Foreign-invested enterprises acted as the primary driver of export expansion. As the OECD concluded in its analysis of the period, "The distribution of exports by category of firm suggests that foreign invested enterprises (FIEs) have been responsible for almost all the visible improvement in China's export performance.

From 1992 to 1998, total Chinese exports rose from 2.3 per cent to 3.4 per cent of world exports. Over the same period, FIEs in China increased their share from 0.5 per cent to 1.5 per cent of such exports."[27]

Entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 ushered in the third phase of China's economic expansion (2001-2008). This period was marked by hyper-growth through global supply chain integration. Per annum GDP expansion peaked at 14.2% in 2007.[28] In 2008, Carsten A. Holz, Professor at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, attributed this to labour and infrastructure advantages.[29]

In response to the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, the fourth phase (2009-2018) featured stimulus-led recovery and rebalancing. A $586 billion package cushioned the effects of the global downturn (albeit at the cost of increasing debt). Xi Jinping, upon assuming leadership in 2012, began to steer China toward what he would later define as "high-quality development."[30] This involved initiatives such as Made in China 2025 (MiC25), which targeted technological self-reliance through comprehensively upgrading Chinese industry. The goal of MiC25 was to occupy the upper reaches of global production chains in sectors such as materials science, electric vehicles and robotics,[31] with explicit targets to raise domestic content of core components to 70% by 2025.

The programme produced substantial results. The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission concluded in its assessment of MiC25: "Across ten key technologies in [MiC25], China has met or exceeded many of the very ambitious global market share, local sourcing, and technology development targets it set for itself in 2015. While it has fallen short on others, in most cases it still made significant gains in each sector. The bottom line is that after a decade of state support, China is more innovative, has moved up the global value chain, and has solidified its status as a global manufacturing powerhouse."[32]

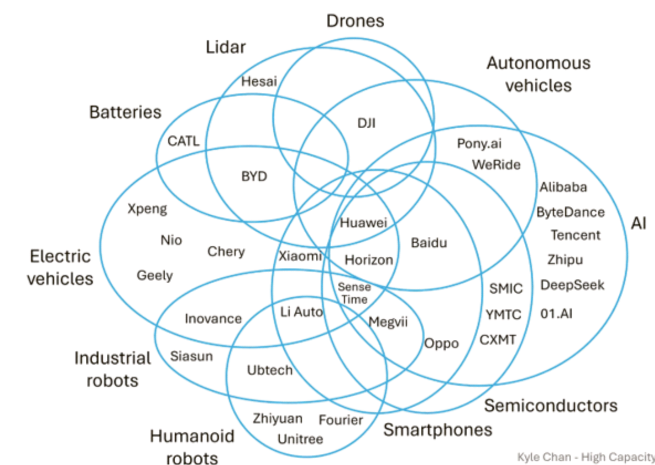
The final phase (2019-2025) navigated trade frictions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a real estate sector crisis, blending domestic resilience with global engagement. Growth moderated to 5-6% annually. Xi Jinping stated: "My country's position in the world economy will continue to rise, our ties with the global economy will become closer, and the market opportunity we offer to other countries will broaden, and (we will) become a massive gravitational field for attracting international goods and key resources."[33]

Effects

The economy that these reforms have built is startling in its size and scope. China has crafted the macroeconomic framework, industrial base and R&D complex – the bones, muscles and brains – of an economy set to dominate the present, and the medium- and long-term future. This matter bears examining, since it appears to be widely misunderstood in the western policymaking milieu.

First, the modern economy in China is characterised by a series of overlapping and mutually supportive R&D-manufacturing corporations. This 'industrial co-evolution' is vital to understanding the modern Chinese economy at the higher end of the value-added curve. The chart, below, from *High Capacity*, shows the main ecosystems within the modern Chinese economy: drones, autonomous vehicles, semiconductors, smartphones, humanoid robots, industrial robots, electric vehicles, batteries and light-detection-and-ranging (LIDAR). The chart identifies the leading companies in each area.

Each of these areas have benefits for others, which in turn aid the development of yet others. For example, the development of industrial robots increases the efficiency of EV production, which drives demand for ever-improved batteries, which in turn make China's EVs more attractive to customers, which increases sales, thus driving demand for yet more batteries and industrial robots – but also semiconductors, AI and LIDAR. Similar linkages and virtuous cycles can be found by starting in other sectors.



This 'industrial co-evolution' is indeed having compounding effects on Chinese industry. As early as 2020, the Hamilton Index (chart below), which monitors the ten most important industry sectors for modern economies, had China ahead in seven out of the ten (the USA led in the other three), and leading in the 'composite' index.[34]

Table 1: Hamilton Index industry leaders, 2020

Industry	Global Output (Billions)	Leading Producer	Leader's Share	Relative Leader	Leader's LQ
IT and Information Services	$1,900	USA	36.4%	Israel	2.89
Computers and Electronics	$1,317	China	26.8%	Taiwan	8.79
Chemicals	$1,146	China	29.1%	Saudi Arabia	2.41
Machinery and Equipment	$1,135	China	32.0%	Germany	2.02
Motor Vehicles	$1,093	China	24.3%	Mexico	3.14
Basic Metals	$976	China	45.6%	China	2.64
Fabricated Metals	$846	China	25.6%	Poland	2.12
Pharmaceuticals	$696	USA	28.4%	Switzerland	7.26
Electrical Equipment	$602	China	36.1%	Vietnam	2.36
Other Transportation	$386	USA	34.5%	Singapore	3.52
Composite Hamilton Index	**$10,097**	**China**	**25.3%**	**Taiwan**	**2.10**

While the Hamilton Index assesses the industries required for a modern economy, such as Machinery and Equipment, Chemicals or Basic Metals, the Australia Strategic Policy Institute released a report[35] in August 2024 that focussed specifically on critical technologies. These were Advanced Information and Communication Technology; Advanced Materials and Manufacturing; Artificial Intelligence, Computing and Communications; Biotechnology, Gene Technologies and Vaccines; Defence, Space, Robotics and Transportation; Energy and Environment; Quantum Technologies; and Sensing, Timing and Navigation. Each category is then divided into specific technologies. For instance, Advanced Information and Communications Technology is sub-divided into Advanced Optical Communications; Advanced Undersea Wireless Communication; Advanced Radiofrequency Communication; Distributed Ledgers; High Performance Computing; Mesh and Infrastructure-Independent Networks; and Protective Cyber-Security Technologies. In the 64 critical technologies identified by the Australia Strategic Policy Institute, China leads in 57. In the seven in which it does not lead, it is second.

These results, wrote the Australia Strategic Policy Institute, "reveal the stunning shift in research leadership over the past two decades towards large economies in the Indo-Pacific, led by China's exceptional gains. The US led in 60 of 64 technologies in the five years from 2003 to 2007, but in the most recent five years (2019–2023) is leading in seven. China led in just three of 64 technologies in 2003–2007 but is now the lead country in 57 of 64 technologies in 2019–2023, increasing its lead from our rankings last year (2018–2022), where it was leading in 52 technologies."

Thus, China now dominates the key industries of the 20th Century, is dominating the development of the cutting-edge technologies most likely to form the core of 21st Century economies, and has developed an overlapping series of high-tech industries that co-evolve with each other to accelerate growth and efficiency gains in the manufacturing application of these technologies.

This trend toward industrial and technological leadership is set to continue. China is second (behind Singapore) in the standardised and independent PISA rankings of the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old schoolchildren in maths, science and reading (the United States is 18th).[36] China is second in maths (again behind Singapore) and third in science (behind Singapore and Japan). The gains at university level are even more stark. In August 2022, the prestigioul journal *Science* reported that "Japan's National Institute of Science and Technology Policy (NISTEP) tallied the top 1% papers in terms of citations, a rarified stratum inhabited by many Nobel laureates," and found that "China has slightly edged out the United States in the number of most cited papers, a key measure of research impact."[37]

Last year, *Nature*, another prestigious science journal, released its updated Nature Index, which ranks universities by their science research contributions. The top ten was dominated by Chinese universities.[38] Only three non-Chinese universities made the top ten, Harvard in the United States, the Max Planck Society for the Advancement of Science in Germany, and the French National Centre for Scientific Research.

It appears that China is also identifying exceptional talent at a young age, and shepherding such individuals toward environments and careers that can best use their unique abilities. Steve Hsu, the American polymath, startup founder and regular visitor to China, recently shared information about what we might dub China's 'genius programme'.[39] By ten years of age, children have been tested, filtered and identified as being outstanding potential intelligence candidates.

By 15 years of age, the state seeks to ensure 'geniuses' are surrounded by others of similar calibre and benefit from an accelerated curriculum and additional resources.

Chinese sailors aboard the Guangzhou class destroyer (Shutterstock)

By 20 years of age, the state seeks to ensure 'geniuses' are working in appropriate fields "deserving of their ability (sciences, etc)." By 30 years of age, 'geniuses' should be "given the resources necessary to start companies or teach and research with upcoming geniuses and provided access to top human capital."

The economic challenges China faces must not be underestimated. High levels of debt and, related, an economy reliant on export markets due to insuffient domestic consumption. While often overplayed due to the time frames and the fact China is not a heavily urbanised economy, demographics are a long-term issue.

Nevertheless, China has not only developed a series of manufacturing ecosystems that lead the world of today, but is also pushing into the lead in the technology and research that will drive economic performance tomorrow. Further, it is investing in the human capital – the intellectual horsepower – needed for quantum leaps a decade hence.

Military consequences

It is inevitable that an economy of this size, scope and technological prowess will have at least the potential for a powerful military. In fact, it has been, and is, transmitting into a marked expansion of military capacity in absolute terms, and relative to the United States. Defence spending rose from $50 billion in 2000 to $296 billion in 2025.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) remains the world's largest land army, with approximately 960,000 active personnel.[40] Meanwhile, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and naval aviation together operate roughly 2,300–3,200 combat aircraft, including a growing fleet of advanced fourth- and fifth-generation fighters.[41]

China also has a clear lead in the development and production of drones,[42] a matter of great importance given the course of the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Iran. In unmanned aerial vehicles, the PLA has built one of the world's largest and most diverse drone fleets, fielding hundreds of medium- and high-altitude long-endurance systems alongside tens of thousands of smaller tactical UAVs.

The US Department of War notes that the PLA operates systems such as the TB-001 and BZK-005 for long-range reconnaissance and the Wing Loong series for strike missions, with additional platforms like the WZ-9 Divine Eagle and Scorpion B in semi-operational or developmental status.[43] The force is rapidly advancing swarm tactics and collaborative combat aircraft (loyal wingman) systems.

The Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) documents PLA swarm tests involving up to 200 fixed-wing drones launched from a single platform, describing these as a key step toward "true swarm" operations.[44] Loyal wingman platforms include the GJ-11 Sharp Sword stealth UCAV and the FH-97A, explicitly designed to operate alongside manned J-20 fighters for extended sensor and weapons capacity. The scale of China's dominance in the drone industry can be seen in the extent to which it dominates the supply of drones for both sides in the Russo-Ukrainian war. Even Ukraine, ostensibly allied to the west, whence Kiev derives most of its military support, received a reported 90% of its all-important drones from China.[45]

For a maritime power based on its advantages in technology, like the United States, it is the growth of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and China's development of space power that must be most concerning, however. As Ronald O'Rourke of the Congressional Research Service records in the official 2025 report to Congress: "The PLAN's overall battle force is expected to grow to 395 ships by 2025 and 435 ships by 2030."[46] China's shipbuilding capacity underpins this expansion. The same report notes that China's commercial and military shipyards together give it "about 230 times as much shipbuilding capacity as the United States when measured in terms of gross tons of ships that can be produced per unit of time."

China has also developed substantial space capabilities. As of 2025, China operated more than 500 intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) satellites as part of a total satellite constellation exceeding 1,000 systems.[47] The PLA possesses operational anti-satellite (ASAT) missiles capable of targeting low Earth orbit satellites and is developing co-orbital systems and directed-energy weapons for counterspace operations.[48]

Conclusion

Since Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Up programme in 1978, China's economic rise has been startling: it has lifted China from a poor and backward nation to a technologically advanced powerhouse with the largest GDP in the world. Contrary to popular views, China's economic success is no longer limited to a dominant position in traditional industries like steelmaking. Instead, China has moved up the value chain to the very forefront of the 21st Century economy. It dominates in fields that will be vital for national success in the coming decades, such as electric vehicles, robotics and drones. Furthermore, it leads in research and development in advanced technologies, and is rapidly overturning the western lead in basic academic research in the sciences. This transformation has directly translated into military power, and will continue to do so.

China's economic growth and military modernisation thus presents a direct threat to the United States if that country wishes to preserve the strategic status quo in the Western Pacific. Indeed, the scale of the threat is far more serious and arduous than the United States faced in the World War II, when it battled a combined Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany, or during the Cold War, when it faced the Soviet Union. In neither of those great struggles did Washington face an economy larger than its own, and with at least as much technological prowess as itself.

The American Pivot: The Struggle For Mastery In The Western Pacific

The Sources of United States-led Unipolarity

The rise of China as a peer competitor has ended the era of American unipolarity. Therefore, Washington must confront a new strategic reality. To understand the scale of this challenge, we must briefly explain the basis of American power. This is not simply a function of the gigantic scale, or singular depth and breadth, of the US economy and the martial strength into which this translates.

The United States is the world's only regional hegemon. Regional hegemony is not an abstract prize but a structural advantage that fundamentally alters a great power's security and freedom of action. Once a state achieves hegemony in its own region, it eliminates the threat from any peer or near peer competitor on its immediate borders. John J. Mearsheimer, the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, explains the logic precisely:

> "The ideal situation for any great power is to be the hegemon in its own region and to have no peer competitors in other regions. A state that achieves regional hegemony can then turn its attention to other regions and try to prevent other great powers from achieving hegemony there."[49]

This freedom is decisive. A regional hegemon no longer wastes resources balancing its immediate neighbourhood or defending its borders from peer or near-peer competitors. Instead, it can concentrate on offshore balancing (preventing others from achieving the same state of hegemony in their home regions) and global influence.

Conversely, the loss of regional hegemony forces a great power into perpetual local defence, drains its military and economic strength, and exposes it to coercion or blockade.

A point that Mearsheimer regularly makes about the position of the United States as a regional hegemon can be paraphrased as follows: it has the economically much weaker and allied Canada to the North, the much weaker Mexico to the South, a giant ocean to the east, and an even bigger one to the west.

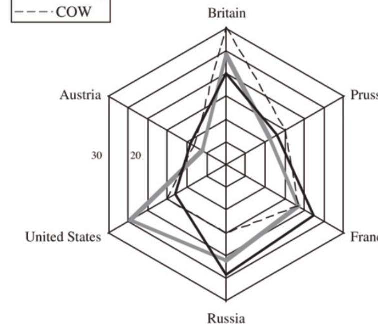
No American is kept awake at night worrying that the Canadians might invade. The freedom this affords has permitted the United States to construct the most powerful navy in world history (navies being traditionally far more expensive than armies) and to focus on dominating the world's maritime trade lanes, offshore balancing and building global influence.

The end of the Cold War left the United States in an extraordinarily powerful position. William C Wohlforth, the Daniel Webster Professor of Government in the Dartmouth College Department of Government, wrote in 1999 that at the end of the Cold War, the United States enjoyed "a much larger margin of superiority over the next most powerful state or, indeed, all other great powers combined than any leading state in the last two centuries.

Moreover, the United States is the first leading state in modern international history with decisive preponderance in all the underlying components of power: economic, military, technological, and geopolitical."[50]

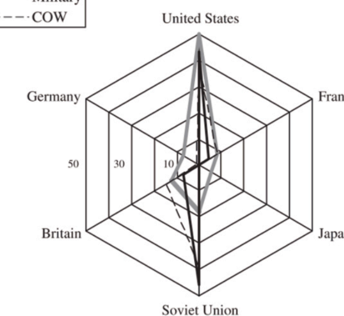
The charts below show Professor Wohlforth's quantification of this lead vis-à-vis the other Great Power world orders from history. The three metrics illustrated are GDP, military power and Correlates of War (COW) – a combination of the other two metrics.

a. Pax Britannica, 1870–72



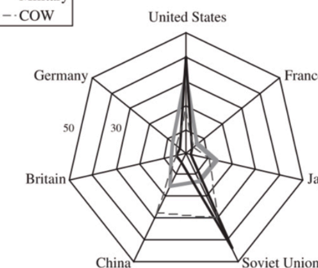
Country	GDP	Military	COW
Britain	24	20	30
Prussia	11	13	15
France	18	22	18
Russia	21	24	15
United States	24	13	15
Austria	6	9	8

b. Early Bipolarity, 1950



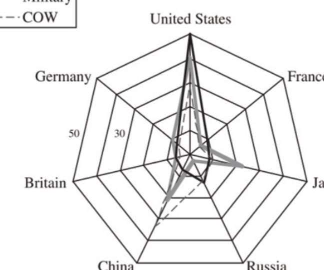
Country	GDP	Military	COW
United States	50	43	38
France	8	4	8
Japan	5	0	0
Soviet Union	18	46	39
Britain	12	7	14
Germany	7	0	1

c. Late Bipolarity, 1985



Country	GDP	Military	COW
United States	33	40	18
France	6	3	4
Japan	13	2	10
Soviet Union	13	44	30
China	15	4	28
Britain	6	4	4
Germany	7	3	5

d. Unipolarity, 1996–97



Country	GDP	Military	COW
United States	40	50	28
France	6	9	5
Japan	22	8	10
Russia	3	13	12
China	21	7	33
Britain	6	6	4
Germany	9	7	6

The post-Cold War position Professor Wohlforth describes bears repeating.

After the removal of the USSR as a Great Power from the system, the United States was not only the most relatively powerful Great Power in history: it enjoyed such a conclusive lead in each of the individual components of power, that no individual state could hope challenge the US lead in any single area relevant to the generation of strategic power.

In 2003, Barry Posen, the Ford International Professor of Political Science at MIT, argued that this position of singular power had given the United States "command of the global commons." In his 2003 paper of the same name,[51] Posen described the 'commons' as the sea and space which gave access to all points in the world. He pointed out that no nation could deny the oceans, and few even their own airspace, to US military force.

He explained exactly what this meant in practice:

> "Command of the commons is the key military enabler of the US global power position. It allows the United States to exploit more fully other sources of power, including its own economic and military might as well as the economic and military might of its allies. Command of the commons also helps the United States to weaken its adversaries, by restricting their access to economic, military, and political assistance. Command of the commons has permitted the United States to wage war on short notice even where it has had little permanent military presence."

This uncontested strategic dominance was the foundation of Washington's post-Cold War focus on creating and extending a liberal world order, and nation-building in Central and Eastern Europe, as described in our above section *1990s and the 21st century: An Opportunity for Empire Building*. Mearsheimer states that, if a global order is Unipolar (as the world order from 1991 was) "the political ideology of the dominant state also matters for determining the kind of international order that forms. In bipolarity and multipolarity, however, the political ideology of the great powers is largely irrelevant."[52] This is a crucial point, because, as we demonstrated in *Part 2: The Rise of China and the end of unipolarity*, China's remarkable rise means the world can no longer be described as unipolar. The advantages that Wohlforth described in 1999 have evaporated.

The world, therefore, is bipolar, at least, with China as a peer competitor of the United States. This means that the behaviour of Washington must, and will inevitably, transition from prioritising ideology and economic efficiency in the construction of a liberal global order, to prioritising realism and security competition.

Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) building in Taichung, Taiwan (Shutterstock)

This shift will occur due to the three fundamental truths of international relations outlined by Mearsheimer as a justification for the pre-eminence of Realism in a multi- or bipolar world. First, the world is anarchic. There is no higher authority to which states can appeal for justice: nobody can enforce international law against a peer competitor. States must therefore look out for themselves. Secondly, great powers hold significant offensive capacity to hurt other states.

Even if they do not have such capacity today, they have, for the same reasons they might be considered great powers to begin with, the ability to generate such power. Thirdly, states cannot be confident that they understand the intentions of other great powers. The leaders of said states may claim they have no offensive intentions, but others cannot be certain of this, and cannot be certain that a change of political regime would not change that stance.

Therefore, Mearsheimer argues, "if there are two or more great powers in the world, they have little choice but to... engage in security competition with each other. Their aim is to gain power at the expense of their adversaries, but if that is not possible, to make sure that the balance of power does not shift against them. Ideological considerations are subordinated to security considerations in these circumstances."[53]

Mearsheimer develops this into 'offensive realism', arguing that great powers seek to maximise relative power when they can. Stephen M Walt, the Robert and Renee Belfer Professor of International Relations at the Harvard Kennedy School, makes a subtly different argument. He contends that states balance not merely against raw power but against the greatest perceived threat. Both views point toward the United States shifting from supporting and perpetuating a liberal empire of economic maximisation toward security competition focussed on China.

The Pivot to Asia

In concrete terms, this transition, from ideology and economic efficiency in the construction of a liberal world order toward realism and security competition in a multipolar world order, would mean switching US military, economic and diplomatic resources toward its main competitor in the world: China.

Elbridge Colby, now Under Secretary of War for Policy, explained the logic of the Pivot to Asia most clearly.

> "It is of critical importance to our prosperity and ultimately our freedom that no state dominate one of the key market areas of the world. ... The most plausible and consequential threat of that coming to pass is China's attainment of hegemony over Asia. Asia comprises roughly half of the global market, and that share is rising. China constitutes roughly half of Asia's GDP. If Beijing exercises control over Asia's huge and growing market area, its influence will ultimately be dominant worldwide as well, giving it the market, scale, and regulatory power to define the world's future."[54]

Contrary to the commonplace assumption, this argument is not a novelty produced by the rise of Donald Trump to the US Presidency. In 2011, the Obama Administration formally launched the "Pivot to Asia" (later rebranded the "Rebalance"). Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton laid out the rationale in *Foreign Policy* magazine: "The future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action."[55] Then-US President Barack Obama reinforced this shift, telling the Australian parliament: "The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay."[56]

The policy has thus from the beginning involved military, diplomatic and economic reorientation toward the Indo-Pacific, recognising that Asia had become the centre of global economic gravity and the most likely arena of great-power competition.

The first concrete result of this longstanding American policy was the NATO Summit held in Newport, Wales, in September 2014. President Obama stressed in the months before the summit that the United States could not continue to carry a disproportionate load for the defence of Europe. He said: "We can't do it alone. And we're going to need to make sure that everybody who is a member of NATO has full membership. They expect full membership when it comes to their defense; then that means that they've also got to make a contribution that is commensurate with full membership."[57]

At the conference, the 28 member states (including the United States) adopted the 'Defence Investment Pledge', which committed all NATO members to moving toward spending 2% of GDP on defence, and 20% of defence spending on new equipment.[58] Thus, the Pivot to Asia had led to NATO's first-ever time-bound, codified target for defence spending since the end of the Cold War. This commitment was made explicitly to free up US resources to face China.

Although the tone in which this policy was presented might have changed through different presidents, it remained US policy. The most recent concrete example of this policy was the 2025 NATO Summit in the Hague, the Netherlands. NATO members (save Spain, which received a limited exemption), pledged to move toward devote 5% of GDP per year to annual defence and security-related spending by 2035.[59] This was the most ambitious spending target in NATO's history and more than doubled the previous 2% guideline agreed at the aforementioned 2014 Wales Summit.

The Strategic Imperative of the First Island Chain

The central strategic expression the such an effort would is the First Island Chain – the arc of islands running from Japan through the Ryukyus, Taiwan, the Philippines and onward to Borneo. This chain is America's forward defensive perimeter in the Western Pacific. Inside the chain (that is to say, on the 'China side') the waters are relatively shallow, which favours the detection of submarines and makes stealthy operations more difficult. Outside the chain, the waters are much deeper, offering space for so-called blue water manoeuvre. Furthermore, all shipping, military or merchant, must pass through a series of maritime chokepoints between the islands that comprise the chain. Controlling these passages allows the United States, Japan, and other allies to monitor, delay, or block Chinese surface ships, submarines, and aircraft in a crisis.

This combination of geographical features keeps the PLAN 'bottled up' in the near seas; it protects the sea lanes that carry energy and trade to American allies, provides forward bases from which the United States can project power and conduct denial operations. *In extremis*, sealing the chain would create a formidable barrier that would deny China easy access to the Western Pacific's vast manoeuvre space and thus allow for a blockade of China's eastern seaboard.

Mearsheimer has repeatedly stated that breaking this chain is Beijing's central strategic goal. In a 2025 interview he explained: "If I were the national security advisor in Beijing, I would tell Xi Jinping what we want to do is push the Americans out beyond the First Island Chain, push them out beyond the Second Island Chain. We want to have our own Monroe Doctrine and we want to dominate the region."[60]

Maintaining a position on the First Island Chain is therefore not optional: it is a requirement for preventing Chinese regional hegemony. Loss of control would allow the PLAN to operate freely in the western Pacific, threaten the sea lanes on which Japan, South Korea and Taiwan depend, and turn the South and East China Seas into a 'Chinese lake'.

Taiwan: The Linchpin of the Chain

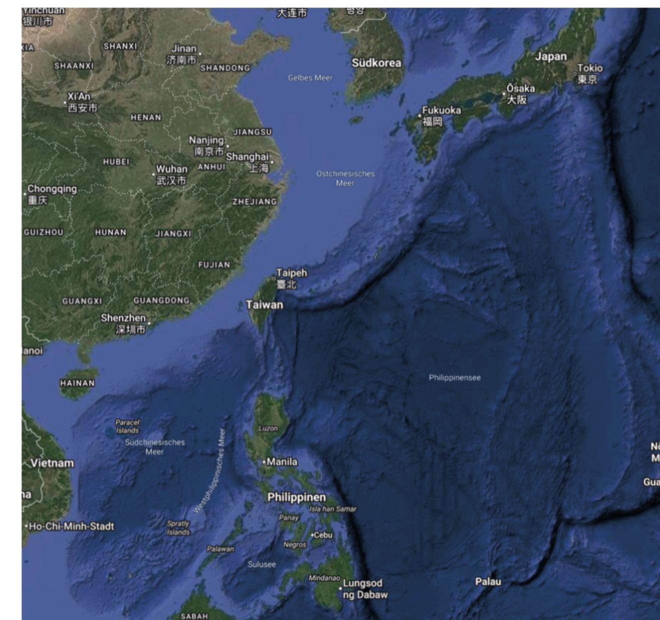
Taiwan is the single most critical link in this chain. Much of the mainstream discourse on Taiwan's importance to the US-centred alliance focusses on its position in the global economic system, and specifically its hold on the production of semiconductor wafers and microchips. Taiwan manufactures roughly 60% of the planet's chips by volume.[61] For advanced logic chips (7nm and below, and especially 5nm, 3nm and the new 2nm nodes) Taiwan accounts for 90-92% of global production capacity.[62] Almost all of this comes from a single company, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (better known as TSMC), which holds a 70% market share,[63] far ahead of its nearest competitor (South Korea's Samsung, at around 7%).

TSMC is effectively the world's monopolist producer of the cutting-edge chips. No other country or company can match its combination of yield rates, scale, and technology at the frontier. These chips power consumer electronics, such as smartphones and laptops (Apple, Nvidia, AMD and Qualcomm all rely heavily on TSMC); AI and data centres (the entire explosion in artificial intelligence depends on TSMC-fabricated chips for training and inference); automotive, industrial, and infrastructure vehicles (especially related to EVs and autonomous driving); 5G/6G telecommunications networks; medical imaging; power grids; the defence industry (advanced weapons systems, satellites); and supercomputing.

Because the supply chain is so specialised and concentrated, there is no quick substitute for Taiwan. Any major disruption in Taiwan (such as a natural disaster, geopolitical crisis, or blockade) would trigger immediate global shortages far worse than the 2020–2022 chip crisis. Economists and governments routinely describe it as a potential "global depression"[64] event because so many high-value industries would grind to a halt within weeks. This is why Taiwan's security is treated as an economic-security issue by the United States, Europe, Japan, and others – not just a regional military concern.

President Donald J. Trump greets Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi (Shutterstock)

Notwithstanding Taiwan's economic importance, it is the island's strategic geography that is of greatest concern to America's position within the Western Pacific. First, as shown in the map below, Taiwan's east coast is an entrance point to the deep Pacific waters. Submarines entering the Pacific from that point would be far more difficult to track than those exiting from inside the First Island Chain. This would give China greater scope to interdict US shipping. As Tanner Greer, the Deputy Director of the Open Source Observatory, has pointed out, this would provide China with the ability to construct a credible second nuclear strike capacity through submarine-launched missiles.[65]



Secondly, shipping lanes to Japan and Korea pass either side of Taiwan, through the Taiwan and Luzon straits. If China controlled Taiwan, all shipping through these straits would be interdicted. In the event of Sino-Japanese conflict, Greer points out that control of Taiwan would "force Japanese shipping out of the South China Sea entirely."

Thirdly, Greer observes that:

> "the loss of Taiwan would also put to question Japan's ability to hold and defend the Ryukyu islands altogether. Yonaguni, at the tail end of the Ryukyu chain, is less than 70 miles away from Taiwan's east coast. That is almost one fourth the distance between the island and the Chinese coast (approx. 250 miles), and one fifth the distance between the island and Okinawa (330 miles).
>
> Okinawa itself is closer to Taiwan's north coast (approx. 370 miles) than it is to the Japanese Archipelago proper (approx. 480). If Taiwan were in hostile hands, Japan would be fatally vulnerable to an island hopping campaign that would rob it of the ability to control its near sea lanes."

A victory for China in an armed battle over Taiwan would also create powerful dynamics for a bandwagon effect across the region. In realist theory, states often align with the stronger side once it demonstrates decisive power and prestige, especially when balancing appears futile or too costly. Within this framework, a successful conquest of Taiwan would create strong incentives for other nations in the region to accommodate Beijing rather than risk opposing it – accelerating the collapse of the US-led order far beyond the immediate loss of the island – as discussed above in the case of Japan.

Taiwan is thus not merely a democratic partner, nor simply an important part of the global economic supply chain: it is the geographic and psychological keystone that holds the First Island Chain together. And the First Island Chain is itself of paramount importance for US efforts to prevent China from becoming a regional hegemon.

In practice, this realist logic means that the United States will likely be unable to continue underwriting European security at the levels maintained since 1945. The Western Pacific has become the decisive theatre of great-power competition. The struggle for mastery there – over sea lanes, alliances, technology standards and control of Taiwan – will determine whether the United States retains its global position or yields primacy to China.

Europe, by comparison, is now a secondary theatre. As Mearsheimer has long maintained, the United States "will have to send its army across the Atlantic when there is a potential hegemon in Europe that the local great powers cannot contain by themselves" – but today the potential hegemon is in Asia, not Europe. Washington must therefore withdraw from its old commitments and focus on the new one. This marks the end of the order Washington built after 1945 and the beginning of a new era in which Europe must learn to provide for its own defence.

Europe Without The US: Putting Out An Inferno Before It Starts

Introduction

A withdrawal of the United States from Europe would have strategic implications for the continent that can hardly be overstated.

As we have seen, Europe's security architecture and strategic position was built on the foundations of US presence – as was indeed, much of its political economy. Washington also acted as a hegemonic stabiliser and security guarantor. While the EU has shown significant institutional resilence to crises such as the Eurozone financial crisis, Brexit, Covid and the Russia-Ukraine war, a sudden withdrawal of the United States from its postwar role in Europe would still pose risks that extend far beyond the threat posed by Russia.

Firstly, there is the risk of a re-emergence of intra-European security competition.

Secondly, the possibility exists that Europe will become a playing field upon which great powers (the United States, China and Russia) and flanking powers (Russia, the UK, Turkey, Ukraine and Serbia) seek to secure their own national interests and engage security competition against each other.

Thirdly, there is the likelihood that Europe would not emerge as a pole in the system itself: this would mean a Europe unable to pursue its own strategic interests, with the result that the so-called Brussels Effect – the ability to regulate beyond its borders – was weakened and then lost. The *raison d'être* of the EU itself – strength in unity and its large, seamless internal market –would ultimately disappear.

Unfortunately, EU leadership is failing to rise to this challenge or, it seems, even to apprehend its scale.

The logical solution – a unified European military system pooling resources, command and control, and procurement – would appeal to the instincts many European elites harbour toward ever-greater EU capture of state competencies; however, it would collide directly with the *sanctum sanctorum* of national sovereignty, namely independent military capacity. A step to form a unified military under direct EU, as opposed to national, command is therefore unlikely to succeed.

This risks leaving the EU on a course for prevarication, then failure and, eventually, exactly the outcome such a solution would seek to avoid. Such political realities cannot be wished away, or overcome by the will of a small number of pro-EU elites. Instead, it must be addressed with a discrete, and achievable, novel policy.

1. Re-emergence of Intra-European Security Competition

As discussed earlier in this paper, the United States has served as Europe's hegemonic stabiliser and pacifier since 1945. It has also, since 1945, acted to create and extend a liberal international order, and has engaged in nation-building to make polities fit for such an order. Yet, the new strategic reality means that the United States is likely to draw down its military and diplomatic presence in Europe.

Logically, it is probable that this withdrawal would lead to the structural conditions of anarchy reasserting themselves. In turn, this suggests that defence policies would be re-nationalised, leading to competitive arms racing and the emergence of intra-European balancing.

The Future of European Security: Alternative Strategies

Josef Joffe, former publisher-editor of *Die Zeit*, and now Marc and Anita Abramowitz Fellow in International Relations at the Hoover Institution, first popularised this argument in 1984, describing the US role as "Europe's American Pacifier." A later US Army War College study summarised Joffe's warning: "He was referring specifically to America's stabilizing role in preventing the renationalization of defense and the reemergence of national rivalries."[66] This analysis cautioned that the absence of US leadership could recreate "the same kind of instability, the same kinds of rivalry, that led to the two world wars."

More recent scholarship reaches the same conclusion. Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks demonstrate that even under the strongest possible incentive – full US withdrawal – Europe's deep "strategic cacophony" (divergent threat perceptions and national priorities) would prevent the coalescence of a unified security policy.

They conclude: "Any European effort to achieve strategic autonomy would be fundamentally hampered by two mutually reinforcing constraints: 'strategic cacophony' [...] and capability shortfalls"[67] Europe, Meijer and Brooks argue, is characterised by "profound, continent-wide divergences across all domains of national defence policies – most notably, threat perceptions." Through a detailed coding of official documents and interviews with 18 European defence experts, the authors map threat assessments across 29 European countries. They identify five distinct categories, ranging from states that view Russia as "unimportant/not a threat" (e.g., certain Southern European countries) to those that see Russia as the dominant threat (e.g., Baltic and Eastern European states).

These divergences are rooted in geography, history and post-Cold War priorities. As one French official told the authors: "If the United States withdrew, the risk represented by Russia would ostensibly be greater but... it would be greater only if France considered that the threat posed by Russia to the Baltic states, Poland, etc. constitutes a threat to our vital interests, which is far from sure."

This strategic cacophony creates insurmountable problems in acting collectively: states disagree on priorities, burden-sharing and even the definition of vital interests, making unified European action improbable, the authors contend. The logical outcome of this state is divergent strategic postures – and thence security and defence policies.

The divergence among European states on the matter of Russia would be replicated across a range of other issues, such as economic intercourse with China and the UK, relations with the Middle East and North Africa Region (MENA), engagement with various global security competition, and in matters related to the EU's non-Russian near abroad.

A self-reinforcing logic would impose itself, driving security competition between European nations. Recall Mearsheimer's three truths of international relations: there is no authority above the nation state to which nation states can appeal for arbitration and justice; states cannot know what the intentions of other nations are; and nation states hold significant offensive capacity. The result of divergent interests and divergent security and defence policies in Europe would therefore lead inevitably to security competition.

The historical precedent is sobering. The interwar period (1919–1939), during which the United States largely withdrew from European security commitments, witnessed precisely the kind of renationalisation, competitive alliances, and arms racing that scholars fear could recur in the event Washington withdraws today. The historical record therefore supports academic theory: the United States has not merely deterred external threats, but also dissolved the internal European security dilemma that produced two world wars. A full US withdrawal would remove that structural restraint, raising the real prospect of renewed security competition among the major European powers.

2. Europe as a Playing Field for External Powers

A US withdrawal would also create a structural vacuum that external powers could exploit, turning Europe into a fragmented arena of competing influences rather than a unified strategic actor. The afore-mentioned strategic cacophony – the profound divergence in national threat perceptions and defence priorities across Europe – would be the key enabler of this vulnerability.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Barry Buzan, emeritus Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics, and Ole Wæver, professor of international relations at the Department of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen, states that security is primarily regional in character, but regional dynamics are frequently penetrated or shaped by great powers.

Regional powers (or weaker states within a region) often proactively seek to draw in external great powers to support their local rivalries. Meanwhile great powers exploit these rivalries to advance their own interests or prevent the emergence of a local hegemon. Buzan and Wæver explain the mechanism of invitation and penetration:

> "An indigenous regional rivalry... provides opportunities or demands for the great powers to penetrate the region. Balance-of-power logic works naturally to encourage the local rivals to call in outside help, and by this mechanism the local patterns of rivalry become linked to the global ones."[68]

Historical examples of weaker powers both seeking to involve and trying to exclude outside influence abound. The Eastern Question in 19th-century European great power politics involved the declining Ottoman Empire and rising Balkan states. This conflict repeatedly drew in other great powers – Russia, Britain, Austria-Hungary, and France. They exploited regional divisions to prevent any single regional power from dominating the Balkans or the Straits of Constantinople. Both the Crimean War (1853–1856), and World War I (1914-1918) offer examples of the dangers created by such environments.

Similar examples can be found during the Cold War. While Europe remained peaceful under the twin hegemonic pacifiers of the Soviet Union and United States, this was not true for the global south. For instance, in the Middle East, Egypt under Nasser drew in the Soviet Union, while Saudi Arabia and Israel relied on the United States, to counter local rivals. The superpowers, meanwhile, used these rivalries to contain, and compete with, each other for influence and resources.

Ominously, there are current examples in which Europe's strategic cacophony might induce individual nations to draw in external powers to balance against internal and external threats. For instance, Italy and Hungary have different views on China's Belt and Road Initiative relative to those of the UK; Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia have different views on the threat posed (and economic benefits offered) by Russia to those of Germany, Spain and Italy. France and Germany likely have differing views on the benefits of UK access to the Single Market. Serbia has regional balancing and territorial disputes with its neighbours that would encourage it to draw in outside powers.

3. Inability to Become a Credible Strategic Player

Europe's inability to become a credible strategic player in the absence of the United States is not merely a question of military hardware: it is a fundamental limitation on the continent's capacity to pursue and project its interests globally, while protecting its internal market from the influence of outside powers with interests that may be different from Europe's own.

Europe has already demonstrated remarkable effectiveness in applying regulatory power beyond its borders – often described as the "Brussels Effect". Anu Bradford, the Henry L. Moses Distinguished Professor of Law and International Organization at the Columbia Law School, has examined how the EU has successfully exported its regulatory standards worldwide in areas such as data protection (GDPR), competition policy, environmental rules, and digital governance. She writes:

> "The European Union has quietly become a regulatory superpower, shaping global markets through its unilateral regulatory power... The Brussels Effect occurs when the EU regulates a market in a way that influences firms operating in that market to adopt EU standards even when they are not required to do so."[69]

This regulatory influence is real and impressive. Europe uses its seamless Single Market and Customs Union to control access to 450 million affluent consumers. In doing this, it often forces the adaptation of EU rules worldwide, as multinational corporations and other businesses would rather adhere to Brussels-dictated regulations than incur the costs of maintaining parallel compliance regimes.

Yet a growing body of academic and policy literature contends that, in an era of intensifying great-power security competition – characterised by weaponised interdependence, territorial aggression, and zero-sum geopolitical rivalry – economic and regulatory bargaining power alone is likely to prove insufficient to secure strategic interests. Without a credible military component to deter coercion, enforce rules, or provide autonomy, the Brussels Effect risks fading, being circumvented, or even weaponised against the EU itself.

Mario G.H. Damen of the European Parliamentary Research Service has documented how geo-economics and security have supplanted value-based approaches.

The Future of European Security: Alternative Strategies

He explicitly links defence dependence on the US to regulatory erosion: "The EU's dependence on US support in the realm of defence and security reduces its capacity to act independently as an economic player and rule-maker, as illustrated by the unfavourable EU-US trade deal and US challenges to EU rule-making."[70] Damen warns of "vassalisation," concluding that "Continued dependence of EU countries on the US for defence makes them vulnerable to US pressures and demands in the economic realm, risking a situation in which the EU could lose strategic autonomy in both areas vis-à-vis the US."

Sven Biscop, Ghent University, professor at Ghent University and director of the Europe in the World programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels, argues that the EU cannot claim great-power status or safeguard vital interests through economics alone. He contends that "Military power projection is, in fact, the most urgent dimension" of strategic autonomy, because "without American support, Europeans struggle to project significant military power," even on the EU's doorstep.

In the final analysis, the Brussels Effect is best considered as a *paradox*: once the US withdraws from Europe, the EU's extra-jurisdiction regulatory power (and with it the aspiration of the EU as an independent strategic actor) is vulnerable to the very same forces that gave rise to it in the first place: the economic interdependence created by globalisation.

Henry Farrell, the SNF Agora Professor of International Affairs at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and Abraham Newman, professor in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and Government Department at Georgetown University, argue that globalisation has created a system of "weaponized interdependence".[71]

This theory states that the complex and finely tuned network upon which our global economic system depends has allowed states that sit atop its key nodes to benefit from a 'panopticon effects' and 'chokepoint effects'.

Panopticon Effects give states that control key nodes the ability to observe flows across the entire network, gaining asymmetric information advantages. Modern digital records, searchable databases and big data analyses, such as those provided by, for example, Palantir, dramatically amplify the effect. The example that Farrell and Newman use of a panopticon effect is the SWIFT system, which allows the United States to monitor financial flows, and thus track down and disrupt the activities of terrorist organisations, and to sanction countries as a weapon of economic coercion.

Chokepoint Effects give states the opportunity to deny or restrict access to the parts of the network that allow the entire system to function, imposing severe costs on targets because alternatives are costly or non-existent due to lock-in and network effects. Blocking a hub disrupts not just bilateral ties but the entire web of relationships.

An example of this was recently observed in Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Another example might be the use of US-based internet and computer operating systems.

The 'Weaponised Interdependence' theory of professors Farrell and Newman shows, *en passant*, how the creation of global economic interdependence also creates a vulnerability that will be exposed in the event that the United States leaves: without US military heft, the EU would struggle to protect itself from the panopticon or chokepoint effects being used by states against EU interests.

Ursula von der Leyen president of the European Commission during a Press Conference at the second day of the European Council, 2019 (Shutterstock)

The Solution

For Europe, the central implication is urgent and existential: failure to develop credible military capabilities risks the gradual erosion of the very regulatory and economic influence that has defined the EU's global role. In a multipolar world of weaponized interdependence and great-power coercion, the Brussels Effect may persist in benign commercial domains but would likely prove inadequate for core strategic interests such as supply-chain resilience, technological sovereignty and peripheral stability.

Europe must therefore accelerate defence integration (e.g., through PESCO, EDF, and a genuine rapid-deployment force) and recalibrate "open strategic autonomy" to include hard-power autonomy rather than perpetual reliance on the United States. Without this pivot, the EU risks becoming a prosperous but strategically subordinate actor–able to set rules that others increasingly ignore or exploit.

The coming decade will test whether Europe can transform its civilian power into genuine great-power agency or whether it will accept a diminished role in the 21st Century order.

The Last Temptation of the Eurocrats: an EU Army

An EU army – understood as a standing, integrated European force with unified command, shared procurement, and collective defence obligations, above sovereign national control – would directly address the afore-mentioned three core problems Europe would face if the United States drew down its presence on the continent. First, it would, by its very nature, preclude the emergence of intra-European security competition.

The creation of a single, integrated military force under a common command structure, would remove the incentive for individual states to renationalise defence policy or engage in competitive balancing against each other.

The presence of a supranational force would make also traditional power politics among France, Germany, Poland or others structurally impossible or unnecessary: a unified EU military would raise the bar for arms racing and regional balancing so high that it would render them effectively impossible – much as the presence of the United States has done since 1945.

Secondly, a unified European military would protect Europe from becoming a playing field for outside powers by providing a credible collective deterrence, making it far more difficult for outside powers to exploit strategic cacophony through divide-and-rule tactics, grey-zone operations, or coercion against individual member states. With pooled resources and unified command, Europe could present a single, credible front rather than a collection of fragmented national forces. This would significantly reduce Europe's "window of vulnerability".

Further, a unified European Army would enable Europe to become a credible geostrategic player by offering military heft to back the aforementioned Brussels Effect. A unified military would give Europe the hard-power backing needed to enforce its interests against great powers that possess military tools as well as economic ones, allowing Europe to project power independently and defend its strategic autonomy.

There can be little doubt that pro-EU elites would look kindly upon the creation of a unified European army in response to the strategic crisis the continent would face in the event the United States left. Europe's elites have a well-documented tendency to view crises as opportunities to deepen integration and transfer more authority to the EU's supranational institutions – a phenomenon often called 'integration through crisis.' An EU army would be a leap toward political union and federalisation, which aligns with the long-term ideological and institutional goals of EU leadership.

From the beginning, the EU's founding fathers understood that their goal of a unified Europe would be achieved through leaps taken in response to crises. As Jean Monnet famously said: "Europe will be forged in crises, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises."[72] This tendency remains alive. In the last decade and a half, the EU has responded to crises by accruing more power and moving, even if only marginally, toward further integration. The response to the euro area sovereign debt crisis of 2010-12 saw major transfers of fiscal power and economic governance to the EU in the form of the European Stability Mechanism[73] and Fiscal Compact.[74]

The response to the Migration (or Refugee) Crisis of 2015-16 saw the strengthening of Frontex[75] into the European Border and Coast Guard Agency with expanded EU powers over borders and asylum policy. The Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020-21 saw the EU take expanded competencies in national healthcare and fiscal policies, as well as the establishment of the NextGenerationEU fiscal fund.[76]

It seems reasonable to suggest, therefore, that the EU would respond to the afore-mentioned strategic crisis created by a US withdrawal from Europe by pushing for greater integration and to accrue more powers. Indeed, as we described above, the logic for a centralised EU military is powerful and persuasive. Despite this, it is highly unlikely that the EU would be able to succeed. If the logic behind such an effort is irresistible, it would run into the immovable object of national sovereignty. If EU elites, at both the supranational and national levels, would be enthusiastically in favour, achieving their aims would smash into the *sanctum sanctorum* of the very concept of nationhood.

Armed forces are not merely a tool of policy: they are the ultimate embodiment of national sovereignty. Nations thus guard their ability to generate armed force with extraordinary care. The modern sovereign state emerged from the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which established the principle that each polity holds exclusive authority over legitimate force within its territory and the right to defend itself externally without external interference.

Max Weber crystallised this concept in his 1919 lecture *Politics as a Vocation*, defining the state sociologically as "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."

This monopoly is existential: without it, the very concept of the state dissolves into anarchy. Weber's formulation has remained foundational in political science and international relations precisely because it captures the state's core claim to legitimate violence. This remains no less true today. As aforementioned, despite the existence of the UN and the artifice of international law, there is still no higher power to which states may appeal for justice or redress. Therefore, as Professor Kenneth Waltz has written, in such a state of anarchy, "self-help is necessarily the principle of action."[77]

Historical precedents support the idea that national elites understand this. The most pertinent example is the failed European Defence Community (EDC) proposal of 1952. Put forward by French Prime Minister René Pleven as a supranational European army to bind West Germany into Western defence while preventing German rearmament, the EDC treaty was rejected by the French National Assembly on 30 August 1954 (319 votes to postpone ratification indefinitely against 264). The decisive objections were fears of lost national sovereignty and the indivisibility of the French Republic.

These objections crossed political lines: Gaullists, Communists, and nationalists formed a cross-party alliance against the proposal. As historian Gerald Alexander Bonifacio notes in his 2022 analysis, French lawmakers saw the EDC as "giving too much power to Germany and taking too much power away from France."[78] He later added that legislators viewed "the sovereign control over the armed forces of France at risk." It seems extremely likely that similar arguments would be made against a unified military today.

The issue of losing control over national armed force also played a central role in the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign, where the prospect of an "EU army" became a potent talking point of the campaign to Leave. Then-Prime Minister David Cameron, campaigning for Remain, was forced to repeatedly accuse the Leave side of lying about the issue, insisting Britain had a "rock solid veto"[79] on EU foreign and defence policy and that the UK would "never be part of… a European army."[80] In a June 2016 speech, he directly countered claims that the UK was "powerless to stop itself becoming part of an EU army."[81] Leave campaigners, including Boris Johnson, leveraged the sovereignty argument, framing deeper EU defence integration as a threat to British control over its armed forces.

Added to the problems is the aforementioned work of Meijer and Brooks on Europe's 'strategic cacophony'. Exactly what would such forces be used for, and what would they be built to achieve? It seems clear from this research that the expectations of the Baltic nations would significantly differ from those of France, which would in turn differ from those of Spain, which would differ from those of Hungary. Such issues would lead, even in the event EU nations were willing to accept such a concept in principle, significant problems for the concrete implementation of such a proposal.

We may therefore draw several conclusions. Firstly, armed forces are tied up to the post-Westphalian sense of nationhood. Next, the academic literature suggests that control over armed forces are crucial for survival as a nation state: indeed, national politicians and electorates appear to understand this acutely. Finally, such an understanding has in the past played a key role in resisting efforts toward further European integration.

The Solution

If a fully unified European army is politically impossible, what can Europe do to address the three interlocking strategic risks in the event of an American withdrawal? As a reminder, those risks are: the re-emergence of intra-European security competition; the continent's transformation into a playing field for external powers; and the erosion of Europe's capacity to function as a credible strategic player.

The first step is to recognise that the choice confronting Europe is not between fragmentation and supranational unification. A viable third pathway exists: the development of a modular, variable-geometry, international defence framework explicitly modelled on the early evolution of NATO. This approach would foster deep military integration sufficient for Europe to deter external threats and operate cohesively in crisis, while preserving the sovereign command structures and independent martial capacity that define the nation state.

Such a programme would draw directly upon nothing less than the historical example of NATO's success in transforming national armies into a force capable of collective action without abolishing sovereign control, and ultimately deterring the USSR and latterly the Russian Federation. In favour of this solution is the fact that the legal and institutional instruments are *already available* within the European Union.

These include EU Treaty obligations and, notably, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), European Defence Fund (EDF), European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS/ReArm Europe), and European Peace Facility (EPF) programmes. Furthermore, in its response to the aforementioned four crises since 2009, the Europe has shown it has the institutional heft to deploy such means.

The Historical Process: NATO's Incremental Evolution into a Cohesive Fighting Force

The North Atlantic Treaty, signed on 4 April 1949, was not a detailed provision for a fully integrated military force. It contained an often misunderstood, loose political commitment to collective defence under Article 5, but established no integrated command structure or standing military forces. Indeed, as Robert Luger of RAND wrote, "The North Atlantic Treaty was a short, two-page document composed of 14 separate, sparsely worded articles."[82] The Treaty did not provide for a permanent headquarters, detailed planning machinery, or even a command and control system in the event of a crisis. Each signatory retained full sovereignty over its armed forces and the right to decide how and when to fulfil its obligations.

The development of NATO into a functioning military alliance capable of coordinated operations began in the 1950s. The Korean War (from 1950) acted as the decisive external shock that triggered the rapid institutional development of NATO. The treaty was deliberately intergovernmental, leaving each member in full sovereign control of its armed forces. The immediate response to Korea was the creation of NATO's integrated military structure. In December 1950, the North Atlantic Council appointed General Dwight D. Eisenhower as the first Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR).

In April 1951, General Eisenhower activated the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) at Rocquencourt, France. This was the first major step toward operational integration. Per Robert Kugler, it also established "an agreed-upon military strategy (MC 14/1) that called for substantial conventional and nuclear defences."[83] Celeste A. Wallander, formerly Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs at the United States Department of Defense, writes that these steps set the foundation for the development of NATO "from a political commitment to an elaborate political-military institution over the course of many years."[84]

French President Macron, German Chancellor Merz, Polish Prime Minister Tusk, and Ukrainian President Zelensky on Independence Square Kyiv Ukraine, May 10 2025 (Shutterstock)

From 1952 onwards NATO introduced the Annual Review process. Each member submitted detailed reports on its defence programmes, force goals, and contributions. The process allowed the alliance to set collective capability targets and coordinate national efforts.

This was the first systematic mechanism for burden-sharing and force planning. The 1952 Lisbon meeting set ambitious force goals (96 divisions and 9,000 aircraft by 1954), though these were later scaled back for economic reasons. In the early 1950s, NATO also began negotiating Standardisation Agreements (STANAGs) to ensure equipment and procedures were interoperable.

By the late 1950s dozens of STANAGs covered a range of practical issues, from ammunition calibres to radio frequencies and tactical doctrine. This incremental standardisation was crucial for enabling joint operations.

In 1951, the alliance launched a common-funded infrastructure programme. It financed airfields, pipelines, communications networks, radar stations, and storage facilities across member territories. By the end of the decade the programme had funded hundreds of projects, creating the physical backbone for NATO operations.

Routine joint exercises also began in the mid-1950s, helping to forge the operational habits and command relationships necessary for multinational operations. The joint exercises also served as political signals of alliance solidarity.

From the early 1960s, NATO had moved beyond the foundational phase of the 1950s and began the incremental process of refining its military posture, command arrangements, and operational capabilities. Crucially, it did so while preserving the inter-governmental character established in 1949: the period 1960-1990 saw the alliance adapt to changing strategic conditions – including France's partial withdrawal, the adoption of Flexible Response, conventional force improvements, and the development of multinational formations – without ever creating a supranational army.

It is of paramount importance to note that these developments were incremental, driven by both external threats and internal political negotiations: they demonstrated that sovereign states could deepen integration while retaining ultimate control over their forces.

The 1960s opened with a major doctrinal shift. In 1967 NATO formally adopted MC 14/3, the strategy of Flexible Response. This replaced the earlier doctrine of Massive Retaliation (MC 14/2) with a graduated approach that emphasised conventional forces as the first line of defence, supported by tactical nuclear weapons if necessary, and strategic nuclear forces only as a last resort.

The REFORGER (Return of Forces to Germany) exercises, which began in 1969, and involved air and sea lift of entire divisions, pre-positioned equipment in Europe, and large-scale live-fire manoeuvres, became the centrepiece of NATO's reinforcement strategy. These large-scale annual exercises demonstrated the US ability to rapidly deploy heavy forces to Europe in a crisis, reinforcing the credibility of extended deterrence.

By the 1980s REFORGER had become a routine demonstration of transatlantic commitment. Multinational formations expanded significantly. The Allied Command Europe Mobile Force (AMF), established in the 1960s, was a small, highly mobile brigade-sized force drawn from multiple nations that could deploy rapidly to any threatened flank.

An excellent example, for our purposes, of NATO's development as a multi-national military alliance capable of coordinated operations while retaining national control is the NATO Airborne Early Warning and Control (AWACS) programme, which became operational in 1982.

This provided one of the first truly multinational operational assets in NATO history: a jointly owned fleet of E-3 Sentry aircraft. The aircraft were NATO property, but participating nations retained control over their crews and could withdraw contributions. The programme dramatically improved alliance air surveillance and command-and-control capabilities.

By the late 1980s, NATO had achieved a level of practical integration that the 1949 treaty had only hinted was possible: sovereign armies that could operate together under unified command in crisis, supported by common planning, standardisation, multinational formations, and proven reinforcement procedures.

The REFORGER exercises, AWACS programme and the incremental development of a warfighting doctrine were concrete manifestations of this maturity.

Yet while the alliance had developed the habits, infrastructure and procedures necessary for effective collective action, no state had surrendered peacetime control over its forces. For instance, NATO assigned the United Kingdom primary responsibility for anti-submarine warfare and maritime patrol in the GIUK Gap, the critical choke point between Greenland, Iceland and the UK for Soviet submarines entering the Atlantic.

The Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force concentrated resources on the development, manufacture and operation of Nimrod long-range maritime patrol aircraft, Invincible-class ASW carriers with Sea King helicopters, and Type 23 frigates optimised for submarine hunting.

This division of labour allowed the NATO to cover a vital strategic theatre efficiently, while Britain retained full sovereign expeditionary capability. The Falklands War of 1982 provided the definitive demonstration of this. The UK assembled and deployed a task force 8,000 miles from home with almost no direct NATO operational support. The operation was entirely British-commanded, using British ships, aircraft, nuclear submarines, command and control, and personnel.

Another example of this phenomenon of specialisation within a NATO framework while retaining national sovereignty over armed forces can be found in the example of West Germany. After joining NATO in 1955, West Germany was assigned the role of the alliance's main heavy land force on the Central Front, the most likely axis of a Warsaw Pact attack. The Bundeswehr developed large mechanised divisions with heavy armour, artillery, and a forward-defence posture in Germany.

By the 1980s it fielded the largest conventional land component in Central Europe. The Bundeswehr, however, remained under national command in peacetime.

This historical record from the 1960s to the 1980s provides a clear template for Europe today. NATO's success was built on incremental, modular steps (doctrinal refinement, specialised national roles, multinational assets, and joint exercises) within an intergovernmental framework. Crucially, the EU already has significant tools at its disposal to follow the NATO pathway – and indeed the organisation of NATO itself to occupy and build upon.

Article 42 of the consolidated Treaties of the EU establishes the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as an integral part of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

It states that the CSDP "shall include the progressive framing of a common defence policy that might lead to a common defence."[85] Article 42(7), the mutual assistance clause (sometimes called the "European NATO Article 5"), states that if a member state is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other member states have an obligation to provide aid and assistance "by all the means in their power."[86]

Article 46 of the Consolidated Treaty on European Union provides the legal foundation for more concrete steps toward integration through PESCO, Permanent Structured Cooperation. PESCO is deliberately intergovernmental: participation is voluntary, decisions on entry/exit/suspension use qualified majority voting among participating states only, and operational decisions inside PESCO require unanimity among participants.

This design was intended to allow "those Member States whose military capabilities fulfil higher criteria" (cross-referenced to Article 42(6)) to move ahead without forcing all 27 members into the same pace or depth.

PESCO was formally launched on 11 December 2017 by 25 EU member states (all except Denmark, Malta, and the UK). The European Council stated explicitly that PESCO was, "a milestone in European defence. It is a concrete step towards a European Defence Union."[87] High Representative Federica Mogherini said that the launch was "a decisive step towards a more integrated, more efficient and more capable European defence."

In other words, PESCO was designed from the beginning as a framework that might lead to the creation of 'A European NATO' by tying nations – on a voluntary, project by project basis, to further military integration while retaining national control.

There are currently 80 projects under the PESCO umbrella, and progress has been mixed. Nevertheless, it has achieved significant successes. For instance, the flagship military mobility project, launched with PESCO itself in 2017, aimed to remove the legal, infrastructural, and procedural obstacles to the rapid movement of military forces and equipment across Europe.

The Future of European Security: Alternative Strategies

It included harmonisation of customs procedures, improvement of dual-use infrastructure (roads, bridges, railways, ports, airports), and the simplification of cross-border permissions. By 2025 it had achieved Full Operational Capability in several areas, including new EU military mobility corridors and updated dual-use standards. It has directly influenced national infrastructure planning and NATO compatibility, and several member states have upgraded key bridges and rail lines to accommodate heavy military equipment. The Cyber Rapid Response Teams and Mutual Assistance in Cyber Security (CRRT), also launched 2017, and led by Lithuania, has similarly enjoyed success, with active deployments for cyber incident response and regular exercises that have improved alliance-wide cyber resilience.

Other programmes (such as the European Peace Facility, currently used to fund Ukraine, the European Defence Fund, to finance R&D and capability improvement projects, and the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) (formerly ReArm EuropeFoundation), a comprehensive strategy to strengthen the European defence industrial base, reduce dependence on non-EU suppliers, increase joint procurement, and boost overall defence spending and production capacity) suggest a base to fund a unified military command, improve industrial capacity, fill gaps a US withdrawal would leave, and gain the independence of military-industrial production needed to protect against outside influence.

Policy Suggestions

The Solution

The first step European nations must take is to spin out the relevant articles of the Consolidated Treaties of the EU (TEU) into a new, standalone Treaty for collective defence. This new Treaty would extract the most relevant provisions from the existing TEU (primarily the aforementioned Article 42 and Article 46, along with the PESCO Protocol), and re-frame them into a simpler, intergovernmental format modelled on the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty.

The Treaty should have five goals. First, it should offer a clear political signal of intent and ambition. Next, it should create an organised framework for integration of sovereign national militaries. Third, it should seek to include non-EU parties with an interest in mutual European defence (for example, the UK and Norway).

Fourth, it should remove the political friction to signing. This would be achieved due to:

- the Treaty's very nature as a spin-off of existing clauses already signed by EU nations;
- making it plain within the treaty that it would not represent the creation of a unified European army under central control, but a NATO-style integration of national armies that remain under national control into a modular, variable geometry, opt in fighting force;
- including clauses that ensure the Treaty would not be prejudicial for existing security and defence commitments.

Finally, the Treaty would provide a central framework and impetus for a central command structure outside NATO, as well as for the capability expansion and integration projects of PESCO, EDF and ReArm/EDIS to become larger, more effective and *institutional*.

To this end, a new treaty would be deliberately short and simple – like the original 14-article North Atlantic Treaty.

It would contain only the essential elements needed to create a credible, modular defence framework.

The **Preamble** must be a plain statement of purpose and ambition, referencing the changed strategic environment and the need for European strategic autonomy while respecting national sovereignty. For example:

"The Parties,

Determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of national sovereignty, democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law;

Convinced that the security of Europe and individual European nations requires collective action by the European states,

Desiring to further the development of a European security and defence capacity while fully preserving the sovereign rights of each Party over its armed forces;

Have agreed as follows:"

Article 1 would be a mutual assistance/collective defence clause akin to NATO's Article 5. It would spin out Article 42(7) TEU into a clear, binding commitment.

The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them shall be considered an attack against them all of them and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking without delay, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as each of them deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of Europe.

Article 2 would relate to the aforementioned PESCO, spinning out Article 46 of the TEU and the PESCO Protocol, but in plainer language.

The Parties agree to participate in the Permanent Structured Cooperation programme. The Parties thereby commit to move toward meeting the military capability criteria of Permanent Structured Cooperation programme and to making the necessary commitments on investment, capability development and interoperability.

Article 3 would relate to capability development and joint procurement, specifically the aforementioned EDF and EDIS/ReArm Europe.

The Parties undertake to develop and maintain their military capabilities through joint research, development and procurement projects, with a view to reducing fragmentation and increasing interoperability.

Article 4 would make clear that the commitment would be modular and have a variable geometry.

The Parties, being nation states with full sovereign control of their armed forces, agree that participation in the Permanent Structured Cooperation programme, and other such programmes related to this Treaty, will be on an opt-in, project-by-project basis.

Article 5 would establish a new political council, based on the North Atlantic Council.

The Parties hereby establish the European Security and Defence Council, composed of representatives of each Party, which shall be the principal political forum of the Treaty. The Council shall convene once a year, or, without delay, in extraordinary meetings at the request of a Party, at the level of foreign ministers and defence ministers, or heads of government where appropriate. Decisions shall be by consensus and individual Parties shall retain full control over the type and extent of the assistance they may provide within their Treaty obligations.

Article 6 would establish the relationship of the Treaty to the existing commitments of the Parties.

The Parties agree that this Treaty shall not prejudice the rights and obligations of the Parties under the North Atlantic Treaty, the Treaty on European Union, or other treaties, alliances or defence and security commitments.

Article 7 would cover withdrawal and suspension from the Treaty based on Article 13 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

The Parties agree that any Party may withdraw from the Treaty one year after they provide official notice of their intent to do so.

Article 8 would briefly cover the Treaty's entry into force.

The Parties agree that this Treaty shall enter into force 30 days after the date on which a majority of the signatories provide their instrument of ratification. For each state that ratifies thereafter, the Treaty shall enter into force 30 days after the date on which they provide their instrument of ratification.

Article 9 would cover the duration of the Treaty.

The Parties agree that this Treaty shall remain in force indefinitely. Each Party may propose reviews or additional Articles three years after the Treaty first enters into force, and at a period no earlier than three years after the first such review.

Article 10 would provide a broad-brush framework for the implementation of the Treaty

The Parties agree that the European Security and Defence Council may establish such subsidiary bodies as it deems necessary for the implementation of the Treaty.

The above illustrative Treaty is deliberately modelled on the original NATO treaty. It is simple. It would not be politically difficult to sign, given it plainly states, at multiple points, that individual states would retain sovereign control of their armed forces, and given many nations have already agreed, either through NATO or the Treaties of the EU, to many of the clauses. Further, it is a definitive signal of intent that sets in motion a new, integrated European collective defence organisation.

Another valuable outcome of spinning out articles from the TEU into a new Treaty would be to allow interested outside nations, such as the United Kingdom and Norway to join without running into the EU's protective wall and institutional politics. For instance, the UK indicated its willingness to join the SAFE defence fund, which provides some EUR 150 billion worth of defence related loans as part of the ReArm Europe/EDIS programme.

This is the type of concrete step from a country with a traditionally powerful military to involve itself in Europe's defence that must be welcomed.

European Council President Charles Michel talks to the press ahead of a security and defence video conference, Brussels (Shutterstock)

However, instead, the EU demanded London make a sizeable financial contribution of some EUR 6.7 billion in order to join.[88] Talks collapsed. By removing such programmes from the EU Acquis Communautaire, such pettifogging (which the EU may view as a legitimate means of protecting its own institutional interests) could be eliminated as barriers to participation.

Filling the Gaps

The second policy step must be a serious stocktaking of which military capacities the EU would lose in the event of an American withdrawal from the continent (or, to put it differently, what Europe needs in order to field an integrated force capable of high intensity warfare on the modern battlefield), and then a concerted effort to fill the gaps.

The institutionalisation afforded by the new Treaty outlined above would provide a framework and impetus to solve many of the existing problems faced by PESCO, the primary vehicle for such an effort.

As we have seen, PESCO has achieved some successes; however, progress is both patchy and incremental. A recent comprehensive study of PESCO by the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies found that "PESCO still faces significant institutional hurdles to reach its full potential as the EU's core platform for focused, scalable defence cooperation and enhanced third-country participation."[89]

It further revealed that "nearly half of all projects are still being designed or defined rather than executed" and that "many projects have stalled or moved slowly." The Atlas Institute for International Affairs found that PESCO projects often find themselves in a "Valley of Death" in which "projects move from concept to prototype but fail to transition into serial production."[90]

Recommendations to solve these issues often focus on areas, such as European military procurement processes, that are beyond the scope of this paper.

However, the first step European nations could take to solve the issue would be to place PESCO under the jurisdiction of the above suggested European Defence and Security Council formed by the Treaty, and then repurpose it specifically to fill the gaps left by a US withdrawal.

A broad-brush assessment of those gaps suggests a focus on the following areas.

- **Command and Control (C2) and Integrated Planning:** The US provides the backbone of NATO's integrated command structure through SHAPE and key senior posts. Europe lacks a fully functional equivalent for large-scale, multi-domain operations.
- **Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), including Space-Based Assets:** The US dominates high-end ISR, SIGINT, and space-based early warning. Europe's capabilities in this domain are limited and fragmented.
- **Strategic Airlift and Air-to-Air Refuelling:** Europe has insufficient heavy-lift transport aircraft and tanker capacity to move and sustain large forces rapidly across the continent or beyond.
- **Suppression/Destruction of Enemy Air Defences (SEAD/DEAD) and Long-Range Strike:** The US provides the majority of advanced electronic warfare, stealth platforms, and long-range precision munitions needed to penetrate sophisticated air defences.
- **Logistics, Munitions Stocks, and Surge Production:** The US maintains pre-positioned stocks and the industrial capacity to rapidly replenish munitions and supplies.
- **Nuclear Extended Deterrence:** The US nuclear umbrella (forward-deployed weapons and strategic forces) remains the ultimate security backstop.

These gaps are not theoretical. A report from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) found that, in the event US forces disengaged from the European theatre, "Europe's window of vulnerability would open quickly. Not only would European allies need to replace major US military platforms and manpower – the latter estimated at 128,000 troops – but also address shortfalls in space and all-domain intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets. They would also need to replace the significant US contribution to NATO's command and control arrangements and fill many senior military positions in NATO organisations currently occupied by US personnel."[91]

A CSIS analysis reached the same conclusion: “European conventional and logistical capabilities are limited–particularly for high-end war–creating potential vulnerabilities if the United States were to withdraw significant air, naval, and ground forces from the region.”[92]

From this broad list of capacity gaps would come a far more detailed programme of personnel, organisational, hardware, procurement, investment, industrial, manufacturing, training and operationalisation programmes that are beyond the scope of this document.

It is important to note that these could be either based on the NATO formula of individual nations specialising in areas in which they have competitive advantage in order to provide specific capacities (e.g. the aforementioned example of the UK and ASW) or on a communal capacity, such as the AWACS plan outlined above.

Crucially, however, the new European Defence and Security Council, like NATO during the Korean War of the 1950s, would have the impetus and authority to begin a serious programme of military capacity expansion with the aim of filling the gaps the United States left, and providing the basis of the development of an integrated force, comprised of national, independent armies, and capable of fighting in high intensity, combined arms warfare against a peer opponent on Europe’s frontiers, or, eventually, to defend vital European interests out of area.

Détente as well as Deterrence

Finally, Europe must rediscover the wisdom of the twin track Deter and Détente policy. The establishment of an integrated European military capable of high intensity warfare, as discussed above, would inevitably precipitate a response from Europe’s flanking states.

The establishment of a European security environment characterised by adversarial relations between heavily armed blocs would therefore become a possibility. This would be undesirable and, potentially, dangerously unstable. Therefore, even as Europe increases military capacity to deter, it must also seek détente, preferably through institutionalising dialogue with its near abroad.

Such a policy should be founded on the principles of the 1967 Harmel Report. Adopted by the North Atlantic Council on 13-14 December that year, it stated:

> “The Atlantic Alliance has two main functions. Its first function is to maintain adequate military strength and political solidarity to deter aggression and other forms of pressure and to defend the territory of member countries if aggression should occur. … Military security and a policy of détente are not contradictory but complementary. Collective defence is a stabilizing factor in world politics. It is the necessary condition for effective policies directed towards a greater relaxation of tensions.”

This dual-track logic – deterrence as the foundation for safe engagement – proved effective during the Cold War. It contributed to the peaceful end of the Cold War without major conflict in Europe. The most concrete example of the policy was the CSCE/Helsinki Process of 1973-1975. The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe included all European states, the Soviet Union, and the United States on equal terms. The Helsinki Final Act (1975) was not legally binding but created a permanent dialogue forum. It explicitly recognised the territorial integrity of all participating states while allowing discussion of human rights and security concerns. The process was widely credited with reducing tension and laying groundwork for the end of the Cold War. A November 2015 briefing for the European Parliament found that the Helsinki Process *“transformed the zero-sum game of the Cold War into a positive-sum game between European states and became a forum for discussion between the two superpowers and European countries.”*[93]

A European Defence and Security Forum could operate as a separate, non-binding political platform established by a simple memorandum of understanding signed by EST members and invited states. It would be based on three principles. First, equal status for all participants. Secondly, a consensus-based dialogue, with no voting or majority decisions. Finally, regular meetings, including head of government, ministerial and ambassadorial meetings. Emergency summits could be held.

Initial discussions would have to focus on areas of broad agreement to build trust and confidence, such as arms control, military transparency, crisis de-confliction, and non-traditional security issues, including disaster relief and counter-terrorism. It should be hoped, however, that such a process could lead to the forum becoming the foundation of a broader regional rapprochement. Indeed, it could be made plain to all participants that a route to full inclusion in the above suggested European Defence and Security Treaty remained open.

Endnotes

[1]Best encapsulated by Dean Acheson, US Secretary of State 1945-47. For example: “the corruption of Greece would infect Iran and all to the East… It would also carry infection to Africa through Asia Minor and Egypt, and to Europe through Italy and France, already threatened by the strongest Communist parties in Western Europe.” https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/marshall-plan

[2]US Federal Government Archives. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/marshall-plan

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[4]Paul Kennedy, 1987: *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*

[5]Truman Doctrine speech, given by President Harry S Truman on 12 March 1947. Source: US National Archives. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/truman-doctrine

[6]Per the US State Department’s Office of the Historian: “In light of the deteriorating relationship with the Soviet Union and the appearance of Soviet meddling in Greek and Turkish affairs, the withdrawal of British assistance to Greece provided the necessary catalyst for the Truman Administration to reorient American foreign policy. Accordingly, in his speech, President Truman requested that Congress provide $400,000,000 worth of aid to both the Greek and Turkish Governments and support the dispatch of American civilian and military personnel and equipment to the region.” https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine

[7]Council on Foreign Relations article *Where are US Military Forced Deployed in Europe*, May 2026. https://www.cfr.org/articles/where-are-us-forces-deployed-europe

[8]The US began deploying nuclear weapons to Europe in 1954.

[9]*The Rules-Based International Order: A Historical Analysis*, Marc Trachtenberg in MIT International Security, Volume 50, Issue 2. https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/50/2/7/133734/The-Rules-Based-International-Order-A-Historical

[10]*Fifty Years Of Economic Growth In Western Europe: No Longer Catching Up But Falling Behind?*, Nicholas Crafts, Stanford University, 2003. https://siepr.stanford.edu/publications/working-paper/fifty-years-economic-growth-western-europe-no-longer-catching-falling#:~:text=Policy%20Research%20(SIEPR)-,Fifty%20Years%20Of%20Economic%20Growth%20In%20Western%20Europe:%20No%20Longer,real%20GDP%20per%20hour%20worked

[11]https://archive.ph/FCEMI

[12]The ‘Return of Forces to Germany’ exercises were held annually between 1969 and 1993, and were designed to ensure that the United States was able to rapidly inject forces from the continental United States to Germany in the event of a crisis.

[13]Europe whole and free” was a foreign policy doctrine inaugurated by US President George HW Bush on 31 May 1989 in a speech in Mainz, West Germany. Full quote: “…our responsibility is to look ahead and grasp the promise of the future. I said recently that we're at the end of one era and at the beginning of another. And I noted that in regard to the Soviet Union, our policy is to move beyond containment. For 40 years, the seeds of democracy in Eastern Europe lay dormant, buried under the frozen tundra of the Cold War. And for 40 years, the world has waited for the Cold War to end. And decade after decade, time after time, the flowering human spirit withered from the chill of conflict and oppression; and again, the world waited. But the passion for freedom cannot be denied forever. The world has waited long enough. The time is right. Let Europe be whole and free.” https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/bush-a-whole-europe-speech-text/

[14]US Mission to NATO, Ambassador Vershow's speech on NATO in Southeast Europe, Slovenia, May 11, 2000

[15]Avour https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-jubilee-celebration-for-the-weekly-magazine-weltwoche

[16]*The Rules-Based International Order: A Historical Analysis, MIT International Security*, Fall 2025, Marc Trachtenberg. https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/50/2/7/133734/The-Rules-Based-International-Order-A-Historical

[17]*Eisenhower’s vision of European security, Engelsberg Ideas*, 20 May 2025, Moritz S. Graefrath. https://engelsbergideas.com/notebook/eisenhowers-vision-of-european-security/

[18]US resentment of the cost of its engagement with Europe underrates just how good a deal it was for the United States. In very broad terms, the benefits came in four ways. First, it did indeed bind America’s major allies to the American strategic cause. It created a bulwark against the only power with the capacity to control all of Europe, the Soviet Union, and ultimately deterred it from attempting to do so. Europe thus became Washington’s bridgehead onto the Eurasian landmass, and prevented the emergence of a power that could possibly surpass the United States. Secondly, it succeeded in reflating the Japanese and Western European economies, creating rich and prosperous markets for American capital, goods and services. This was especially pertinent to the cases of Japan and Germany, in relation to which Washington’s postwar offer avoided the errors of 1919. Thirdly, it fulfilled the longstanding desire for a global version of the ‘Open Door’ policy formulated in 1899.realised as far back as 1917 that the United States of America’s geographical position and great natural and human resource endowments meant its security had no need for territorial conquest; however, “its goods and capital had to be free to move around the world and across the boundaries of any empire.” Finally, it placed the United States in command of the economic, diplomatic, financial and military affairs of by far the most powerful bloc in the world. This also, however, represented a good deal for Europe. The Old World was able to rapidly rebuild, regain much of its former living standards, and protect itself from Bolshevist expansionism while diverting to infrastructure and social programmes money that would ordinarily have been needed for defence. At the very least, Washington treated the vanquished with far greater kindness than other victorious powers have done through history.

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[21]Deng Xiaoping is first recorded to have uttered this phrase, apparently a proverb from the Sichuan province, in 1962 when he was Vice Premier of China. It was seen as encapsulating his preference for pragmatism and progress over rigid adherence to ideology. Although it became one of his 'crimes' during the Cultural Revolution, it was revived when Deng became paramount leader of China in 1978. It gave rise to 'cat theory' as part of China's Reform and Opening Up programme.

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