DEFENSE PRIORITIES

LET EUROPE REARM: CAPITALIZE ON NATO'S FIVE PERCENT PLEDGE

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KEY POINTS

1. The pledge made by NATO members to spend 5 percent of their GDP on defense by 2035 is an opportunity for the U.S. to steer its European allies toward greater security responsibilities.
2. Europe still faces internal divisions and must overcome decades of dependence on the U.S. However, given its central role in the region, Washington is well-positioned to help unlock Europe's considerable defense potential.
3. To do so, American leaders will need to find the right combination of pressures and incentives to nudge their European allies toward greater responsibility. This will mean, among other things, consolidating Europe's strategic autonomy through NATO and the EU.
4. Instead of envisioning Europe as a captive market and limiting its commercial and investment opportunities in the U.S., Washington should allow its allies to protect their defense sectors and consolidate their defense companies.
5. Washington should also decrease its operational presence in Europe in order to incentivize European leaders to take responsibility for their own defense.

THE PROMISE AND PITFALLS OF NATO'S 5 PERCENT BUDGET PLEDGE

Since Donald Trump returned to the White House in January 2025, U.S. officials have indicated they would "no longer tolerate an imbalanced [trans-Atlantic] relationship which encourages dependency" and have occasionally expressed hostility toward Europe.[1] Washington may not be able or even willing to scrap its involvement in the region, but there is strong merit to the claim that Joe Biden was America's "last truly trans-Atlanticist president."[2]

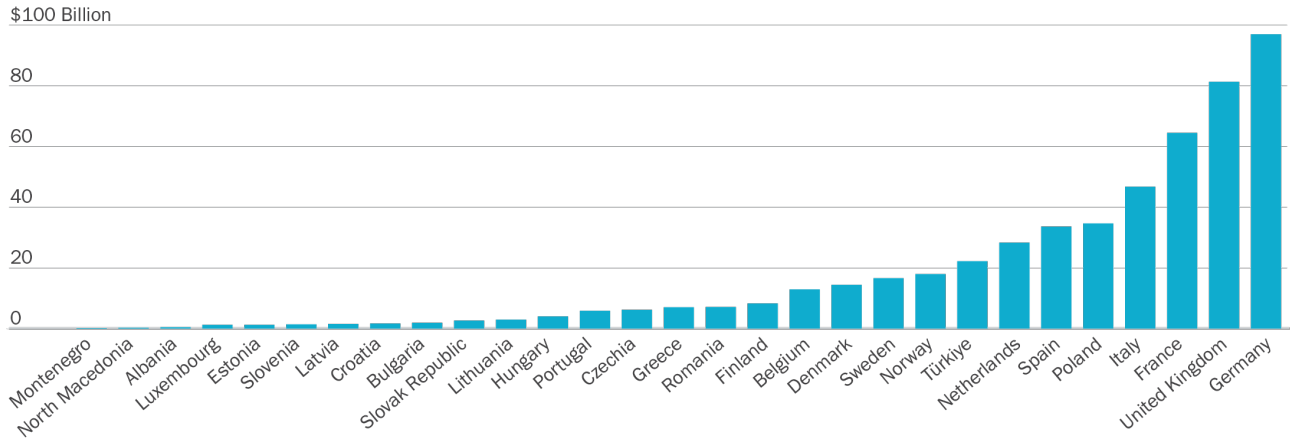
At the NATO summit in June 2025, the members of the trans-Atlantic alliance pledged to spend 3.5 percent of their GDP on "core" defense and 1.5 percent on associated domains such as innovation, cybersecurity, and critical infrastructure by 2035.[3] This 5 percent pledge is no panacea and could bring new challenges. Still, it is a positive step toward strengthening Europe's military power and guiding the trans-Atlantic relationship on a more sustainable course.

To ensure that its NATO allies build a truly combat-ready European force, the U.S. should abandon its regional hegemonic strategy and take further steps toward retrenchment. This will incentivize European leaders to address the strategic, industrial-military, and operational obstacles that have long impeded their ability to defend themselves.[4] Those adjustments won't be easy, but Washington has sufficient leverage to steer Europe toward a more independent future.

A TIMELY PROMISE

NATO's 5 percent budget pledge represents an acknowledgment that the trans-Atlantic relationship must become more equal. Although often strident, the Trump administration's complaints about Europe's free-riding reflect a structural evolution in America's geostrategic priorities.[5]

NATO-EUROPE DEFENSE SPENDING (2025)



Note: Figures are in constant 2021 prices and exchange rates. Figures for 2025 are NATO estimates. Figure for Germany based on SIPRI reporting, adjusted using an online calculator to match 2021 constant dollars.

Source: "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025)," NATO; "Global Military Spending Rise Continues as European and Asian Expenditures Surge," SIPRI.

Defense spending by European nations varies widely based on size, population, geographic vulnerability, and other factors.

Washington has contributed an average of 68 percent of NATO member states' combined defense budgets from 1960 to 2024, even though the threat of a local power dominating Europe has nearly disappeared since the break-up of the Soviet Union.[6] Europe's share of world GDP fell from about one-third to 14 percent between 1960 and 2024.[7] Europe's value as a launch pad for power projection has declined as the U.S. scaled back its armed interventions in neighboring regions.[8] Likewise, with new data-driven technologies such as AI making national power less tangible, the advantages of maintaining a heavy local presence have diminished.[9]

This reevaluation comes amid other transformations. In recent years, growing segments of the U.S. national security community have acknowledged the costs of foreign interventionism and the need for Washington to reduce its commitments abroad as its relative power declines.[10] A significant faction of the Republican Party shifted on this issue following President Trump's "America First" slogan, but many Democrats have signaled similar inclinations.[11] The Cold Warriors who remain deeply attached to Europe are being replaced by a new generation of American leaders.[12] Domestic backing for extensive NATO commitments can thus no longer be taken for granted.[13] Regardless of who replaces President Trump in January 2029, America's involvement in European security will remain much more uncertain than it was in the pre-Trump II era.

Reducing U.S. troop levels in Europe could save up to $80 billion annually.[14] Those funds could be reallocated to other security priorities—the U.S. border, the Western Hemisphere, or the Indo-Pacific—or other functions of government.[15] Such a shift could result in a smaller force structure, helping to allay the U.S.

military's growing recruitment difficulties.[16] Europe's buildup would also ease the resentment Washington has long expressed toward the region's leaders, possibly improving cooperation across the Atlantic.[17]

An expanding European defense-industrial base could bring additional investment and sales opportunities for U.S. companies, helping them achieve economies of scale and mitigating Washington's commercial deficit.[18] It could offset the supply chain vulnerabilities and workforce shortages that plague the U.S. defense industrial base.[19] It might also close some trans-Atlantic technology and interoperability gaps.[20] Such improvements, even if limited, could strengthen America's and Europe's competitiveness, resilience, and deterrence.[21]

CAN EUROPE'S NATO MEMBERS MEET THE 5 PERCENT THRESHOLD?

There is no guarantee that European leaders will fulfill their new budget commitments. The 3.5+1.5 percent threshold is a significant step up from the 2 percent that NATO's members committed to after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.[22] It is also higher than the 3 percent they maintained on average during the Cold War.[23] It's a high bar even for the United States, as President Trump himself acknowledged.[24]

Europe faces serious domestic challenges, which might hamper large hikes in defense spending. Its GDP growth has nearly stagnated since the 2008 financial crisis.[25] Having built its competitiveness on free trade and multilateralism, the EU has suffered from the decline of multilateralism over the past decade.[26] Its industrial productivity and innovation are falling behind the U.S. and China.[27] In 2024, the average national public debt across the eurozone was 88 percent.[28] Pressure on local welfare systems has intensified, largely due to austerity policies, a rapidly aging population, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russia-Ukraine war. [29]

The situation may worsen if European states double down on their military buildup. Although some studies suggest that increased defense spending can boost economic growth, most research shows it yields weaker positive externalities than other public investments (i.e., healthcare and education).[30] It may even undermine those investments and raise national debt.[31]

Rising defense spending remains relatively unpopular when it comes at the expense of health and education budgets.[32] Europe's economic struggles and austerity measures could thus weaken public support for a defense buildup, especially since European citizens were not consulted about NATO's 5 percent pledge.[33]

European leaders also have a history of underdelivering. For example, in 2024, only 21 of Europe's 30 NATO members met the 2 percent defense spending threshold pledged a decade earlier. That number would have been much lower had Russia not invaded Ukraine.[34] EU states still devoted only 1.9 percent of their GDP to defense on average in 2024.[35] Additionally, many of Europe's leading powers were just above the target (e.g., the UK and France), right below it (e.g., Germany), or far below it (e.g., Italy and Spain).[36]

NATO's 5 percent budget target could reflect political deceit. The pledge, introduced by Secretary-General Mark Rutte to appease Washington, allowed President Trump to claim "a monumental win" and Europe to keep the U.S. engaged with little near-term accountability.[37] NATO's 2025 summit statement did not specify that the 5 percent pledge would apply to "all allies."[38] Equally intriguing, the 2029 deadline falls just after the end of Trump's second term, potentially leaving the door open for renegotiation.[39]

HOW MUCH IS 5 PERCENT REALLY WORTH?

The impact of NATO's budget pledge might still be limited, even if members fulfill it. The 5 percent threshold could be misleading from a financial standpoint. The 1.5 percent allocated to other security areas cannot bolster Europe's capabilities as much as the 3.5 percent allocated to "core" defense. Additionally, given the loopholes that pervade the process, some countries may resort to "creative accounting" to meet their spending requirements.[40] More fundamentally, a state's defense budget, measured as a share of GDP, may be heavily distorted by variations in that state's economic output. Stagnant military expenditures can look deceptively strong in relative terms during periods of recession—and vice versa.[41]

Even if European defense budgets rise significantly in both absolute and relative terms, the region still has a long way to go. Its historical prioritization of healthcare, pensions, and education led to an overall shortfall of approximately €1.1 trillion relative to NATO's 2 percent threshold from 2006 to 2020.[42] Even after accounting for its post-Ukraine war buildup, Europe's combined defense spending increased by only 50 percent from 2000 to 2023, whereas China, Russia, and (from a much larger base) the U.S. implemented increases of 596 percent, 360 percent, and 60 percent, respectively.[43] Thus, NATO's 5 percent target is unlikely to bridge the gap between the two sides of the Atlantic.[44] This will be especially true if President Trump's envisioned 66 percent increase in the U.S. defense budget for next year is enacted, even in part.[45]

Europe's combat capability limitations could persist even if it closes the spending gap durably. The region's legacy of underspending is compounded by the fact that, until recently, its defense investments prioritized humanitarian interventions, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorism over traditional military capabilities.[46] Moreover, European states could fail to correct their ineffective defense spending patterns, leading to additional delays, waste, and poor decisions.[47] More fundamentally, focusing on share-of-GDP ratios risks diverting attention from a rigorous evaluation of each country's defense needs.[48] Those ratios do not address intra-European differences either. As such, because NATO's 5 percent pledge applies to a group of states, their respective investments might lack coherence at the regional level, especially since each European alliance member has a distinct set of strategic, industrial-military, and operational preferences.[49]

AN ENCOURAGING STARTING POINT

Although the 5 percent budget pledge is full of ambiguities, it can still significantly improve European combat capabilities. Since the first Trump presidency and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, European leaders have increasingly discussed strategic autonomy.[50] These discussions have gained momentum as questions about the reliability of the U.S. conventional and nuclear deterrents have intensified.[51] European leaders have increasingly worried that Washington could try to coerce them by halting intelligence-sharing or withholding spare parts, maintenance services, software updates, or data transfers necessary to operate American weapon systems.[52]

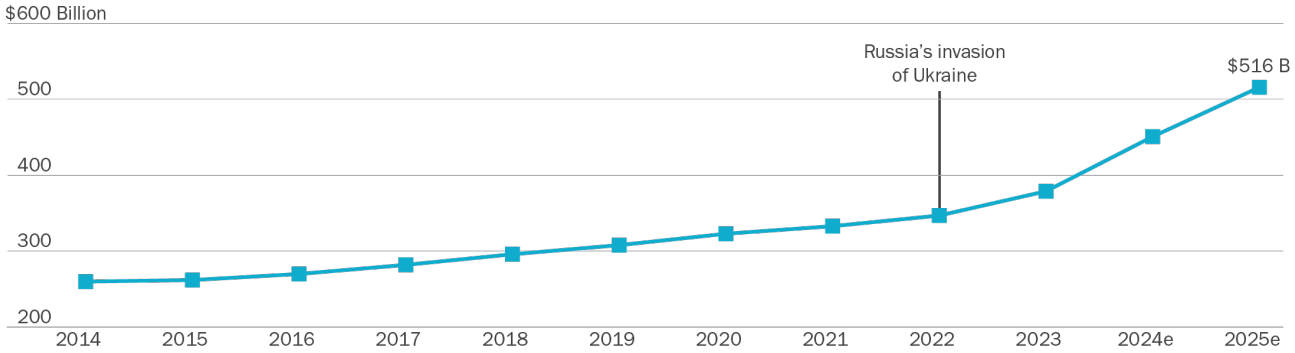
Admittedly, the concept of strategic autonomy remains debated.[53] While some define it as taking on greater responsibilities in support of the West, others interpret it as a hedge against a potential U.S. withdrawal from Europe, or as a first step toward fulfilling the EU's "potential as a global power."[54] However, all these definitions share a common horizon aligned with NATO's 5 percent budget pledge: equipping Europe with the tools necessary to reduce its dependence on America.

Many European leaders now acknowledge that defending the region is their responsibility.[55] European leaders have committed to becoming Ukraine's primary providers of military aid.[56] The EU's March 2022

Strategic Compass was its first ever "shared assessment of geopolitical threats."[57] Despite ongoing rivalry, mistrust, and legal and political barriers, NATO and the EU have deepened their collaboration at both the staff and senior levels.[58] More broadly, the fact that the European construction process has always been "forged in crisis" suggests that the region's governments and militaries could make more breakthroughs in integration if push came to shove.[59]

This commitment has begun to take shape. Defense spending by European NATO members rose to $516 billion in 2025, up significantly over the previous year.[60] In March 2025, the EU launched the ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030 program to boost combined defense spending by $800 billion through measures such as easing the bloc's 3 percent deficit rule and 60 percent debt-to-GDP rule.[61] The EU's SAFE initiative, released that same month, includes a €150 billion loans-for-joint-procurement mechanism.[62] This effort echoes the March 2024 European Defense Industrial Strategy, which aims for intra-regional trade to constitute at least 35 percent of the bloc's defense market by 2030.[63]

NATO-EUROPE'S DEFENSE SPENDING IN AGGREGATE (2014–2025)



Source: "Defense Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025)," NATO Press & Media, June 3, 2025.

Note: Figures are in constant 2021 prices and exchange rates and rounded to the nearest billion. Figures for 2024 and 2025 are estimates. Figures include new NATO members as of the year they joined the military alliance: Montenegro (2017), North Macedonia(2020), Finland (2023), and Sweden (2024).

Though stagnant for years amid reliance on the U.S., Europe's defense budgets have significantly increased since the war in Ukraine began.

Europe has the potential to deliver. With a GDP of about $19 trillion in 2024 (compared to Russia's $2 trillion) and a population of 449 million people (compared to Russia's 145 million), the European Union remains an economic and demographic giant capable of sustaining a military buildup.[64] Including the UK, Turkey, Ukraine, and Norway, Europe has 28 companies among the top 100 defense firms by revenue worldwide (17 are in the EU).[65] Its output quality surpasses that of the U.S. in niche areas such as main battle tanks and conventional submarines.[66] Even if European states do not ultimately meet NATO's 5 percent threshold or fully optimize their defense spending, making a serious effort to do so would strengthen European defense.[67]

AMERICA'S ROLE IN EUROPE'S STRATEGIC DEPENDENCE

To succeed, NATO's 5 percent efforts must be based on a clear understanding of the factors that have hampered Europe's defense. While those challenges originate in the European construction process, U.S. leaders have consistently leveraged their central role in the region to perpetuate Europe's dependence on Washington.

INTERNAL OBSTACLES TO A EUROPEAN DEFENSE RENAISSANCE

Building on the trauma of World War II, European leaders have long envisioned international politics as "an ever-extending process of peaceful discussion, production and exchange" where the use of force would become illegitimate and irrelevant.[68] At the same time, concerns about national sovereignty, a desire for "democratic accountability," and fear of supranational overreach have incentivized European states to limit the EU's defense powers.[69]

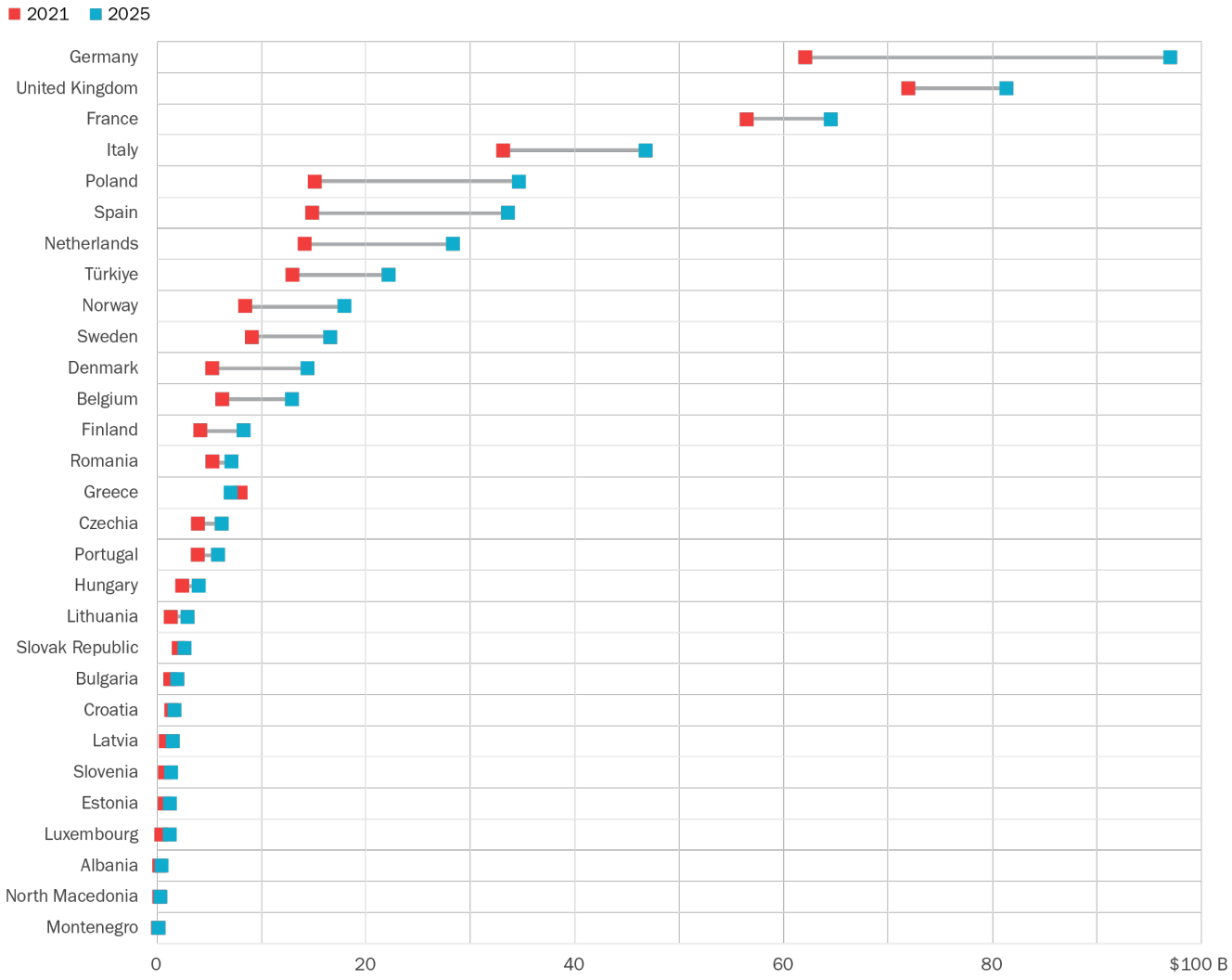
National divisions compound those challenges. European countries exhibit a wide variety of "leadership styles, degrees of risk tolerance, and approaches to governance."[70] Each military is guided by unique strategic, bureaucratic, and corporate interests.[71] And while most EU states are NATO members, the bloc includes a few neutral countries.[72]

European leaders often struggle to unite, as shown by their recurrent debates over how to prioritize threats like Russia, terrorism, and illegal immigration, and by their failure to reach consensus on China.[73] Although the Ukraine war has heightened concerns about Moscow, divisions remain, as illustrated by the persistent contrast between Eastern European states that spend heavily on defense to compensate for their proximity to Russia, and the region's major powers that benefit from greater distance (i.e., Germany and France) and, in some cases, protective mountain ranges (e.g., Italy and Spain).[74]

Rivalries exacerbate the problem. European states are reluctant to share sensitive information with one another.[75] Their support for the EU depends on how much they can gain from collective defense relative to other members.[76] France's efforts to promote strategic autonomy have often been perceived by other nations as an attempt to use European resources to boost Paris's influence.[77] Rivalries also exist within EU institutions, as illustrated by disputes over bureaucratic appointments and clashes between the European Commission and European Council.[78]

These fractures have generated considerable strategic incoherence. In most areas of foreign policy and defense, there is no such thing as a true European policy but a patchwork of national policies.[79] These divisions often lead to contradictions, redundancies, missed opportunities, and wasted resources. This has enabled Russia and China to use divide-and-rule tactics that have further weakened Europe's defense.[80]

NATO-EUROPE DEFENSE SPENDING INCREASES (2021–2025)



Source: "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025)," NATO; "Global Military Spending Rise Continues as European and Asian Expenditures Surge," SIPRI.

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The war in Ukraine has significantly catalyzed defense spending in European countries, though some have increased their budgets more than others.

AMERICA'S MISGUIDED AMBITION TO USE NATO TO CONTROL EUROPE

The U.S. isn't the root cause of Europe's defense issues, but it has long leveraged NATO to maintain control over the region and prevent challenges to its authority. American leaders initially sought to reduce their post-World War II military presence and even supported the creation of a European army in the mid-1950s.[81] However, after this project fell apart, amid the Soviet threat and Europe's divisions, Washington gradually realized that underwriting the region's security gave it significant leverage.[82] Despite frequent complaints

about allied free-riding, it kept a large troop presence in Europe and undermined any supranational European initiative.[83]

After the Cold War, American leaders committed to precluding "any hostile power from dominating [the] region."[84] Perpetuating Europe's dependence would help prevent any local challenge to U.S. leadership, secure new markets, and project American military power into neighboring regions.[85] These factors motivated Washington's push for NATO's expansion and opposition to European-led diplomatic and security structures.[86] They also explain its insistence that the EU focus on economics and that Brussels' nascent defense initiatives not lead to "decoupling, duplication, and discrimination" within NATO.[87] As in the past, those policies heavily relied on political interference and divide-and-rule tactics.[88]

Although Donald Trump questioned Washington's role in European security and threatened to leave NATO during his first presidential term, his administration was generally consistent in supporting U.S. activities within the Western alliance.[89] Trump treated NATO as a network of "bilateral security commitments" to maximize leverage over each European state.[90] He opposed the EU's efforts at defense integration even more fiercely than his predecessors.[91]

Though it adopted a friendlier approach, the Biden administration leveraged Russia's invasion of Ukraine to reaffirm the U.S. preponderance in Europe. This involved renewed investment in NATO, support for Finland's and Sweden's NATO entries, massive military aid to Kyiv, skyrocketing arms sales to European states, and a growing troop presence near Russia.[92] Meanwhile, despite occasional expressions of support, it remained ambivalent about EU strategic autonomy and sought to protect Washington's status as the region's key security guarantor.[93]

European leaders, despite much rhetoric to the contrary, never seriously sought to alter this arrangement, which allowed them to shift costs and advance regional integration while maintaining access to Congress and the White House.[94] Despite occasional tensions, renewed U.S. gestures often sufficed to revive their "complacency."[95] This pattern has persisted in recent years. Indeed, despite the boost from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, European strategic autonomy again lost momentum after February 2022.[96]

ROOTS OF EUROPE'S INDUSTRIAL-MILITARY STRUGGLES

Flawed government policies have long hindered Europe's defense-industrial potential. Chronic underinvestment has severely harmed local production capacity.[97] Despite its buildup after the Ukraine war, Europe's defense sector still faces uncertain long-term demand.[98] Similarly, intra-EU public R&D investments in defense remain insufficient, amounting to only €11 billion in 2023.[99]

A lack of private funding has prevented European companies from bridging the gap between basic research and industrial innovation, rewarding risk-taking, mitigating the unpredictability of public contract allocations, and rapidly scaling up production.[100] Banks, which provide most funding to European companies, are risk-averse.[101] Europe's financial markets, which are far less developed than in the U.S., lack "depth and liquidity."[102] Strict Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards and a widespread belief that supporting the defense sector is "unethical" have also taken a toll.[103] This shortage of European financial capital has enabled U.S. companies to attract European talent.[104] It has also helped U.S. investors dominate FDI inflows into EU tech sectors.[105]

Intra-regional fragmentation remains pervasive. European states have maintained separate regulations, export controls, and IP restrictions.[106] They have frequently opposed transnational mergers due to concerns

about job losses and the loss of industrial assets.[107] National firms have closely aligned their output capacity with their country's security priorities while leveraging their connections with the government to minimize foreign competition.[108]

Although the EU has attempted to address these issues, its influence is limited by its small budget (1 percent of the bloc's GDP), lack of fiscal powers, and inability to impose binding decisions.[109] The bloc's financial incentives remain inadequate to transform its members' defense spending.[110] Discussions about defense bonds, collective borrowing, a rearmament bank, and new taxes seem unlikely to materialize in the foreseeable future, given intra-EU divisions and the technical complexities involved.[111] Meanwhile, national rivalries and resistance to supranationalism have left the EU's joint procurement, R&D, and capability development efforts "under-resourced and disconnected."[112] In fact, the more support states receive from Brussels, the less they collaborate with each other.[113]

The European defense industry has suffered as a result. Underspending has sped up the aging of local "production lines" and constrained "surge capacity."[114] Fragmentation has led to wasted investments, higher production costs, the loss of economies of scale, strained supply chains, and increased vulnerability to inflation and shortages of materials, technologies, and workforce.[115] More broadly, European defense companies are too small to compete globally.[116]

These issues have prevented Europe from producing certain types of equipment.[117] They have also duplicated capabilities, reduced interoperability, weakened incentives for regional strategic planning, and limited opportunities to customize and integrate hardware.[118]

AMERICA'S CONTRIBUTION TO EUROPE'S INDUSTRIAL-MILITARY SHORTFALLS

The U.S. has long used NATO to penetrate European markets, export American technological standards, and spread American military doctrines across the Atlantic. This, in turn, has enabled Washington to consolidate its defense industry, improve its commercial balance, and create jobs at home.[119]

Meanwhile, European defense firms have missed out on domestic growth opportunities and remained vulnerable to acquisitions.[120] They've had significantly less access to the American procurement market.[121] Even when they do gain entry, they face much higher demands, especially regarding technology transfers.[122] Trans-Atlantic industrial collaboration has often involved "subcontracting, licensing, or participation" in U.S.-led initiatives.[123]

American officials have systematically opposed Europe's efforts to integrate its defense industries. For instance, when Brussels revived those ambitions after Brexit and the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the Trump administration condemned "a dramatic reversal of the last three decades of increased integration of the trans-Atlantic defense sector" and urged the EU to open its "paltry" European Defense Fund to U.S. companies.[124] It also lobbied against the bloc's technological ambitions because it wanted to preserve the dominance of American tech firms in European markets.[125]

The Biden administration failed to encourage the EU's hesitant discussions on defense integration.[126] Instead, it urged its allies to purchase American weapon systems, depriving European companies of vital domestic opportunities.[127] It promoted legislation such as the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act, which provided U.S. companies with massive subsidies, thereby weakening Europe's industrial

and technological competitiveness.[128] It continued to blunt Brussels' efforts to push back against the dominance of tech giants such as Google, Amazon, and Microsoft.[129]

European leaders remained ambivalent about shifting away from Washington's weapon supply systems, which offer greater availability, quality, and maintenance support.[130] Some NATO allies were still eager to buy American weapons to keep or attract U.S. troops.[131] Likewise, Sweden, the Netherlands, Poland, and others remained disinclined to endorse the EU's "buy European" proposals because their defense industries were too closely linked with America's.[132]

Thus, Europe's dependence on U.S. military hardware increased further. One leading study found that America's share of weapons imports among local NATO members rose from 52 percent in 2015–2019 to 64 percent in 2020–2024. Although other studies reported lower figures, many overlooked less direct forms of reliance, such as equipment sourced from external suppliers (i.e., Israel and South Korea) relying heavily on American inputs.[133] Europe's dependence is particularly pronounced in advanced capabilities such as air defense, missiles, and fighter aircraft.[134] Moreover, new generations of European military hardware (e.g., precision guidance systems) seem poised to rely heavily on U.S. technologies as the region falls behind in key sectors such as AI and quantum computing.[135]

These patterns reinforce Europe's strategic dependence on Washington. On the one hand, by preventing the emergence of a strong, integrated defense industry, they curtail Europe's production capacity and deprive the region of a strong advocate for strategic autonomy.[136] On the other hand, they constantly incentivize European leaders to meet or anticipate U.S. demands across a wide range of domains rather than cultivate an independent voice.[137]

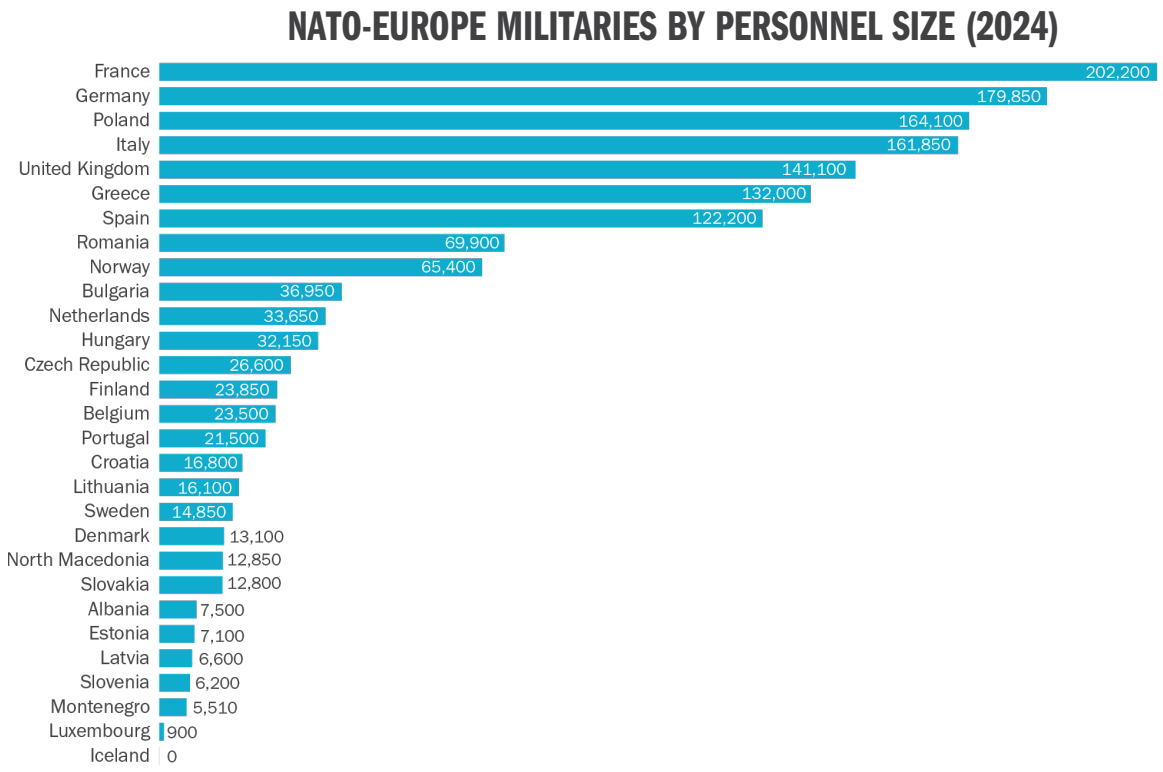
OPERATIONAL OUTCOME: A WEAK EUROPEAN COMBAT CAPABILITY

Inherent European weaknesses and U.S. efforts to keep the region dependent largely explain Europe's insufficient combat capability and low readiness levels.[138] As of 2025, the 23 countries that were both NATO and EU members fielded about 1.28 million active-duty military personnel, not to mention other European alliance members such as the UK (150,000) and Norway (24,000), compared to Russia's 1.26 million.[139] Yet European armies remain deficient in terms of talent, leadership, and even raw numbers.[140]

Although the region's aggregated capabilities seem respectable at first glance, many of those assets are obsolete in key domains such as battle tanks, infantry vehicles, and artillery units. National disparities remain enormous, as illustrated by the number of European states that have no tanks (12) or fighter aircraft (14).[141] European armies have low munition stocks, particularly for "smart systems."[142] They also lack a unified command structure.[143]

Europe's logistics system is ill-suited to military transport and hampered by national bureaucratic procedures.[144] Its west-to-east orientation, designed for U.S. reinforcements, overlooks other needs.[145] The region also lacks fuel facilities, repair assets, and ammunition stockpiles.[146]

Because of these weaknesses, Europe would struggle to defend itself without U.S. forces.[147] Likewise, it could not operate effectively without America's command-and-control systems as well as its Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets, air- and missile-defense systems, and other critical enablers.[148]



Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies. *The Military Balance 2025: Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defense Economics*. London: IISS, 2025.

On paper, Europe has a significant number of active-duty military personnel, yet European armies remain deficient in other ways such as expertise and leadership.

Similarly, America's nuclear arsenal and counterforce doctrine continue to underpin European deterrence. France and (to a lesser extent) the UK might be able to deter Russia in the future, especially if other European nations bolster their capabilities.[149] However, because of their far more modest capabilities and nuclear doctrines as well as persistent intra-European divisions, they cannot offer a credible alternative to the U.S. nuclear umbrella.[150] This is especially true for London, which has faced significant operational issues and cannot sustain its deterrent without American support.[151]

HOW THE TRUMP II ADMINISTRATION COMPROMISES NATO'S 5 PERCENT PLEDGE

The second Trump administration has rightly promoted NATO's 5 percent budget pledge as a corrective to Europe's dependence. However, its persistent desire to dominate Europe risks compounding some of the region's problems.

WASHINGTON'S AMBIGUITIES TOWARD RETRENCHMENT

In some respects, the Trump II administration has paved the way for a stronger Europe. It has begun phasing out certain local U.S. regiments.[152] It has downgraded the status of the U.S. regional Air Force Command and NATO's Air Command.[153] Washington has sought to transfer leadership of the Allied Joint Force

Commands in Norfolk, Virginia, and Naples, Italy, to European generals and to cut some of its NATO command-and-planning positions.[154] It plans to reduce its involvement in the alliance's "force-generation" and "defense-planning" by 2027.[155]

The Trump administration has signaled that America's support should not be taken for granted. For instance, in early 2025, it temporarily halted military assistance and intelligence sharing with Ukraine.[156] Washington has begun phasing out its military aid to Eastern European countries.[157] President Trump has suggested that Article 5 of NATO's charter might not apply to states that underinvest in their defense.[158] He has warned that the U.S. might no longer export its top weapon systems to certain countries because "someday maybe they [will not be America's] allies."[159]

Washington's January 2026 National Defense Strategy confirmed this "sharp shift… in approach, focus, and tone."[160] The U.S. aims to "incentivize and enable" fulfillment of the 5 percent pledge.[161] It will provide "more limited" support and adjust its "force posture" to Europe's actual capabilities and the actual challenge posed by Russia, which it considers a "manageable threat." In summary, it expects its allies to "take primary responsibility for [their] conventional defense."[162]

However, the U.S. commitment to retrenchment remains in question. President Trump's sharp critique of NATO allies is neither new nor surprising, given that he views statecraft as a continuous pursuit of leverage.[163] His "America First" coalition includes factions that oppose restraint and even support primacy.[164] Moreover, despite his criticisms of America's endless wars, Trump has shown increased interventionist impulses, culminating in the recent U.S. war in Iran.[165]

In fact, the Trump administration's trans-Atlantic policies have not fundamentally departed from those of its predecessors. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said he "expects" NATO to "be sustained for generations to come."[166] In the same vein, America's latest National Security Strategy has described Europe as "strategically and culturally vital to the United States."[167]

To be sure, Washington has been extremely assertive in recent months. In January 2026, President Trump reiterated long-standing claims to Denmark's Greenland, arguing that U.S. "ownership and control [were] an absolute necessity" and refusing for days to rule out hostile economic or military actions.[168] In April, he declared that the U.S. would withdraw 5,000 troops from Germany within a year, at least partly in response to Berlin's criticisms of his war in Iran, and even suggested additional reductions.[169] Trump has also repeatedly insulted NATO allies and individual European leaders.[170]

Yet far from being a sign of disinterest, these moves reflect a desire to preserve U.S. dominance on harsher terms than before.[171] They stem from a perception of European helplessness and a belief that, although not always successful, America's threats may eventually compel its allies to submit.[172]

Washington has occasionally softened its rhetoric when it realized it was generating too much resistance. For instance, after the Greenland controversy, it called European states America's "cherished allies and oldest friends."[173] True to a long-standing American tradition, this show of warmth was intended to keep European leaders "divided and off-balance" to better maintain U.S. hegemony.[174]

COMPOUNDING EUROPE'S MILITARY DEPENDENCE

The limits of the Trump II administration's drawdown from Europe risk perpetuating the region's reliance on Washington.

As of early 2026, the U.S. local footprint still hovered around 80,000 troops.[175] This was consistent with the Biden administration's post-Ukraine-war levels and well above pre-war figures.[176]

The Trump administration has confirmed that an American general will serve as supreme allied commander Europe (SACEUR), continuing the tradition since 1951 of American leadership over European forces.[177] It has reinforced its control over NATO's Marine, Air, and Land Commands, which are critical for supporting alliance operations, improving trans-Atlantic interoperability, and "provid[ing] wartime component command headquarters."[178] President Trump has also shown willingness to offer security guarantees to Ukraine, including intelligence support, "battlefield oversight," and participation in a European-led air defense system.[179]

Despite Europe's growing pushback against the war in Iran, Trump's demands clearly indicate that Washington still views its European bases and NATO's support as critical to any U.S. intervention in the Middle East or Africa.[180] Although Trump has issued new threats to leave NATO since then, his administration favors punishing or rewarding allies based on their level of support.[181] Likewise, the forthcoming U.S. troop withdrawal from Germany represents only a small share of America's regional footprint; it will not compromise European security and some of these troops might be redeployed to other parts of Europe.[182] In late May, President Trump announced that the U.S. would deploy an additional 5,000 troops to Poland.[183]

The Trump administration has tacitly indicated its intention to uphold the U.S. nuclear umbrella over Europe.[184] In fact, Washington intends to upgrade its atomic arsenal in the region and has reportedly begun deploying nuclear weapons in the UK for the first time since 2008.[185] The U.S. is also considering deploying nuclear warheads and nuclear-capable aircraft in other European countries, a prospect that Eastern European states strongly encourage.[186]

The U.S. government's modest efforts toward retrenchment have faced sharp congressional condemnations.[187] Congress has passed legislation that could prevent the executive branch from reducing the U.S. presence in Europe to fewer than 76,000 personnel for more than 45 days without consulting European allies and proving that such cuts benefit U.S. national security.[188] It is also worth remembering that President Trump cannot withdraw from NATO without congressional authorization (a highly unlikely event).[189]

U.S. military leaders have likewise tried to resist retrenchment.[190] Frustration seems especially strong in the Army, which sees Europe's predominantly land-based theater as crucial to offset its marginal role in the Indo-Pacific.[191] The Trump administration also faces a powerful military-industrial complex with a vested interest in perpetuating America's allies' dependence on Washington.[192]

Meanwhile, European leaders have stuck to a familiar response. Despite their dismay at Trump's re-election, they initially tried to placate him.[193] As shown by their desperate attempts to keep the U.S. involved in Ukraine, they "consistently adopted a posture of submission."[194] Although partly successful (for now), their pushback on Greenland was "disorganized" and "hesitant."[195] Moreover, Washington's subsequent tactical softening immediately reignited their desire for "normalcy."[196] This led most European leaders to quietly support the U.S. and Israel during the early stages of the war against Iran.[197]

Admittedly, European leaders have since criticized the war, reduced their support for U.S. operations, and declined Trump's request for direct European involvement.[198] The conflict has also prompted them to accelerate their efforts to ensure continuity of NATO's activities in the event of an American withdrawal.[199] Yet their resistance remains limited and ambiguous.[200] For instance, while many European nations are

ready to join a multilateral mission to help stabilize the Strait of Hormuz after the war, Germany has sought to walk back some of its recent criticisms, declaring that Washington remains its most critical NATO ally.[201] More broadly, European leaders are striving to demonstrate their strategic value to the Trump administration ahead of NATO's July 2026 annual summit.[202]

In that context, the Trump administration's persistent ambiguities could discourage European leaders from making the domestic sacrifices and intra-regional compromises necessary to develop their defense capacity. They could also motivate them to continue damage control while advocating more passionately for their cause in Washington, especially after a new administration takes office in January 2029.[203] Yet their persistent desire to limit tensions at all costs may encourage the Trump administration to make new demands that could further delay the emergence of Europe's strategic autonomy.[204]

COMPROMISING THE ECONOMIC FOUNDATIONS OF EUROPE'S DEFENSE BUILDUP

The Trump administration's policies may weaken the economic vitality necessary for Europe's defense buildup.

Washington's hostile trans-Atlantic policies have hurt European economies. For example, the July 2025 U.S.-EU trade deal framework, which the bloc accepted largely out of fear, included a 15 percent tariff on European exports (with some exemptions).[205] Brussels may not honor all these commitments, but the Trump administration has renewed its offensive to ensure the deal's full implementation, threatening further retribution.[206] Even if they're only partially carried out, these tariffs and other forms of economic coercion could erode Europe's capacity to rearm.[207] Moreover, as they exacerbate the strain on the region's struggling welfare systems, U.S. policies could trigger a "radical rejection of the rearmament drive" among European citizens.[208]

Beyond tariffs, Washington has worked to deepen Europe's economic dependence on the U.S. For instance, the July 2025 U.S.-EU trade deal framework required the bloc to purchase $750 billion in American energy annually.[209] If the deal is fully implemented, the U.S. share of the EU's liquefied natural gas imports, currently at 57 percent, could rise to 75–80 percent by the end of the decade.[210] Likewise, the Trump administration has offered massive financial and regulatory support for the U.S. tech industry and lobbied aggressively against the EU's attempts to limit its dominance in defense-relevant domains such as AI, cloud computing, and cybersecurity.[211] Its hostile economic policies may compound Europe's dependency on America's market, investment, and payment systems.[212]

The Trump administration has exerted political pressure to ensure that Europe's defense buildup would result in a "supercharging" of America's defense industrial base rather than tapping into the region's potential.[213] In this regard, the "buy American" requirements in the July 2025 U.S.-EU preliminary deal are bound to hurt European military companies both at home and abroad.[214] Despite occasional overtures, the Trump administration has consistently lobbied to prevent the EU from integrating its defense industries and restricting the dominance of U.S. military corporations.[215] This has helped keep Europe dependent on American defense technologies.[216]

ERODING THE POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS OF A EUROPEAN BUILDUP

Europe's defense prospects could also suffer from the Trump II administration's proclaimed desire to interfere in the region's local politics.[217]

The U.S. wants to bolster European leaders with whom it shares ideological affinities.[218] But "cultivating resistance to Europe's current trajectory" also signals a much more ambitious agenda.[219]

Europe's far-right groups remain divided.[220] They have reservations about President Trump's style and haven't welcomed his attacks on European sovereignty.[221] These movements also know that Trump is deeply unpopular with European voters.[222] Many observers have interpreted the recent fall of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the EU's main internal spoiler and most pro-Trump leader, as a clear rejection of the U.S. and harbinger of greater European strategic autonomy.[223]

Yet Trump still has significant support in many of Europe's far-right parties.[224] The U.S. government could help those movements fund their activities and spread disinformation.[225] Moreover, the pressure that its economic policies have created on European welfare systems might boost the far right's popularity.[226] The same is true of other American initiatives that disregard the region's economic interests, such as the war in Iran.[227] President Trump could further discredit the mainstream parties in power by repeatedly forcing them to bend the knee.[228]

Most of the region's far-right movements oppose a European-led NATO or an EU-led defense.[229] Their continued rise would fuel societal fractures across Europe and alter the makeup of EU institutions.[230] Although Washington's interference may trigger a nationalist pushback, this momentum could exacerbate intra-EU divisions rather than generate regional unity in areas such as trade, technology, and space.[231]

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Trump II administration should leverage NATO's 5 percent budget pledge to rebalance the trans-Atlantic relationship across the strategic, defense-industrial, and operational levels.

STRATEGIC

The emergence of a truly capable European defense will require Washington to end its longstanding efforts to maintain dominance over Europe's military, economic, technological, and political spheres. Instead, the U.S. should support its allies in strengthening their national power, overcoming their divisions, and asserting their strategic voice.

This reorientation entails letting Europe take a leadership role within NATO. The shared standards, common strategic planning, and "highly integrated structures" that the Western alliance has developed over decades give Europe an ideal instrument for safeguarding collective security.[232] Furthermore, NATO can enable a smooth transition from U.S. domination to European responsibility.[233]

Washington should also provide rhetorical support for a stronger EU endowed with substantial security powers. It should encourage European leaders to overcome their divisions and end its opposition to the bloc's defense initiatives.[234] The EU can excel in nontraditional security areas, such as sanctions, cybersecurity, and critical infrastructure protection.[235] It also has genuine potential for capability development.[236]

The U.S. should tone down its antagonism toward Europe, including President Trump's baseless claims about Greenland, his insults toward NATO allies, and his personal attacks on European leaders.[237] This aggressiveness could divide European states and lead them to prioritize expediency over strategic vision, thereby exacerbating local capability gaps.[238] In a worst-case scenario, it could prompt Russia to test NATO's cohesion.[239]

To be sure, Washington's adjustments alone will not suffice; Europe must ultimately step up. However, these adjustments can help European leaders recognize that the United States will not stand in the way of European strategic autonomy and that expanding their combat capabilities will only help stabilize the trans-Atlantic relationship.

DEFENSE-INDUSTRIAL

In the defense-industrial sphere, Washington should end its threats and lobbying to force "buy American" deals and other harmful economic measures on European leaders. It should halt its efforts to prevent the EU from consolidating its military industries and supporting local defense start-ups. Instead, it should encourage Brussels to "integrate, coordinate, and supplement" European defense spending, joint procurement, and R&D efforts at the necessary scale.[240]

In parallel, Washington should remove the commercial barriers and export controls that constrain access to the U.S. defense market and ease requirements for local private European investments.[241] Efforts to make U.S. security and foreign disclosure regulations less opaque and more predictable would be welcomed.[242]

A larger European defense industry will have greater political capital to bolster support for European defense within EU institutions. Likewise, allowing Europeans to build their own defense industries may generate the domestic political coalitions that will sustain defense spending over time.[243]

Washington should increase its political and financial support for closer trans-Atlantic coordination on economic security, including supply chain resilience and access to critical minerals. Greater involvement in initiatives such as the U.S.-EU dialogue on security and defense would enable trans-Atlantic partners to reduce their vulnerabilities to China.[244]

European leaders should build on those foundations to integrate their national procurement processes either regionally or through subregional coalitions based on industrial complementarities or shared threat perceptions, and to focus on the right capabilities.[245] For instance, they should significantly increase production capacity for all types of munitions (e.g., artillery, long-range missiles, and interceptors), especially precision-guided.[246] They should bolster long-range strike capabilities to threaten Russia's territory to ensure credible deterrence. They should leverage their industrial advantages and Ukraine's expertise to boost drone production. Missile defense systems and interceptors should also be prioritized. And despite their growing vulnerability, armored vehicles remain an indispensable investment for any future conflict against Moscow.[247]

Although they already have capabilities in these areas, European leaders need to dramatically expand their production of strategic enablers to reduce their dependence on the U.S., including in strategic airlift, air refueling, ISR, and missile defense.[248] For instance, given the distances involved in any potential fight against Russia, air refueling assets may enable European aircraft to loiter over targets and reach operational theaters otherwise beyond reach.[249]

OPERATIONAL

In the operational domain, the U.S. should steadily decrease its military presence in Europe. Reducing to about 30,000 troops by the end of the decade, along with a 50 percent cut in U.S. air and naval assets, seems like a reasonable goal.[250] European defense ambitions have repeatedly stalled when Washington has signaled continued commitment. This historical pattern suggests that Europeans are unlikely to meet the 5 percent spending pledge unless America initiates retrenchment first. A steady, credible reduction in U.S. forces may incentivize them to bolster European combat capability.

In the meantime, Washington should encourage the creation of a "permanent standing pan-European reaction force" of about 100,000 troops under NATO or EU responsibility within a decade.[251] It should transfer NATO's key command positions while maintaining staff involvement "at every level."[252] It could also promote "double-hatted" NATO-EU positions and smaller European command-and-control coalitions based on geographic or functional priorities.[253] As long as the U.S. maintains its leadership in the alliance's key positions, it will discourage European leaders from assuming greater responsibility. A reduction in U.S. staffing in leadership roles can incentivize Europe to ensure their own defense.

To make the most of this transition, U.S. allies should conceive their standing force as a lethal "mass of maneuver" that could be quickly dispatched and concentrated in any European theater.[254] Poland is key in this regard. Given its size, terrain, and location, the country is both Eastern Europe's defense stronghold and an ideal launching pad for defending the Baltic states.[255] However, European leaders could also deploy light assets to the Baltics to slow any Russian offensive while reinforcements arrive.[256]

To bolster readiness levels, European leaders should significantly improve Europe's infrastructure (e.g., bridges), integrate the region's railways, and optimize port traffic.[257] European armies should improve their troops' training and invest far more in maintenance and spare parts.[258] They should also integrate their C4ISR capabilities to better coordinate their movements and respond to the enemy.[259]

A BALANCED TRANS-ATLANTIC RELATIONSHIP

The adjustments required of Europe's NATO members to meet the 5 percent budget pledge they made in July 2025 and assume responsibility for their own defense are likely to disrupt well-entrenched habits, upset powerful vested interests, and generate strategic anxiety.

Yet rebalancing the U.S.-Europe partnership is the best way forward. Given its key role in the region's geopolitics and its immense national power, Washington is uniquely positioned to help Europe overcome its weaknesses and become a truly autonomous partner. This will be achieved not by managing Europe's transition but by credibly stepping back to incentivize Europe to step up. Provided it sheds its hegemonic impulses and maintains a constructive approach toward its NATO allies, the U.S. can steer the trans-Atlantic relationship toward a more sustainable path that benefits all.

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