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After NATO — the way forward

Global instability demands action. Europe's time to lead has arrived

In *The World Crisis*, his personal account of World War I, Winston Churchill noted that 'the moral consequence of the United States joining the Allies was indeed the deciding cause in the conflict… [Without America] the war would have ended in a peace by negotiation, or, in other words, a German victory.' Such a statement chimes in with Churchill's public pronouncements of an Anglo-American 'special relationship' borne out of the realisation that Britain cannot go it alone.

Yet, as he was writing *The World Crisis*, in his private diaries, Churchill was articulating a very different position: 'It always seems to be assumed that it is our duty to humour the US and minister to their vanity. They do nothing for us in return but exact their last pound of flesh.' In fact, Churchill went as far as pondering a military confrontation with the United States, which, according to the established wisdom of the time, was 'unthinkable', but he insisted that 'everyone knows this is not true.' For, however 'foolish and disastrous such a war would be, we do not wish to put ourselves in the power of the US.'

Today, Europe is facing a US that is actively weakening European security. The Trump administration is attacking democracy on the continent and supporting far-right and neo-fascist political parties, directly interfering in the domestic affairs of European countries from the UK through Germany to Romania and Malta. Executing the 'largest reversal of US foreign policy in eight decades', the views of the Trump administration appear to be echoing those of the Russian regime by accusing Ukraine of starting the war, demanding that Kyiv pay neo-colonial reparations to the US and publicly humiliating Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, all the while threatening the sovereignty of long-standing allies such as Denmark and Canada.

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In this respect, Churchill's premonition of a strategic confrontation with the 'bloody Yankees' is no longer unthinkable, but a scenario that can no longer be ignored. Europe

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is facing the dilemma of becoming a vassal of either a vengeful US administration or outright colonisation by an imperial Russian regime seeking to rewrite the end of the Cold War and crush the self-determination of Eastern Europe while conducting an open genocide in Ukraine.

No one on the continent should be under any illusions about the strategic intent and influence of the current administration in Washington. The self-proclaimed king of the US, who has given himself the powers to provide the 'authoritative interpretation' of the laws, does not want a return to the transatlantic business-as-usual. As President Trump put it, 'the European Union was formed to screw the United States', and it therefore must be punished — either through tariffs or by encouraging Moscow to attack allies that do not pay up.

A major victim of the US self-sabotage is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The US-Russia summit in Saudi Arabia put the final nail in NATO's coffin. Moscow knows now that Europe can no longer rely on the American security umbrella. The US not only voted alongside Russia to oppose a UN resolution condemning Moscow's aggression against Ukraine, Washington also suspended offensive cyberoperations against Russia, paused military aid for Kyiv and is drafting a plan to ease Russia sanctions. And while rumours of an imminent withdrawal of US troops have been downplayed in European capitals, now more than ever the security guarantees enshrined in Article 5 of the NATO Treaty seem doubtful. After his election victory, Germany's likely future chancellor Friedrich Merz went even further, declaring that strengthening Europe was his absolute priority so that 'we can really achieve independence from the US.'

Five parallel strategic lines

In reality, it is Paris and London, not Brussels, Berlin or Warsaw, that are leading the transformation of European security. Now is the time for Ursula von der Leyen's 'geopolitical Europe' to leave behind a legacy of infantile strategic thinking. If the European project is to have a future, policymakers must abandon the comfort of routine and redesign Europe's defence and security policy along five parallel and equally important strategic lines.

First, the EU member states need an action programme to urgently increase their conventional military assistance to Ukraine, with no restrictions on weapons systems and tactical use. Alongside these efforts, the EU Commission's ReArm Europe Plan aims to raise an additional

€800 billion for defence. But it remains primarily focused on funding national defence capabilities rather than building a common European defence industrial base. Ukraine's defence needs equipment and systems in almost every area, including air defence, artillery shells, missiles, tanks, mines, drones and other equipment. The €20 billion military aid package planned by European leaders in response to Trump's attacks on Zelenskyy sends an important signal of support. But it is not enough. European countries have the capacity to replace the US to ensure Ukraine's combat capability — paradoxically, the EU 'would only have to spend an additional 0.12 per cent of its GDP.'

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Second, Europeans should work towards a common nuclear deterrent. Starting, but not ending, with extending the British and French capabilities, a nuclear deterrent is particularly relevant to the security of countries on the eastern flank, such as Poland and the Baltic states. Putin sees a historic opportunity to make Russia great again, and he wants this to be his legacy. Without a nuclear deterrent, the existential survival of the countries of the eastern part of the continent – as well as that of Ukraine – is subject to the imperial whims of Putin.

Third, the debate on the European army and the continent's security capabilities has been long and extensive. It is paradoxical that despite the decades of NATO and EU security summits, as well as joint military exercises, not to mention the three years of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, such a force does not exist. Yet, the nearly decade-old experience of NATO's multinational brigade in the Baltics proves that this is not impossible. Located in Latvia, since 2016, the Baltic Brigade has provided the first truly multinational force on the European continent, bringing together troops from Albania, Canada, Czechia, Denmark, Iceland, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. Its framework and experience can prove instructive in the establishment of any future European forces.

Fourth, the increase of defence capabilities will be a flash in the pan if it isn't backstopped by a robust long-term strategic vision for a European security order. The latest Munich Security Conference showcased Europe's outdated outlook in response to the radical disruption to European security. Vice President JD Vance made it clear that the US does not care about past alliances and shared historical experiences. The continent has a small window of opportunity to recognise that with its

commitment to diversity, environmental and social sustainability, and the rule of law, the European project represents everything that the current American administration detests and seeks to eliminate.

Finding allies

The recalibration of the continent's strategic vision demands a rethink of Europe's own approach to partnerships and alliances. Washington's diplomatic *Trumpocalypse* has soured America's relations with many of its partners. Europe should reach out to countries such as Canada, Mexico, Japan or South Korea, who have concerns about the Trump administration. While in these cases, there are historical precedents and security alignments that will assist the new partnerships, there are many prospective partners in a multipolar world – especially among the so-called tech middle powers in the Middle East and Asia – with whom Europe can develop a pragmatic and transactional outreach without undermining the core values of the European project.

The relationship with China will require delicate balancing. Beijing may find the emerging imperial alignment between Russia and the US as unpalatable as Europe. It is not inconceivable that the new US tariffs and the new détente between Washington and Moscow will bring Europe and China strategically closer than anyone expects. The current shifts also open up opportunities for renewed Sino-EU multilateral cooperation in areas such as arms control and non-proliferation. But a blossoming comprehensive partnership between Beijing and Brussels is doubtful, as the close economic and security cooperation between Russia and China is unlikely to be significantly affected by the Trump-Putin honeymoon.

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Fifth, Europe's strategic vision should be guided by a 'neighbourhood-first' principle. The 'geo' in Europe's new geopolitical approach means that it must focus on its immediate neighbourhood: the stability of societies across North Africa; the reconstruction of Syria, Libya and (later) Ukraine — where Chinese and Indian companies could become valuable partners; and on containing Russian influence in the Balkans and the Caucasus.

These strategic changes require bold and forward-looking leadership in European countries that can communicate the paradigm shift to their electorates. The scope of such a security vision must accommodate ambitions to substantially integrate and expand the continent's own hard

power capabilities, including enhanced military assistance to Ukraine, a common nuclear deterrent and the creation of a European army and satellite and intelligence infrastructures. Such goals are not far-fetched. European countries have the industries, the skills and the financial firepower to make them a reality. Ultimately, it is a question of political will.

Unlike in Churchill's day, the question for the continent is not whether it can go it alone without the US. Europe is now alone and facing the 'unthinkable', with Washington aiding and abetting those who seek to undermine the continent's security. Europe has no choice but to forge its own path to security, protecting its values and interests in an increasingly uncertain and hostile world.



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