

Europe's Defense Dilemma

How to Prepare for a Future Without American Protection

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Executive Summary

As the United States lessens its military support to Europe, Europeans will have to adapt the continent's defense frameworks and architecture. With or without a ceasefire in Ukraine, Russia will remain the main source of European insecurity in the years ahead. There are three main models for Europe's future defense architecture: a more European NATO, in which Europeans assume primary responsibility for conventional defense but are backstopped by U.S. nuclear guarantees; a European defense union, in which the European Union develops its own defense structure; and a European defense coalition, in which an ad hoc coalition of European states, including Ukraine, assumes responsibility for the continent's defense.

Each model has different military, political, legal, and industrial implications, both for Europe and the United States. No single model offers a complete solution for the future of European defense, and some combination of the three is the likeliest outcome. A more European NATO would allow for the most continuity, but a European defense union would be a better option if the United States withdraws mostly or entirely from the continent. A European defense coalition, for its part, offers the greatest flexibility, but the lack of centralized planning and decision-making architecture could prove costly in times of crisis. European leaders should think of these frameworks as complementary, not mutually exclusive, while focusing on defense investment, capability development, and defense industrial expansion. A European defense coalition, based on a durable group of willing European states, including Ukraine, could provide the necessary political flexibility that neither a reformed NATO nor the EU could in a crisis, but would need to be complemented by more permanent support structures from NATO or the EU.

Introduction

The United States' disengagement from European security—as exemplified by the Pentagon's Europe Force Posture Review, which will determine how to shrink the U.S. military footprint on the continent—has forced European allies to rethink their defense posture. The Trump administration has

often been openly hostile toward Europe; President Donald Trump has made ambiguous remarks about NATO's defense commitments, threatened to annex Greenland, berated Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Oval Office in front of reporters, and suspended all aid to Ukraine, including, in October 2026, intelligence cooperation, in particular early ballistic missile warnings. Although this retreat is only beginning, Europe's future defense architecture is likely to look very different in the next decade. Its final state will depend on two key variables: the extent of the Russian threat, particularly how and when Russia tests Europe's defenses beyond the war against Ukraine, and the extent of U.S. disengagement from European security, which may not only affect conventional capabilities stationed in Europe but could also undermine the credibility of the U.S. nuclear guarantee. Taken together, those factors make a return to the post-1945 transatlantic security model in the foreseeable future unlikely. Instead, Europe's defense architecture will evolve, either toward a new defense framework that enables greater European strategic responsibility, inside or outside NATO, or toward a more fragmented and unstable security order in the absence of sustained U.S. leadership. As Europeans rebuild their armed forces, expand defense production, and reverse decades of underinvestment, they are increasingly preparing for a future in which the United States no longer underwrites European security. Washington, however, faces its own dilemma: how to reduce its military commitment while retaining political and industrial influence in Europe and managing the implications of a more autonomous Europe, if and when it successfully emerges.

Against this backdrop, three models are imaginable for Europe's defense, each with different costs and benefits for Europe and the United States. The first model, a more European NATO, envisages a rebalanced alliance in which Europeans assume primary responsibility for conventional defense, as envisioned by the Pentagon's NATO 3.0 approach, but can still trust the U.S. nuclear security guarantee. The second model, a European defense union, assumes a major deterioration in the U.S.-Europe relationship or a paralysis of NATO in times of crisis and conflict, necessitating the subsequent development of a European defense union within the European Union based on Article 42(7), the Treaty on European Union's mutual defense clause. The third model, a European defense coalition, argues that neither a reformed NATO nor the EU can reliably provide the political flexibility required

for rapid action in a crisis, leading instead to a new defense architecture based on a durable coalition of willing European states, which would also include Ukraine.

Each scenario assumes that U.S. disengagement from European security continues beyond the current administration and becomes a structural feature of U.S. foreign policy toward Europe. Each model also assumes that Russia remains the principal threat in Europe's security environment, regardless of a potential ceasefire in Ukraine. Accordingly, every option is assessed against the need to deter and, if necessary, defend against Russian aggression, while considering its industrial, legal, financial, and operational implications, as well as its consequences for U.S.-Europe relations. Europe's future defense architecture will most likely combine elements of all three options rather than conform neatly to a single option. Nevertheless, examining the options separately provides a useful analytical framework for understanding the trade-offs and opportunities associated with different pathways for Europe and the United States, and can illuminate recommendations for European and American policymakers.

A More European NATO

Policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic often see a more European NATO as the most viable option for a future European defense architecture, because it is closest to the status quo and to the current U.S. approach, albeit with some alterations. The United States has made clear since 2025 that the balance of burden within NATO needs to shift toward European NATO allies. U.S. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby has spearheaded this approach, referred to as NATO 3.0, in which Europeans take on primary (although not exclusive) responsibility for Europe's conventional defense.¹ In 2026, the U.S. government undertook steps to reduce its force levels in Europe, as well as the capabilities it assigns to NATO in case of a crisis, and ordered a force posture review to analyze what U.S. military assets might be further removed from Europe.² European NATO allies have responded with urgent procurement orders to fill the resulting gaps.

As a consequence of those U.S. demands, Europeans have had to take on more responsibility within NATO's Command Structure and Force Structure. In one of the most significant adjustments since the

post-Cold War era, European allies have assumed command of several NATO Joint Force Commands (JFCs): the United Kingdom will assume command of JFC Norfolk from the United States, Italy will take command of JFC Naples from the United States, and Germany and Poland will rotate command of JFC Brunssum.³ This means that all three of NATO's four-star JFCs will be led by European officers. At the same time, the United States has extended its leadership over the theater component commands (land, air, and maritime) by taking over Allied Maritime Command, which was previously held by the UK. In essence, therefore, one element of NATO 3.0 is a greater European operational role that still maintains the United States' overall political leadership of the alliance.

Reforming NATO Structures for Europe

A more European NATO could evolve through reforms to NATO's Command Structure, force posture, and nuclear arrangements.⁴ The greatest challenge concerns military command. Since 1951, Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) has always been an American officer, overseeing NATO's operational commands across all domains.⁵ The dual-hatted role as both SACEUR and commander of U.S. European Command also provides the institutional link between the U.S. nuclear command structure and NATO's Nuclear Planning Group, allowing nuclear sharing without violating the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Replacing an American SACEUR with a European commander would therefore fundamentally alter NATO's relationship with U.S. military structures and extended nuclear deterrence. NATO's nuclear arrangements remain closely tied to U.S. capabilities through SACEUR, U.S. nuclear sharing arrangements, and American missile defense assets in Europe.

If a European SACEUR were ever appointed, the most credible candidates would be from France or the UK, given their nuclear capabilities; Germany increasingly possesses the military resources but lacks an independent nuclear deterrent. Although France has proposed initiatives to strengthen Europe's nuclear role, and Europe would not necessarily require numerical parity with either the United States or Russia to maintain a credible deterrent, European allies are not yet prepared to assume collective responsibility for nuclear deterrence.⁶

One possible compromise would be for the United States to obtain the deputy SACEUR position, preserving a degree of institutional and nuclear continuity. Although within the framework of NATO 3.0, the immediate emphasis remains on conventional defense, and there has been no fundamental change in the U.S. nuclear posture toward Europe, a substantial reduction of U.S. forces before Europeans can assume greater conventional responsibilities could also weaken nuclear deterrence. For now, bipartisan support in Congress has prevented a major reduction of U.S. forces in Europe, but those legal constraints may not endure.

Ultimately, any meaningful Europeanization of NATO on the conventional side depends on closing Europe's conventional capability gap with the United States.⁷ Although European countries collectively possess substantial armed forces, they remain heavily dependent on U.S. strategic enablers, including space, integrated air and missile defense, long-range strike capability, strategic lift, logistics, cyber, industrial capacity, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.⁸ They also struggle to deploy and sustain large formations across Europe, which implies they could struggle to defend against Russia without substantial support from U.S. forces. Some European countries, such as Germany, are increasing defense spending and growing their militaries, but more is needed. So far, European efforts to mobilize European joint debt for collaborative procurement have remained limited in scale, and the political will for large-scale European rearmament financed through joint debt seems lacking.

For Europeans to effectively deter Russia with conventional capabilities, recent studies advocate for stronger multinational corps headquarters, larger integrated air formations, and permanent European maritime groupings capable of operating with greater autonomy.⁹ The objective is to create a European pillar able to generate and sustain high-intensity operations while reducing reliance on U.S. support.¹⁰ Furthermore, a European NATO could include shifting operational command further toward NATO's eastern flank, strengthening regional headquarters, and restructuring the alliance's land, air, and maritime commands to reflect greater European responsibility.

A More European NATO, but How European?

European allies have sought to reinforce NATO and reassure Washington of their commitment to conventional defense, which is reflected in their acceptance of the 5 percent of GDP target on defense spending set at the 2025 Hague Summit. Despite ambiguous political signals from the Trump administration over Greenland and Ukraine, most allies calculate that the NATO 3.0 bargain offers the best chance of preserving U.S. NATO membership, as well as Article 5 and its nuclear guarantee. If the United States remains committed to NATO, this model is likely to remain the preferred option for Europe's defense. But recent U.S. policies have undermined European confidence in that commitment. Disagreements over Iran, the denial of European airbases for U.S. operations, the dramatic reduction of U.S. weapons stockpiles, and Trump's threats to annex Greenland have highlighted growing political tensions and even raised the unprecedented prospect of one NATO ally threatening another.

In the event that the U.S.-Europe relationship further deteriorates, the United States could significantly weaken the alliance and undermine Europe's defense even without formally leaving NATO by exploiting its consensus rules, its control of the SACEUR post, and its dominant military capabilities. Washington could block defense plans, force goals, command reforms, budgets, partnership programs, regional plans, readiness certifications, and NATO Defense Planning Process targets, while also reducing senior personnel, leaving key posts vacant, and withdrawing critical intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets. Such actions could effectively paralyze NATO while leaving the alliance formally intact.

If NATO were reduced to a zombie organization in this manner, Europeans could not rely on a more European NATO for their own defense because of potential U.S. obstruction.¹¹ NATO would thus never be European enough for Europeans to mobilize it independently in the event of a crisis Washington does not want to participate in. Absent such a catastrophic situation, the process of a greater Europeanization of NATO is not automatic or without disagreement. Allies disagree about the threat Russia poses; southern allies are increasingly focused on the Middle East and are willing to trade in higher defense spending for domestic priorities. Reduced U.S. leadership in NATO would have to be

replaced by stronger European political leadership, and it is unclear which formation of European states—from the European Three grouping of France, Germany, and the UK to the European Group of Five of France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the UK, or an even wider circle—can provide European leadership that is capable of unifying differing threat perceptions, strategic cultures, and levels of risk tolerance.

U.S. Options on the Europeanization of NATO

Under current policy objectives, a greater Europeanization of NATO would be supported by the United States so long as it reinforces, rather than replaces, American leadership. Washington wants European allies to assume primary (but not exclusive) responsibility for the continent's conventional defense, allowing the United States to prioritize the Indo-Pacific. A stronger European pillar would therefore serve U.S. interests provided it strengthens NATO's military effectiveness, preserves American nuclear leadership, and sustains the alliance as Washington's principal vehicle for political and military influence in Europe and as a basis to project power globally. There are also clear economic incentives. European commitments to spend 5 percent of GDP on defense by 2035 expand the transatlantic defense market, as Europeans will continue to rely in some measure on American military technologies and systems in the future.

However, U.S. support for greater European military autonomy would waver should the Europeanization of NATO lead to defense industrial autonomy in Europe. Washington would push back on initiatives designed to reduce European dependencies on U.S. defense firms, because those companies underpin American defense and economic competitiveness as well as its technological influence. The future of NATO 3.0 therefore rests on the idea that the United States will support a more capable European pillar, but not one that diminishes American influence within NATO or its defense industrial position. Although Undersecretary Colby argues that European rearmament poses little commercial threat, because no competitor can apparently match the U.S. defense industrial base, this confidence sits uneasily with Europe's growing efforts to strengthen its own defense industry and reduce strategic dependence on American suppliers.¹²

A more European NATO is therefore the most palatable option for U.S. interests in the short and medium term. However, in the long term, U.S. policymakers may underestimate the risks and costs associated with a more European NATO. First, European NATO allies have experienced a severe degree of alienation under the second Trump administration, as well as a loss of trust in NATO and the U.S. defense commitment, which is unlikely to subside fully even under a different administration. A more European NATO, once established, could therefore evolve into a stepping stone for Europeans to eventually pursue greater political and military independence from the United States, as former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander has argued.¹³ That would result in a Europe that is less deferential and more willing to negotiate about any U.S. advantages, such as the use of bases in Europe and future weapons procurement.

Finally, another risk of a more European NATO for the United States is that the transition process could become fraught and unpredictable. For example, the United States might withdraw faster than Europeans can fill the resulting gaps in conventional defense. Coupled with an ambiguous stance from the U.S. president on NATO, that could invite Russian aggression sooner than expected. Washington would then need to decide in a crisis whether it is still willing to defend Europe through conventional or nuclear means. The at-times erratic and contradictory decision-making on NATO 3.0 in the Trump administration is a risk to the model itself.

The European Defense Union

The second model envisages a European defense union in which the EU progressively assumes more of NATO's functions as an institution, first by providing the legal basis for mutual defense. Rather than building an EU army, the idea would be to build on the Treaty on European Union (TEU) Article 42(7) and Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) Article 222 to provide a legal basis for EU action in response to armed aggression and major crises in EU territory. Although the EU already contributes through defense financing and capability development, a European defense union would

support a larger role for the EU in defense planning, coordination, and decision-making, should NATO's role diminish.¹⁴

Article 42(7) TEU, the Mutual Assistance Clause, obliges EU member states to provide “aid and assistance by all the means in their power” to any member state that is the victim of armed aggression.¹⁵ France invoked the clause after the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, prompting bilateral military support that enabled French forces to redeploy from overseas operations.¹⁶ Unlike NATO's Article 5, Article 42(7) can be invoked unilaterally by the affected state, but its practical operation remains underdeveloped. The clause accommodates the constitutional positions of neutral states and affirms consistency with NATO commitments, yet those limitations become less relevant if NATO no longer fulfills its traditional role. For its part, Article 222 TFEU, the Solidarity Clause, provides a legal basis by requiring the EU and its member states to act jointly in response to terrorist attacks or natural and man-made disasters, while allowing the EU to mobilize all available instruments, including military resources provided by member states. Unlike Article 42(7), Article 222 has a stronger supranational dimension that directly involves EU institutions, but its application was significantly constrained by a 2014 Council of the European Union decision limiting its use to situations where a member state is unable to respond effectively on its own. This high threshold has meant that the clause has never been invoked.

If the EU is to assume a greater role in European defense, both treaty provisions require further development to be transformed into operational defense mechanisms. Article 42(7) lacks credibility today because, after it has been triggered by a member state, there are no clear response mechanisms or procedures in place. The EU must design ways of lending credibility to the Mutual Defense Clause through coherent planning and response architecture. Where Article 222 is concerned, the EU could decide to lower the threshold required to trigger the Solidarity Clause, which would allow EU institutions to play a more important role in countering cyberattacks, sustaining EU space capacities, and responding to attacks on Europe's critical infrastructure. The EU must improve its preparedness for acute military attacks on its territory by reducing the uncertainty surrounding possible responses; adapting its legal framework would be the necessary, although not sufficient, first step.¹⁷

Institutional Obstacles

If a European defense union is to become a credible alternative, Article 42(7) must evolve from a legal commitment into an operational defense mechanism. Many of the nonmilitary instruments required in wartime already exist within the EU; beyond crisis response and civil protection, the EU coordinates policies central to European defense, including the EU single market, space, cyber, maritime security, economic security, critical infrastructure, and military mobility. For now, however, beyond the necessary legal adaptations as outlined above, the EU also does not have coherent politico-military response arrangements in place as NATO does, nor the command structures or capabilities required to mount a credible attempt at Europe's territorial defense.¹⁸ Of course, the EU has become Europe's principal financier of defense cooperation through instruments such as the European Defense Fund, the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) defense loan instrument, the European Defense Industrial Programme, and the European Peace Facility (EPF), while its support for Ukraine demonstrates its ability to mobilize resources at scale. Those instruments can strengthen the credibility of Article 42(7) by financing capability development, interoperability, and security of supply.

Although the EU has creatively used industrial, research, and economic treaty provisions to support defense industrial investments, the treaties still prohibit financing military expenditure through the EU budget and thus prevent any EU Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions from operating on EU territory, which would be a necessary precondition for territorial defense. Apart from the Balkans, these missions, especially with military mandates, have been largely concentrated outside of Europe, in Africa, including in the Sahel, the Gulf of Guinea, and the Horn of Africa.¹⁹ This constraint limits the use of the budget available in the EPF for territorial defense scenarios. As a consequence, a treaty change would be required to allow the EU to play a more comprehensive military role in European security, including territorial defense, in addition to a substantial increase in the common military operational costs financed under the EPF. This shift requires a shared understanding that, in the future, EU defense would extend beyond crisis management, its current focus, to encompass the conventional defense of the continent.

Furthermore, the EU possesses military institutions such as the Military Committee, Military Staff, and the Military Planning and Conduct Capability, together with intelligence assets including the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre, the EU Satellite Centre, and the EU Situation Room. But these structures are fragmented, under-resourced, and legally constrained, particularly because they were purposely designed not to duplicate NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, and they cannot currently support territorial defense. Unlike NATO, the EU also lacks an equivalent to SACEUR capable of exercising strategic military command over EU members. The establishment of European command and control structures outside of NATO has come into particular focus as a necessary precondition for coherent territorial defense and intelligence-sharing structures. A European defense union would have to take over the NATO defense planning process, determining what forces, capabilities, and military equipment its member states need to provide and harmonizing and coordinating the national defense planning across EU member states.

Making the Mutual Defense Clause Work

Those institutional shortcomings would need to be overcome for any European defense union to take shape, potentially including targeted treaty revisions, and to gradually assume more of the functions that NATO provides, especially territorial defense. It is not the EU's fault that it is not in a position today to mount a coherent territorial defense. Since the end of the Cold War, it has been a principle of U.S. policy toward Europe to prevent any duplication of NATO's functions within the EU. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's three D's (no decoupling, no duplication, no discrimination) explicitly stated that European initiatives should not needlessly duplicate existing NATO operational planning systems, command structures, or military assets. Today, those views seem outdated. Calls for duplicating NATO structures for Europeans have only become ever louder since the reliability of the United States has been put in question.

Political decision-making among Europeans in case of a crisis would need to be reformed to work as efficiently as the North Atlantic Council in NATO. Although Article 42(7) itself can be invoked unilaterally, many EU instruments that would support a military response remain subject to unanimity,

creating the risk of political paralysis with one member state blocking its application. Although proposals such as extending qualified majority voting have been advanced, they generally exclude military decisions in the realm of CSDP, leaving a significant gap between legal commitments and operational effectiveness. Furthermore, there is not yet an automatic role for EU institutions under Article 42(7), meaning that the crisis response, humanitarian emergency, economic security, critical infrastructure, and military mobility tools at the EU's disposal could not technically be used once the clause is triggered.

Finally, any European defense union would need to define the role of key non-EU partners. Canada, Iceland, Norway, Turkey, the UK, and Ukraine would remain indispensable contributors to Europe's continental defense. Although they cannot invoke Article 42(7) or access EU crisis management and financing mechanisms, nothing prevents them from supporting an EU member state through bilateral military assistance or participating in planning arrangements. Preserving those partnerships, especially the UK because of its nuclear capabilities, would therefore be essential if Article 42(7) were ever to become the foundation of a credible European security architecture.

By contrast, any EU institutional role in nuclear deterrence faces enormous constraints, including opposition from neutral and antinuclear member states, and the fact that nuclear capabilities in the EU remain exclusively in the hands of France. For that reason, a supranational European nuclear capability is as much fantasy as a supranational European army. A credible European defense union, if it were to overcome the institutional hurdles presented here, would rely primarily on the willingness of its EU member states to cooperate with each other on defense, including France and the UK on nuclear deterrence, supported by the institutions—not the institutions providing the defense themselves. For the time being, this approach would still rely heavily on the U.S. nuclear guarantee, not least because European nuclear alternatives driven by the French with British support still need time to mature.

U.S. Options on a European Defense Union

Certain aspects of a European defense union might be welcomed by the United States, especially if the arrangement strengthens Europe's conventional capabilities, improves defense financing and military

mobility, and reinforces crisis response. The more fundamental question is how much European defense integration the United States would see in its interests and tolerate before it perceived a significant loss of political, military, and industrial influence in Europe. For U.S. strategic interests, this model would certainly represent the least desirable option. The United States could eventually become an outsider when it comes to Europe's defense, with all the inherent risks and downsides.

Washington has long opposed EU initiatives that duplicate or decouple from NATO, and it may argue that the EU lacks both the leadership structure and strategic authority that the United States has traditionally exercised through NATO and SACEUR. Yet the very rationale for a European defense union presupposes a fundamental breakdown in transatlantic relations or NATO itself, whether through U.S. withdrawal or actions that undermine the alliance. In this worst-case scenario, Washington might not be able to determine which shape Europe's defense takes. However, the United States would still exert significant leverage over a European defense union because it is presently the most effective nuclear deterrent against Russian nuclear forces, at least until a time when French and British nuclear capabilities can comprehensively protect all of Europe.

If it were to come to that point of alienation through internal paralysis, an external shock, or an increasingly conflicted U.S.-Europe relationship, future U.S. policymakers may wish to influence how the United States relates to a possible European defense union in the future. For example, if a European defense union comes to fruition in the medium or long term, the United States might demand an "open door policy" from EU members that could allow the United States to plug and play into European defense operations when it meets U.S. and European interests. It could also seek arrangements that define the scope of a possible continued U.S. nuclear protection pledge.

A European Defense Coalition

The most flexible yet least institutionally binding method of European defense cooperation is the third option: a durable intergovernmental coalition of willing European states, operating outside of both NATO and the EU. This model allows for potentially quicker decision-making, as it requires no

consensus across all thirty-two NATO members or twenty-seven EU member states. Europeans have a history of working in this manner. In 2000, the defense ministers of France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, and the UK signed the now-defunct Letter of Intent on defense industrial policy. Other historical attempts have been made to generate European defensive coalitions through the Brussels Treaty, the European Defense Community, and even with the Eurogroup playing a defense role in NATO.²⁰ There is also a range of minilateral and regional defense initiatives, including the Nordic Defence Cooperation; the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF); the European Intervention Initiative; Benelux defense cooperation among Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg; and more.

Aside from the EU and NATO, European defense is already made up of a latticework of individual initiatives, bilateral defense cooperation treaties, and regional groupings. Such arrangements have an inherent flexibility, although their overall effectiveness is dubious, especially given that they tend to be issue-specific arrangements that do not cover the entire spectrum of defense planning and readiness. Still, a European defense coalition based on such latticework is no longer completely hypothetical. The Coalition of the Willing, convened by France and the UK in 2025 to offer security guarantees for Ukraine, has become an operating prototype of a European coalition acting without an American framework, even if this as-of-yet undeployed coalition still rests on U.S. security guarantees. The twofold question this model poses, however, is whether such a defense coalition can be built independently at all and whether the structure will be reliable and durable in the face of an armed attack on Europe.

The Effectiveness of Ad Hoc Defense Arrangements

Ad hoc defense coalitions have produced mixed results in Europe. In recent decades, ad hoc coalitions have emerged during the Gulf War (1990–91), the Kosovo campaign (1999), the Franco-British intervention in Libya (2011), Operation Serval in Mali (2013), and the Takuba Task Force (2020–22). Their success has generally depended on a clearly defined political objective and agreement on the desired end state, although most have also relied heavily on U.S. leadership and military capabilities. Ad hoc coalitions have become Europe's preferred mechanism for military operations, but their flexibility

has come at the cost of structural weaknesses, including uneven burden-sharing, dependence on a framework nation, and reliance on high-end U.S. capabilities. They also tend to address specific functional objectives rather than providing a comprehensive defense framework. For example, Nordic Defence Cooperation concentrates on industrial cooperation, procurement, and interoperability, whereas the JEF focuses on operational planning, exercises, and military interoperability.

The principal advantage of ad hoc coalitions is how they embody institutional flexibility. Acting through a smaller group of willing states could reduce the possibility of vetoes, which is a risk when securing consensus among EU or NATO member states. Such flexibility has become increasingly attractive in the context of the war in Ukraine and strained transatlantic relations.

Making Ad Hoc-ism Work in a Durable Way

If European governments increasingly rely on a coalition of the willing for their defense, the key challenge will be moving beyond ad hoc political coordination toward more durable decision-making and command arrangements, while ensuring compatibility with NATO and EU structures. Existing examples, including Eurocorps (a six-nation military corps comprising personnel from Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Poland, and Spain) and JEF (a UK-led military partnership focusing on Northern Europe), already demonstrate how such cooperation can function. But in a scenario in which neither NATO nor the EU offers a sufficient framework for European defense, particularly in the absence of the United States, any coalition would require an overarching political decision-making body and multinational command structure capable of combining political flexibility with military effectiveness. NATO and the EU already have frameworks that provide a template for a durable European defense coalition:

- 1) A “mini NATO” model could establish a minilateral equivalent of the North Atlantic Council in a coalition-of-the-willing format with agreed membership, decision-making rules, and accompanying military command structures. The coalition could be supported by joint headquarters modeled on NATO’s Joint Force Commands or assembled from national command structures contributed by participating states.

- 2) A “mini EU” model could build on Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) by allowing participating coalition states to cooperate at different speeds and, where appropriate, use qualified majority voting for institutional decisions. Unlike today’s PESCO, however, such a coalition would need to move beyond capability projects by developing operational command arrangements and military structures.
- 3) A “Berlin Plus Plus” model for a coalition of the willing could adapt the existing Berlin Plus framework, which allows the EU to access NATO planning and command structures. Any updated arrangement for the coalition could mean that it borrows security and defense assets from both NATO and the EU for predefined tasks.

The flexibility of a European defense coalition means that it could also incorporate Ukraine as the most significant actor in European security and its defense industrial base in coalition structures, which would be more difficult with a more European NATO or an EU-based structure, and give Ukraine, in return for contributing to a European defense coalition, an actual say in decision-making processes. This setup would more realistically reflect Ukraine’s outsized role in the defense of Europe today (especially on drone warfare and artificial intelligence) than just limiting future European defense to existing EU or NATO members, given that Ukraine’s NATO membership seems unlikely for the foreseeable future, and the path toward full EU membership is arduous.

In terms of the nuclear dimension, in 2026, French President Emmanuel Macron announced a “forward deterrence” initiative allowing the temporary deployment of French airborne nuclear assets across participating European states, building on the 2025 UK-France Northwood Declaration on nuclear coordination.²¹ The initiative in no way alters decision-making behind France’s independent nuclear deterrent, which remains solely in the hands of the French president. However, the new initiative does broaden the geographical coverage of French nuclear forces, which should complicate Russia’s nuclear strategy. Although France holds a unique nuclear status in Europe as both an EU and NATO member, Paris would not launch such a nuclear initiative within an institutionalized context, preferring instead to maintain the highest level of political control through a French-led ad hoc arrangement.

U.S. Options on an Ad Hoc European Defense Coalition

Ever since the United States decided to prioritize China as its major pacing threat, it has called on its allies in Europe to invest more in defense and to build up their conventional military forces to protect Europe, while providing primarily nuclear deterrence and reinforcement. In this sense, a European defense coalition would be desirable for the United States if it advances greater European conventional defense and European joint decision-making while remaining interoperable with the United States. Given that such a coalition would be intergovernmental in nature, and thus not subject to institutional integration into structures such as the EU (and thus not competitive with NATO), the United States could maximize its influence with the coalition. Although such an arrangement would not be as effective as NATO for wielding U.S. influence, it would avoid the EU-based alternative—a European defense union—which would treat the United States as an effective outsider to European security. Naturally, the United States would work with a European defense coalition so long as it pursues American interests and does not lead to any substantial decrease in U.S. influence over Europe.

Ultimately, Washington would assess the success of any European defense coalition against the benchmark of political and military outcomes rather than solidarity. In concrete terms, such a coalition would be deemed successful if it helps address Washington's overarching concern today: ensuring that Europe takes up primary responsibility for conventional defense. If such a coalition enabled Europe to better deter and, if necessary, defeat conventional aggression from Russia without substantial U.S. support, then it would work in the U.S. interest. Conversely, if such a coalition evolved to weaken NATO's interoperability and undermine U.S. military and political interests, then American support would likely wane.

Recommendations and Conclusion

There is no cost-free or smooth solution to enhancing Europe's defense without the United States. A more European NATO model clearly remains the least disruptive because it builds on the alliance's existing structures, processes, and capabilities and represents a less turbulent evolution of the status quo. However, it does not address the risk of NATO paralysis. For a future without the United States in

Europe, a European defense union model offers the obvious solution, but it comes with difficult institutional dilemmas and leadership challenges. Such a union model would require political decisions and institutional reforms that Europeans have hitherto been either unwilling or unable to take, despite the worsening U.S.-Europe relationship. From a U.S. perspective, a European defense union would be the least desirable model, not least because Washington risks losing influence over Europe while damaging its global power projection capacities. A European defense coalition model offers the greatest political flexibility, but instead of an ad hoc nature, it needs durability, especially institutionalized planning and decision-making processes in place in time to react to a crisis.

Europeans, then, should not treat the three models as mutually exclusive but as complementary. Without divining the end state of Europe's defense architecture, European governments should continue to double down on building up conventional defense through NATO's 5 percent defense investment pledge, capability development, and defense industrial expansion.

At the same time, Europe should prepare credible alternatives should NATO become politically paralyzed. Something akin to a European defense union requires the EU to develop Article 42(7) TEU planning, clarifying the role of EU institutions therein, strengthening the Military Planning and Conduct Capability, integrating intelligence structures more effectively, and expanding common defense financing through instruments such as SAFE, the European Defence Industry Programme, and the European Peace Facility. At a basic level, efforts are needed to develop joint Article 5–Article 42(7) procedures, and any EU plan to draft a playbook for Article 42(7) contingencies would be a good start.²² The European defense union model and the European defense coalition model share the need to establish standing multinational headquarters and command and control structures.

For the United States, a stronger European pillar within NATO would inevitably entail greater European political influence in return for reduced U.S. military commitments, allowing Washington to focus more resources on the Indo-Pacific. Most importantly, to avoid the downsides of more independent European defense models, future U.S. policymakers should encourage Europeans to take

on more conventional responsibility but offer a reliable, jointly agreed roadmap for transition instead of the erratic unilateralism that undermines the credibility of a more European NATO today.

The United States should prioritize cooperation in areas such as intelligence, military mobility, cyber, space, logistics, and capability development rather than viewing every EU or European initiative as institutional competition. It can also focus on future plug-and-play arrangements, even if greater European defense industrial autonomy in the future reduces opportunities for U.S. defense exports.

Alongside a more European NATO, a European defense coalition may prove the easiest model for Washington to support because it allows flexible U.S. contributions (such as intelligence, strategic lift, missile defense, or nuclear reassurance) without requiring permanent U.S. leadership. And it would allow for Ukraine's inclusion in the future of European defense without the need to make controversial institutional membership decisions.

Ultimately, Russia remains the most immediate military threat to Europe's defense, but uncertainty over future U.S. policy means that European security can no longer rest on assumptions of permanent U.S. leadership—which the United States seems uninterested in providing in the future. Europe must therefore develop the military capabilities, industrial base, and political cohesion necessary to deter and, if required, defend against aggression, even if U.S. support is delayed, limited, or absent. This capacity also requires developing more distinctively European approaches to defense planning and warfare—ideally with the United States, but if necessary, also without. Whether through a stronger European NATO, a European defense union, or a European defense coalition, the objective for Europe remains the same: to ensure that it can absorb future strategic shocks while preserving the transatlantic partnership wherever possible and desirable.

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Cover photo: Eurocorps soldiers carry an EU flag before the inaugural session of the European Parliament in 2024. (Frederick Florin/AFP via Getty Images)

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