



[Home](#) > Europe Alone

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What Comes After the Transatlantic Alliance

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Speaking at the Munich Security Conference in early 2019, former Vice President Joe Biden had a reassuring message for European politicians, diplomats, and military leaders worried about [American disengagement](#) <sup>[2]</sup>: "We will be back." Biden's speech was met with applause and relief. Wait out the tenure of U.S. President Donald Trump, he seemed to be saying, and sooner or later, leaders can return to the transatlantic consensus that defined the post–World War II era. Patience is the name of the game.

Biden was feeding a common but delusional hope. A new U.S. administration could assuage some of the current transatlantic tensions by, say, removing tariffs on European steel and aluminum or rejoining the Paris climate agreement. But these fixes would not deal with the problem at its root. The rift between the United States and Europe did not begin with Trump, nor will it end with him. Rather than giving in to nostalgia, U.S. and European leaders should start with an honest assessment of the path that led them to the current crisis—the first step to building a more mature and forward-looking transatlantic partnership.

The main threat to the transatlantic relationship is not a hostile White House or a decoupling of interests. Today's crisis is first and foremost a result of the power asymmetry between the United States and Europe. For a long time, both sides accepted this imbalance, even cultivated it. Europe remained submissive in exchange for a spot underneath the U.S. defense umbrella. For all their current hectoring about "burden sharing," American leaders have long preferred European free-riding to European chaos. But the end of the Cold War, 9/11, and the rise of China eventually shifted Washington's security priorities elsewhere, leaving Europe alone and mortal. Today, the continent is "a vegetarian in a world of carnivores," as Sigmar Gabriel, then Germany's foreign minister, put it. The Trump administration's Europe policy, alternating between indifference and hostility, has given this revelation a newfound urgency.

For now, European visions of "strategic autonomy" from the United States, often invoked by the European Commission's president, Jean-Claude Juncker, and French President Emmanuel Macron, remain just that—visions. So far, a European army exists only in white papers. But even such tentative proposals fuel skepticism, if not outright opposition, in Washington. The fear, it seems, is that Europe's desire to go its own way in security matters will put the continent in direct competition with the United States. U.S. policymakers would prefer Europeans to spend more on military power within the confines of NATO, an idea that is based on the assumption that a more capable Europe would still follow the United States' lead. Yet the hope that Europe can be pushed to invest in its defense without developing more autonomous security interests is fanciful. U.S. policymakers have to make a choice. Do they prefer to maintain a weak and divided European continent that is aligned with their interests and dependent on U.S. power? Or are they ready to deal with a more forceful and autonomous partner that will sometimes go against their favored policies? Europe, for its part, has a similar choice to make. It cannot claim the mantle of independent global leadership and continue to rely on the United States for its security, including in its immediate neighborhood.

Reversing the trend toward European irrelevance and disunity is the responsibility of European policymakers. But the United States should not oppose these efforts, even if they end up making Europe a more difficult partner. In the long run, a strong continent that is able to defend its interests and fight its own battles will benefit Washington more than a divided and weak one. The transatlantic alliance can and should remain the bedrock of the Western model of liberal democratic values and principles. But it will have to transform to meet the growing economic, security, and political challenges from China and Russia. Rather than pining for the return of a transatlantic partnership that will surely continue to fray, the United States and Europe must now invest in and accept the consequences of autonomy.

## SLOW BURN

Tales of a golden age of transatlantic unity are written with the benefit of hindsight. In truth, the relationship has always been tumultuous. France and the United Kingdom developed their own nuclear strike capabilities in the 1950s and 1960s, against the initial objections of U.S. leaders. France even left NATO's integrated military command in 1966, returning only in 2009. West Germany sought a détente with East Germany in the 1970s, leading others to fear that the transatlantic ties uniting the West against the Eastern bloc were eroding. Events in the Middle East, above all, have sparked disagreements between the United States and Europe for decades, long before the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal.

Nor did U.S. disengagement from Europe start with Trump's inauguration. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has shown itself willing to dismiss Europeans' concerns and reticent to dispense blood and treasure on European soil. In 2001, President George W. Bush withdrew the United States from the 1997 Kyoto Protocol despite hard lobbying by Gerhard Schröder, the German chancellor. France and Germany refused to join the Bush administration's "coalition of the willing" in the [Iraq war](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, a split that seemed to mark a new low in transatlantic relations.

President Barack Obama poured salt on the wounds. His administration "pivoted" to Asia and pursued a "reset" with Russia. At the same time, it canceled plans to build a U.S. missile defense system in Poland with radar stations in the Czech Republic and later withdrew two U.S. Army brigades from Europe. It was only after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 that the Obama administration reversed course, eventually reinstating

one of the brigades and setting up the European Reassurance Initiative (now known as the European Deterrence Initiative), a Pentagon fund for operations to defend European allies. But even then, Obama had harsh words for Europe, calling France and the United Kingdom “free riders” in [an interview](#) <sup>[4]</sup> with *The Atlantic*.

Put in perspective, today’s troubles are not so unusual. The current differences between the United States and Europe over the Iran nuclear deal pale in comparison to the split that arose when Washington opposed the British and French invasion of Egypt during the 1956 Suez crisis, the breakdown over Iraq in 2003, and the recurring disagreements over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And yet today’s Zeitgeist of crisis and disintegration feels appropriate, likely because the Trump administration makes for a convenient scapegoat. As the journalist [James Kirchick](#) <sup>[5]</sup> put it, “blaming Trump for their problems is the one thing Europeans can agree on.”

European leaders, of course, could have read the writing on the wall long before the Trump presidency and come up with a strategy for keeping the United States engaged. Instead, they have remained complacent in their own weakness and complicit in the deterioration of the relationship, to the point where each policy disagreement—compounded by Trump’s undiplomatic rhetoric—now feels existential. Rather than lamenting the causes of an early death, both sides would be better off accepting that the alliance must change, working toward the goal of a more balanced relationship, and mitigating the inevitable fallout.

## AN END TO COMPLACENCY?

Europe’s predicament is clear. Without a common vision for defense, and with destabilizing pressures on its periphery, the continent will soon serve as a theater, rather than a participant, in a great-power competition. Russia actively supports European far-right parties and regularly interferes in European elections. In Ukraine, Russia has illegally annexed Crimea and fomented a slow-burning war that has killed 13,000 Ukrainians and displaced 1.5 million. Farther south, the Syrian civil war has driven millions of refugees to Europe’s shores, causing a [split over immigration](#) <sup>[6]</sup> policy and fueling the rise of populist parties. China, for its part, has invested heavily in Europe’s ports and technology infrastructure, in part because it hopes to drive a wedge between the United States and Europe. The more internally divided Europe is, the more it will find itself at the mercy of these opportunistic great powers. This is a recipe for a Europe once again roiled by nationalism, an EU that is irrelevant, and a transatlantic alliance in which Europe has little influence and the United States lacks a strong partner.

The only prudent way to avoid this nightmare scenario is for Europe to shed its culture of complacency in favor of autonomy. It must develop the ability to better defend itself and pursue common European interests. The EU’s foreign service outlined this goal in its [2016 Global Strategy](#) <sup>[7]</sup>, and leaders have echoed the same sentiment in speeches all over the continent. But that doesn’t mean getting there will be easy.

For one, Europe will have to do more to secure neighboring regions. As the Syrian civil war has demonstrated, many European countries lack the military capacity and political will to do so. Take German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose rebuke of Trumpism led many observers to christen her “the new leader of the free world.” At this year’s Munich Security Conference, Merkel, usually cautious, criticized Trump’s announcement that the United States would pull out of Syria (a decision that his administration later walked back). “Is it a good thing to immediately remove American troops from Syria,” Merkel asked, “or will it not strengthen Russia and Iran’s hands?” The chancellor had a point: sudden U.S. disengagement from Syria might create a dangerous power vacuum, much as it did in Iraq in 2011. But Merkel’s critique rang hollow: as she took the stage to attack U.S. policy in Syria, not a single German soldier was fighting on the ground there.

For a more assertive European security strategy, look instead to Paris. France not only committed its air force to the fight against the Islamic State, or ISIS, in Syria; it also pushed the United States for more joint action there. French strategists still fume over the “redline” episode in the summer of 2013, when the Obama administration ignored its own warning that chemical warfare in Syria would trigger U.S. military action. French President François Hollande, who had all but sent orders to French jets to start flying toward Syria, felt betrayed when Washington did not follow through. Looking back on the incident in 2016, Hollande’s foreign minister, Laurent Fabius, [called](#) <sup>[8]</sup> the United States’ backtracking “a turning point, not only for the crisis in the Middle East, but also for Ukraine, Crimea, and the world.” Yet France, with its limited military capacity and growing domestic woes, cannot act on its own without more backing from its European neighbors.

The Europeans will also have to overcome their internal foreign policy divisions. Concerns about Chinese spying, technology theft, and hidden subsidies have led the European Commission to call China “a [systemic rival](#) <sup>[9]</sup>” and introduce a system that screens foreign investment in infrastructure, energy, defense, and the media for potential threats to European security—an initiative supported by France and Germany. Yet the screening system [still lacks teeth](#) <sup>[10]</sup>, as it issues only recommendations and gives EU member states, many of which lack comparable national-level protections, the final say. Furthermore, Brussels’ newfound tough stance papers over divisions among member states. Italy’s populist government, for instance, is going down a different path, having recently become the first major European economy to join Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative. And the United Kingdom has reportedly decided to allow the Chinese technology company Huawei to participate in building the British 5G network, despite pressure by the United States not to use any equipment manufactured by the Chinese telecommunications giant.

Similar divisions plague the continent’s energy policy. Austria and Germany are moving toward completing the controversial [Nord Stream 2 pipeline](#) <sup>[11]</sup>, which would deliver Russian gas to Germany via the Baltic Sea. If completed, Nord Stream 2 would exacerbate Europe’s dependence on Russian gas by doubling Russia’s export capacity. Crucially, it would allow Moscow to circumvent Ukraine entirely, thus depriving Ukraine of billions in revenues from gas transit fees. The project has exposed deep divisions between the economic ambitions of individual member states and the interests of the bloc as a whole.

For all these obstacles, there is still a great deal more consensus on the EU’s foreign policy than analysts usually acknowledge. Despite pushback from incipient populist movements and domestic business interests, the EU has stayed firm on its sanctions on Russia. Following Russian interference in U.S. and European elections, the EU has also taken the lead in proposing and coordinating policy to counter disinformation, putting Europe ahead of the United States in addressing this problem. In particular, EU states have begun sharing more intelligence and have expanded a task force that monitors and exposes Russian disinformation. The EU has also remained steadfast in its attempts to keep the Iran nuclear deal alive, against U.S. objections. To convince Tehran to stay in compliance with the deal and to protect European companies doing business with Iran, the EU has even pursued the establishment of a special-purpose financial vehicle to circumvent U.S. extraterritorial sanctions against European companies continuing to trade with Iran. Even if Tehran revamps its nuclear program, as Iranian President Hassan Rouhani threatened in May, the European effort to save the nuclear deal shows that the continent is able to pursue a foreign policy independent from the United States.

After a rude awakening to growing security issues, from the war in Ukraine to [terrorist attacks](#) <sup>[12]</sup> and unsecured borders at the onset of the refugee crisis, European states have also begun increasing their defense investments, putting an end to the continuous decrease that had taken place since the 1990s. Although some countries, most notably Germany, still lag behind, recent trends point in the right direction. In

2016, 22 out of 28 EU member states increased their defense spending, and the continent's combined defense spending increased again the following year. Lithuania and Sweden even reinstated compulsory military service.

In addition to greater spending at the national level, European governments are working together to build a common and efficient defense industry. Europe's defense spending is second only to that of the United States, but it is beset by redundancies and inefficiencies. To address this matter, in 2017, the bloc established the Permanent Structured Cooperation, or PESCO, a series of projects designed to avoid inefficient or overlapping military investments and coordinate efforts on cyberwarfare and energy security. That same year, European governments created the European Defence Fund, which helps finance transnational defense projects.

These defense investments won't come without hurdles. As the creation of the European Defence Fund has signaled, the continent is seeking to develop its own defense industry. Yet national interests in military strategy often still diverge. Germany, for instance, banned its arms manufacturers from exporting weapons to Saudi Arabia after the murder of the Saudi journalist [Jamal Khashoggi](#) <sup>[13]</sup>, whereas France continues to look to Saudi Arabia as an arms export market. Moreover, a growing European defense industry would compete with U.S. businesses, adding another point of tension to the transatlantic relationship. Already, Washington has come under fire for pressuring European countries to purchase U.S.-made military equipment. In March, the French defense minister, Florence Parly, made the point that the mutual-defense provision of the NATO treaty does not require European countries to buy American fighter jets. "It's called Article 5, not Article F-35," she quipped.

Still, U.S. fears that Europe's homegrown defense push is incompatible with NATO are overblown. Europe's efforts aim to address shortcomings in areas left vulnerable by the United States' withdrawal from the region since the end of the Cold War. European leaders have gone out of their way to emphasize that attempts to integrate European defense will strengthen, rather than compete with, NATO. Indeed, the alliance has been reenergized since Russia's aggression against Ukraine. It has carried out operations to signal its commitment to protect eastern Europe and has prepared rapid-response troops to shore up NATO's eastern flank. NATO has also refocused on its core mission: collective territorial deterrence. And despite Trump's public dismissals of the alliance, his administration raised spending on the European Deterrence Initiative, which clearly serves a purpose similar to NATO's, to \$6.5 billion in fiscal year 2019—an increase of more than \$3 billion in two years.

## POWER POLITICS

On defense, Europe should continue to invest in NATO and develop a foreign policy that puts security interests above the continent's aversion to foreign military engagements. More and more, Europe will need to send troops abroad to secure itself by stabilizing its periphery and neighboring regions. The Balkans, for example, remain a tinderbox, especially as some states—most recently [North Macedonia](#) <sup>[14]</sup>—join NATO, whereas others, such as Serbia, seek favor with Russia. The situation in Syria remains fragile, and if the war there heats up, Europe may have to consider military intervention to avoid another wave of refugees.

European autonomy, however, is not measured in defense and security terms alone. Europe should not get bogged down in the technicalities of defense procurement policies or seek to create a counter-weight to U.S. military power. Instead, a new European strategy should maximize those areas where the EU already has a comparative global advantage: its economic weight, its unified currency, and its political and soft power.

To use these advantages to their fullest extent, however, Europeans will need to intellectually reconcile themselves to power, a difficult proposition for a continent where several generations of policymakers, protected by the United States' security umbrella, have come to define themselves by the notion that technical cooperation could simply replace relations of force on the international stage. The EU likes to think of itself as a normative power, leveraging its regulatory expertise and vast, integrated single market to shape global norms and rules on everything from environmental protection to data privacy.

That U.S. companies have adopted the terms of the General Data Protection Regulation, the EU's [ambitious data privacy law](#) <sup>[15]</sup>, shows how effective the bloc is at exporting its norms. Yet the EU has at times underestimated the importance of hard power in supporting soft power. When Brussels was negotiating a free-trade agreement with Ukraine in 2014, it in essence sent well-meaning economists to a deeply geopolitical fight. EU leaders thought of the European Neighborhood Policy, with its comprehensive package of reforms, as a simple tool to promote good governance in EU border states. What they failed to appreciate was that its significance was more geopolitical than anything else. Most Ukrainians saw the agreement not as a collection of technocratic tweaks but as an opportunity to anchor their country more fully in Europe and thus challenge Russia. And indeed, when Ukrainians overthrew their president after he refused to sign an association agreement with the EU, Russian President Vladimir Putin reacted by invading eastern Ukraine and seizing Crimea. Ironically, for all the talk of Putin's anachronistic, Machiavellian understanding of power, the Russian president was much more attuned than Brussels to the real significance of the EU's technocratic instruments. Europe's timid support for Ukraine, even after Ukrainians protested—and in some cases died—while brandishing the EU flag, likely emboldened Moscow to invade Ukraine, intervene in Syria, and meddle in several Western elections. Instead of mostly standing by, Europe should have seen the Euromaidan revolution as an opportunity to take a principled stance against a revisionist Russia.

Europe's efforts to reconcile itself to power will have to include an understanding of the geopolitical role its single market can play in ensuring European sovereignty. From breaking Russian gas monopolies to blocking Chinese investments, the European Commission can use its regulatory bureaucratic instruments to ensure that Europe is not a theater for the actions of predatory great powers. To do so, lawmakers will have to overcome their dogmatic attachment to openness and put a more realistic defense of European citizens at the core of the EU's economic policies. The same applies to immigration and asylum laws. More robust border controls, a basic pillar of sovereignty, would help bridge the gap between Brussels and citizens all over the continent, many of whom are concerned that EU institutions have not been able to protect them against what they see as unruly migrants.

## NO MORE NOSTALGIA

As far as Washington is concerned, a more autonomous Europe will inevitably mean more headaches and disagreements. Consider the European efforts to circumvent U.S. sanctions on Iran. Although such endeavors are largely symbolic at this stage, they could lead to a more ambitious attempt to promote the euro as an alternative reserve currency, reducing Europeans' dependence on the U.S. dollar and the U.S. financial system. This would compel the United States to rely less on the brute force of its financial dominance and more on diplomacy and

persuasion—an impulse that is anathema in U.S. diplomatic culture. Yet that is the price one pays for having serious, reliable allies. It is unrealistic to imagine that after asking a partner to take on a larger portion of its own security, your interests will magically align. U.S. policymakers simply cannot expect Europe to both increase its defense spending and remain politically passive.

The good news is that Europe's willingness to pull its own weight will, paradoxically, go a long way toward ensuring a new transatlantic relationship. It will alleviate the frustrations and resentment that free-riding has fueled on the American side and remedy the weakness and dependence on the European side. In many cases, the United States will greatly benefit from European actors defending their security on their own in areas that are only peripheral to U.S. interests. U.S. support for French-led operations against al Qaeda-linked groups in the Sahel, for instance, is proof that European leadership can serve the United States well. And given that the American public has shown little appetite for getting more involved in Middle Eastern conflicts, a greater European capacity to promote stability in a region whose problems often affect Europe directly would allow Washington to lead from behind.

Above all, policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic should adjust their expectations downward. Europe will never be as central to the United States as it once was and will have to focus on ensuring the survival of its own model before claiming global ambitions. The United States should help the Europeans in this undertaking as best it can. But the Trump administration, with its confrontational stance, has already forfeited some of the influence Washington used to have. By forgoing its role as a trust builder among Europeans and, with the United Kingdom's decision to leave the EU, losing its historic ally within the community, the United States has seen most of its ability to shape positive outcomes in Europe evaporate. Instead, it has focused on building strong bilateral ties with individual countries, such as Germany under Obama and Poland under Trump. A new U.S. president might not label the European Union a "foe," as Trump has. But merely paying lip service to common values and shared history is unlikely to translate into an increased willingness to protect European interests.

Observers should neither lament this state of affairs nor yearn for what used to be. If Europe can choose its own path, the transatlantic relationship will mature into a more balanced alliance. By 2030, NATO could be stronger and more capable than it is today. The EU could take military action to end future wars on its periphery. It could invest in Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and the Balkans, thus pushing back against Chinese and Russian influence there.

From developing best practices for the use of artificial intelligence to responding to unfair Chinese trade practices to fighting climate change, the United States and Europe together are still indispensable when it comes to shaping the norms and rules of tomorrow. The transatlantic alliance is unlikely to look like it once did. There may be more distance and distrust. Siblings often grow apart when they come of age; they make choices, choose partners, and embrace careers that the other doesn't necessarily approve of. But in the end, the ties that bind are stronger than the individual choices that divide.

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