

# ETHICS AND ARMED FORCES

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## European Security in A Changing World Order

### INTERVIEW

The Russian “Shadow Fleet”:  
an Instrument of Hybrid Warfare?



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Militärethik

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# EDITORIAL

Dear Readers, as these lines are being written, this year's NATO Summit in Ankara has just concluded. These days, it almost seems an achievement if such a summit ends without a major rupture. At the same time, issues with the potential to divide the Alliance can resurface at any moment—as illustrated by the renewed U.S. claim to Greenland, which earlier this year triggered a serious crisis within NATO.

Even setting aside Donald Trump's distinctive political style, a number of fundamental questions remain. What forces are driving the current U.S. administration and the cooling of the transatlantic partnership? What threat does Russia pose after more than four years of waging its war against Ukraine at enormous cost? And how can Europe remain capable of acting and provide for its own security in a world undergoing profound change?

Against this backdrop, Gerlinde Groitl opens this issue by examining Europe's difficult strategic position in light of the current shifts in the global balance of power, the outcome of which remains uncertain. She concludes that Europe faces a difficult future unless it can develop a shared vision of a new international order together with the United States. While thus continuing to link Europe's future closely to a renewed transatlantic order, Daniel Marwecki takes a different view. He challenges what he sees as the prevailing focus on rearmament and argues that Europe should also develop broader ideas for adapting with dignity to its declining global influence.

The following article, by the Ukrainian author Elena Davlikanova, examines the threat posed by Russia and strongly cautions European governments against assessing it through the wrong analytical lens. Against the backdrop of the European Union's structural constraints, Matthias Dembinski explores how deeper security and defense cooperation within the Union might enable Europe to provide, at least in part, capabilities and functions that have so far been supplied by the indispensable superpower, the United States.

Another widely debated question concerns the prospect of some form of "European" nuclear deterrence. What role does the concept of "forward deterrence," presented by the French

President in early March, play in this context? Emmanuelle Maitre addresses this question from the perspective of global nuclear rearmament and the objective of nuclear non-proliferation, while Jean-Louis Lozier focuses on the increasingly close cooperation between Europe's two nuclear powers and on the often-overlooked European dimension of French nuclear deterrence. Shounak Set and Ben Kienzle examine the emerging quality of security cooperation between India and Europe. They argue that it represents an original model of flexible, modular partnership – one shaped by today's geopolitical environment, yet offering considerable long-term potential.

In the concluding interview, I speak with Commander Helge Adrians about a subject that has once again attracted considerable public attention following a series of high-profile ship inspections in recent weeks. Among other things, he explains why, when dealing with Russia's so-called "shadow fleet," we should remain in control of our own reactions.

*Ethics and Armed Forces* does not claim to provide a comprehensive treatment of European security. The next issue will therefore continue this discussion by addressing related topics such as resilience and societal stability. Finally, I would like to thank everyone who contributed to making this issue possible: our authors, the translation teams, the Editorial Board, and the editorial staff of the new Institute for Peace and Military Ethics, into which zebis, the Center for Ethical Education in the Armed Forces, has now been integrated. Change is thus shaping not only the international order but also our own institution. Nevertheless, we will continue to offer our readers stimulating perspectives on debates in peace ethics, security policy, and military ethics.

Rüdiger Frank  
Copy Editor



# IDEAL AND REALITY

## FROM LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER TO (SELF-) PROTECTIVE ORDER?

**Author:** Gerlinde Groitl

(Translated from German by Richard Hewitt  
and Kristina Lange)

### Introduction

“The world has been thrown off balance.” –  
“We are witnessing a turning point in history.”  
– “The international order is eroding.” These  
and similar phrases have become common-  
place in recent years. They reflect the unease  
and uncertainty with which citizens, deci-  
sion-makers and analysts view the numerous  
concurrent crises in Europe and the world.  
How did such a proliferation of political, eco-  
nomic and military conflicts come about? Why  
is even Europe now afflicted by the turmoil of  
global politics, having long been considered  
a peaceful region? And where is the world  
heading? This essay attempts to answer these  
questions from a political science perspective  
by looking at how the international order is  
changing. It first defines terms and outlines  
how orders emerge and decline. Then it ad-  
dresses the rise and fall of the liberal inter-  
national order. Finally, it discusses current  
Western policy and ventures a glimpse into  
the future.

### “World out of balance” – evolution and revolution in the international order

Order is frequently understood as the civilized  
counterpart – restrained by the rule of law – to  
the unbridled tyranny and arbitrary exercise  
of power inherent in anarchy. The term “world  
order” implies a global system or framework  
of rules which, alongside the fundamental  
absence of violence, serves to guarantee core  
values such as peace, freedom, and justice.  
Consequently, some may be mistakenly led  
to view the existence of a world order – insti-  
tutionalized through the United Nations, in-  
ternational law, and international bodies – as  
an inherent baseline of international politics  
that has merely shifted “out of balance”. This  
assumption, however, is incorrect.

The basic state of world politics is anar-  
chy: states coexist without being subject to a

### Abstract

*The world is in upheaval. This article traces the evolution of the international order. It shows that international constellations of power and interests are key influencing factors, and that the international order is constantly subject to change. We are currently in an interregnum: The old liberal international order is a thing of the past, and the emerging new world order is taking shape amid many unknowns. At the same time, Europe is experiencing a dual disruption caused by external revisionism (from Russia and China) and the dispute over direction within the West, triggered by shifts in political priorities in the United States. Whether we succeed in articulating a new shared vision of the international order will determine our fate.*

world government. The international system is therefore a space in which strategic competition is not an exceptional phenomenon – and neither are power politics, violence or war. Security, peace, freedom, justice, and prosperity are goods that must be organized politically. A true “world order” in this sense is a distant dream. It would require a universally applicable and at the same time enforceable set of rules with global reach. In other words, it would mean overcoming anarchy by establishing a framework for the constitutional rule of law across the globe. Despite the unprecedented level of global integration and regulation since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this has never materialized.

Rather than employing the term “world order,” political science utilizes the analytically more precise concepts of “international order” or, in the plural, “international orders” when examining structural features. This terminology deliberately leaves open the geographical scope, depth, and degree of enforcement, thereby allowing for a measure of ambiguity. The central characteristic of an international order can be delineated using a qualifying adjective – as exemplified by the liberal international order. In addition, researchers can analyze functional orders relating to specific policy areas (such as the nuclear or global economic order) as well as geographically limited regional orders.

However, there are also different theoretical interpretations of the concept of “order.” Proponents of the realist school take the view that under the conditions of anarchy and the resulting security dilemmas, only the distribution of capabilities within the international system has a structuring effect. The international order is thus defined in terms of power relations and can be categorized using the term “polarity.” Proponents of liberalism, by contrast, categorize the international order in terms of patterns of societal preferences. The democratic peace theory emphasizes the dichotomy between democracies and dictatorships. Institutionists argue that international institutions generate order by establishing binding rules of conduct. Constructivists, conversely, emphasize cognitive frameworks and

normative socialization, which function as invisible rules that bring about order.

The author of this article adopts a neo-classical realist perspective. Power is the key currency for enforcing rules, and every order has power relations at its core. However, the powers shaping the international order differ in the rules they seek to establish or enforce. The specific strategic actions taken to shape the international order arise within the national decision-making process. This premise is as compelling as it is logical: the structural nature of the international order fundamentally depends on which state—be it the Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China, or the United States—shapes it. While it may be academically interesting to examine the visions

## ***The interplay of power and national interests explains both the historical evolution of the international order and its contemporary crisis***

of order articulated by smaller states such as Luxembourg or Vanuatu, these perspectives remain secondary in global politics. Ultimately, the interplay of power and national interests explains both the historical evolution of the international order and its contemporary crisis.

The international order is inherently dynamic. Orders emerge, evolve, and decay as the underlying power structures erode, existing paradigms lose their efficacy, or systemic preferences shift. There is always continuity and change, evolutionary development, and sometimes even revolutionary ruptures. Beyond mere enforceability through power, an order’s longevity depends fundamentally on its structural functionality and perceived legitimacy. At its core, the stability of an order hinges on the balance between its active proponents and its challengers. Within this framework, attempts to alter the status quo constitute “revisionism,” a phenomenon requiring both revisionist intent and the requisite capabilities. Revisionist actors differ significantly regarding the scope of their objectives and the means they are willing to deploy. Ultimately,

this interactive conceptualization demonstrates that order is a continuous product of political agency. Orders may arise through consensus or emerge from competition and conflict; they can adapt via peaceful evolution or collapse through major systemic wars.

European and world history since the 17<sup>th</sup> century provide ample illustrations of these forces. The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 established the Westphalian state system, based on core principles such as the sovereignty of the (secular) territorial state and non-interference in the internal affairs of others. However,

***In the wake of the Cold War, a U.S. policy of liberal world ordering appeared inevitable, especially given the immediate absence of any major geopolitical competitors capable of challenging its power***

this did not eliminate competition or the potential for violence between states. Following Napoleon's failed bid for European hegemony, the Congress of Vienna in 1815 sought to institutionalize a stable equilibrium of power. The resulting international order was characterized by domestic restoration coupled with an external policy of systemic balance. While the European great powers engaged in geopolitical competition, they simultaneously cooperated to safeguard and maintain the continent's monarchical status quo. In the decades that followed, this status quo came under pressure from democratic and nationalist movements, and collapsed during the First World War. During the interwar period, hopes were raised for democracy and popular sovereignty, international institutions, and the rejection of violence. On the other hand, reactionary forces of resistance and totalitarian ideologies with limitless potential for violence were on the rise. This interregnum ended in the disaster of World War II.

In 1945, the United Nations was founded with its groundbreaking Charter, which laid out the basic rules of interstate relations and was intended to establish a cooperative global order. The Charter locked in two inherently competing sets of ordering principles. While

traditional Westphalian principles anchored state sovereignty, non-intervention in domestic affairs, and great-power management within the UN Security Council, the Charter simultaneously institutionalized a contrasting set of liberal principles. These include an emphasis on the rights of the individual, societies and peoples; the ideal of the sovereign equality of all states, and the limitation of state power through the general prohibition of the use of force. The Anglo-American influence is clearly visible here. The hoped-for cooperative internationalism was quickly overshadowed by the Cold War. Under the structural conditions of bipolarity, the international system dissolved into two deeply integrated and institutionalized blocs operating on diametrically opposed principles of order. While the Soviet sphere enforced communist party dictatorships, planned economies, collectivism, and a regime of limited sovereignty, the Western camp championed liberal democracy, free markets, individual liberty, and institutionalized collective defense. Ultimately, the Soviet model collapsed due to its own systemic flaws.

### **The rise and fall of the liberal international order**

In the wake of the Cold War, a U.S. policy of liberal world ordering appeared inevitable, especially given the immediate absence of any major geopolitical competitors capable of challenging its power. The principle of state sovereignty was increasingly re-defined on liberal terms. In intergovernmental relations, the United States championed the ideal of the sovereign equality of states and a rules-based order designed to safeguard the rights of weaker actors. Even more revolutionary was the second paradigm: regarding the domestic exercise of the monopoly on the legitimate use of force, state sovereignty was to be structurally subordinated to liberal norms. Firstly, this entails a structural delegitimization of autocracy, given that in a democratic framework, sovereignty is vested in the people as the ultimate source of legitimacy, rendering elected governments mere representatives. Secondly, it accentuates individual rights vis-à-vis the state, the institu-

tional restriction of state power, and good governance. The political foundations for this trajectory had been in place for decades, notably with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, before finding new avenues for implementation after the Cold War.

From the 1990s onward, the liberalization and globalization of the liberal international order – previously confined to the Western bloc – gained new momentum. To preserve the territorial status quo in Europe and Asia while projecting regional security, the United States maintained its strategic alliance structures. Concurrently, the principle of state self-determination increasingly superseded traditional notions of spheres of influence, a shift clearly institutionalized by the open-door policies of both NATO and the European Union. At the same time, the West invested in promoting democracy, while dictatorships were criticized or even subjected to targeted sanctions. Universal human rights norms gained greater prominence. Human rights violations were increasingly condemned and punished, and even humanitarian interventions increased markedly in number. The subsequent conceptual evolution entailed the formulation of an international obligation to intervene, ultimately codified as the “responsibility to protect”. Under this framework, the international community is empowered – subject to a UN Security Council mandate – to act when sovereign governments either fail to shield their populations from egregious human rights violations or actively perpetrate such atrocities themselves. In the broader picture, Europe and the U.S. worked hand in hand to shape a liberal international order that prioritized political self-determination, market economies and free trade, individual freedom, democracy, institutionalization, and rules-based governance.

From the perspective of Moscow and Beijing, the United States acted as a revisionist power that sought to reshape the foundational principles of the international order to its own unilateral advantage and severely complicated their positions. Furthermore, Russia and China perceived this liberal order as an existential threat – specifically targeting their regime security, their great-power status, and their stra-

tegic geopolitical objectives. They demanded a “democratization” of international relations, by which they meant a containment of American power, the normative recognition of autocracy and dictatorship, and a conception of sovereignty that legitimizes force as a means of securing power and grants them prerogatives as great powers. It was precisely from this impulse that Russian and Chinese revisionism against the U.S.-led international order emerged from the late 2000s onward, as opportunities presented themselves. Meanwhile, the vision of a post-Western world has also been articulated by others: many developing countries and states with a colonial past openly reject the – as they see it – moral excess of

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the “elitist” West, which elevates its own value judgments to the standard of all things while applying them only selectively themselves.

China partially integrated itself into the liberal order, but has always pursued the goal of gaining strength and reshaping the rules-based system. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) – according to its own rhetoric – regards the preservation of its power as the sole guarantee for the political sovereignty, territorial integrity, and well-being of the Chinese people and state. Only in this way, it argues, can China return to its historic role as a hegemonic power. This return requires not only a withdrawal of the United States from Asia, but also structural and territorial “corrections” that Washington currently stands in the way of. Specifically, China lays claim to Taiwan, a large part of the South China Sea, and areas in the East China Sea. To this end, Xi Jinping has stated that the “Chinese dream” of a “rebirth of the great Chinese nation” is to be realized by 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People’s Republic. Ultimately, the People’s Republic seeks an international order that supports the CCP’s claims to power and global ambitions.

Russia takes a similar view of the global situation. Moscow accuses the U.S. and its European “lackeys” of “overturning” states, manipulating their political course, robbing Russia of its traditional status as a power center, and potentially even threatening its regime stability. In reality, however, these societies turned to the West because the Russian model offered them no prospects. To counter this trend, Moscow resorted to violence in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine from 2014 onward. Thus, the Russian regime externalizes its own lack of appeal. While China relies on incentives based on its economic capabilities, Russia’s options have increasingly narrowed to military threats,

## *The Western-shaped international order of the post-Cold War era is mired in a crisis of enforcement, functionality, and legitimacy*

violence, and hybrid instruments. With the war of conquest against Ukraine waged since 2022, the Kremlin is attempting to prevent the end of its imperial dream, aiming to force the West to accept an order tailored to Russian ideas.

The rise of anti-elite discourses and populist parties in the 2010s, the Brexit vote, and the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president in 2016 made it clear that a counter-movement against the liberal international order was also gaining ground in the West. Trump’s core message is that the status quo shaped by political elites does not serve the interests of the American people. Given similar voting patterns across all Western democracies, these allegations should be examined stripped of their populist rhetoric. The institutionalization, legalization, and integration of political

action at the international level with no clear endpoint potentially conflict with the legitimizing and decision-making functions of nationally organized democracy. Furthermore, liberal universalisms potentially clash with national sovereign rights, as evidenced by issues such as asylum and migration. Economically, globalization has not proven to be a win for everyone. Humanitarian interventions also warrant reflection. While alleviating human suffering in a third state is a noble goal, whether one’s own armed forces should be responsible for doing so is another question. This is all the more critical given that in Germany, for example, the capacity to fulfill the constitutional defense mandate was knowingly allowed to erode. Whether national climate policy, in its specific form, actually benefits the global climate or – given state dirigism, economic costs, and limited global utility – is primarily self-harming, remains another point of discussion. The same applies to identity politics over gender and sexual identity, which have entered not only domestic but also foreign policy. “Liberal” has thus come to be defined in an increasingly expansive, particular, and at times ideological manner. Whether liberal governance in its real-world manifestation truly serves the welfare, security, justice, and freedom of the national political sovereign is therefore a legitimate question, even as a way must simultaneously be found to counter the threat posed by external revisionists.

### **From a crisis of the international order to a new order?**

The Western-shaped international order of the post-Cold War era is mired in a crisis of enforcement, functionality, and legitimacy. Over the past three decades, global economic interdependence has combined with intensifying geopolitical competition to generate massive vulnerabilities. The costs and benefits of this order have been unevenly distributed: the primary rising power, China, has benefited immensely from the West’s political, economic, and social openness, while the American hegemon has shouldered an increasing burden of costs with a relatively lower yield.

### **The Author**



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China, by contrast, has skillfully exploited the existing system, grown stronger with Western assistance, and is now turning its capabilities against the West. Beijing is systematically expanding its influence within the UN system and creating new alternative institutions; it operationalizes economic dependencies and harms Western market economies with its state-capitalist apparatus; it strives for dominance in the technology race by any means necessary; and it invests heavily in foreign propaganda as well as its military, while backing states like Russia and Iran to project power. Russia has been only partially successful in its operations and is now resorting to subversion, threats, hybrid warfare, and conventional military means to assert its imperial ambitions. Meanwhile, the U.S. under Trump has likewise abandoned the guiding principle of a liberal international order under American auspices. The hegemon is thus actively challenging the preservation of the system. This includes restructuring existing alliances like NATO, questioning institutions that may no longer serve American interests, and realigning priorities. It is precisely this dual disruption that shakes Germany and Europe to their very core.

It should not come as a surprise that the U.S. is questioning the status quo of the political order, which to a certain extent has been overtaken by real-world developments. If there were a solid consensus in the West about the political order, then a united front against external revisionists, combined with an evolutionary adaptation to new circumstances, would be a likely scenario. However, as the U.S. under Trump is questioning the validity of its own political assumptions as well as the costs and benefits of the status quo, we are witnessing a policy of radical change – as set out, for example, in the 2025 National Security Strategy. It is being deliberately pursued and not coordinated with traditional partners. It remains to be seen how the U.S. will position itself in future, and whether a coherent and purposeful alternative vision for the international order will emerge that others can align with. In any case, Germany and Europe must seriously explore their own possibilities and options for shaping the international order.

Many assume that the coming world order will be multipolar. This implies the existence of several poles of roughly equal strength. This does not reflect reality. Despite relative losses, the U.S. remains far more powerful than any other state. Its geographical location, with only two land borders with non-threatening neighbors, its favorable demographics, its economic might and technological innovation capacity, its access to natural resources, its recent, highly robust reduction of vulnerabilities (e.g., rare earths), and its military strength

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– measured in terms of quantity, quality, and power projection capability, right through to strategic assets – all justify optimism that, measured purely by resources, the U.S. is likely to remain the dominant state for a long time to come. China has at best grown into a “near-peer competitor” but is not on an equal footing, and given its now visible demographic and economic problems, it may never achieve parity. By comparison, all others lag far behind because they possess power only selectively. This also applies to Russia, which is a nuclear superpower but marked by weakness in economic, technological, and even conventional military terms. Brazil, South Africa, India, or the individual European states lag far behind.

Thus, the United States is not responding to a new multipolarity. It is seeking to maintain its hegemony in a world that is characterized by a high degree of interdependence and is, at most, on a path toward bipolarization. The U.S. administration is attempting to force its allies to share the burden, to scale back its own responsibilities, to exploit networks and hubs of financial and technological power ruthlessly for its own benefit, and to slow down China’s rise. Russia, by contrast, is viewed merely as a secondary challenge. Institutionally, the U.S. relies on bilateral, smaller multilateral, and inherently U.S.-centric formats. Unlike

large multilateral forums, these allow the U.S. more direct influence and the ability to assert its will. Donald Trump's leadership style facilitates disruption, but at the same time potentially undermines the strategic reorientation of U.S. policy. The 2026 war with Iran illustrates this perfectly. It was provisionally brought to an end with a "memorandum of understanding" that appears remarkably promising for the Islamic Republic. Washington's superior capabilities did not translate into political success.

Meanwhile, Europe finds itself in a precarious position. The threat posed by Russia is assessed differently in Europe than by the U.S. government, which could lead to a decoupling of European and American priorities. Because Europe remains highly dependent on the United States, it must rapidly succeed in upgrading and expanding its own capabilities. At the same time, Europe needs a leadership arrangement that ensures its capacity to cooperate, as the U.S. is no longer undertaking this role. Moreover, time and again, Europeans are presented with a *fait accompli* by their most important ally and pressured into compliance through the threat of consequences. This is a far cry from the previous model of a cooperative transatlantic partnership based on persuasion and coordination. How, then, can Europe become more independent? One should beware of blanket calls for "more EU," as there is no consensus on this; the EU is in dire need of reform and lacks jurisdiction in the field of defense. Hopes for European "strategic autonomy" or an alliance of middle powers also require a reality check. In fact, European integration is a byproduct of American hegemony. Without the U.S. protective umbrella and involvement, the European order would look very different. Conversely, the frequently voiced swan songs regarding the demise of the U.S. as the world's dominant power are premature. The U.S. is adapting to a world of unbridled great-power competition, even if the collateral damage of Trump's policies must be factored in. What common ground exists between Europe and the United States for a new vision of an international order more focused on self-protection? This is the crucial

political question for the future of the transatlantic partnership.

## Outlook

The thirty years following the Cold War seem like a dream today. Admittedly, there were security crises back then too. But looking back, it was a period of unprecedented global cooperation, prosperity, freedom, and security. This was not something that could be taken for granted, but rather a product of American power and the policies pursued in conjunction with Western partners. Today, the situation is different. The threat scenario of a major war with Russia expanding beyond Ukraine is being seriously discussed, and the old status quo of the post-Cold War liberal international order is a thing of the past. The reactions of external revisionists and the internal shift away from the former policy course are equally responsible for this. Currently, therefore, we find ourselves in an interregnum. It is clear to see what has already been lost, yet what is to come remains shrouded in the mists of the future.

For Europe, a particular difficulty lies in acknowledging the limits of its own possibilities. Of course, taken together, the countries of Europe possess substantial capabilities. However, translating these into targeted action and influence is hampered by the fact that cooperation must be organized among sovereign states whose interests often diverge. In the past, the U.S. assumed the role of leader and coordinator. Within Europe itself, there is no natural or universally accepted leading power. Yet, without the community amplifying the power of individual states, it is practically impossible to become a key player in a world of major powers. Added to this is a second, home-grown problem: The states of Europe are as politically divided as the U.S. There is no simple "European option" in opposition to the "Trump revolution". The most demanding political task of our time will likely be devising a new vision of a stable order—one that is commensurate with our capabilities and, moving beyond populist rhetoric, sets out in detail how the rights, freedoms, security, and well-being of Europe's citizens can be protected.

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# DIGNIFIED DECLINE?

## GERMANY AND EUROPE IN THE CHANGING WORLD ORDER

*Author: Daniel Marwecki*

The changing world order is a topic now discussed so widely that it has given rise to its own set of clichés. In recent years, few commentators on global current events have managed to avoid quoting the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who wrote from his prison cell that an old world is dying, and the new one struggles to be born. Such a transitional period, Gramsci said, is a “time of monsters”.<sup>1</sup>

Another well-worn insight, which likewise does not become any less true through repetition, is that the “end of history” postulated by Francis Fukuyama did not correspond to the subsequent course of world events. In the summer of 1989, shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Fukuyama – an as-yet unknown employee of the U.S. State Department – wrote an article that would make him famous overnight. Fukuyama argued that the market-based, democratic nation state is the best possible model of political community. Therefore, he contended, it was no longer necessary to engage in fundamental quarrels about the ways in which humans should coexist. If history had run its course, there was no longer any need to wage wars over its direction.

Today, not only is history continuing, but its future also appears completely open. It is unclear where the current transitional period is leading, or whether it is currently leading anywhere at all. It may well be the case that the perceived and very real state of upheaval will remain the new normal for the time being. One thing seems certain, however: the course of history will be shaped less and less where it used to be shaped – that is, in the West.

Amid this uncertainty and the sense of history slipping from our hands, a wake-up call is spreading in Germany and Europe – which, in turn, threatens to become a cliché. Namely, that we have done business with the wrong powers for too long and relied too heavily on the United States for our security. Now, the argument goes, it is time to think in terms of “realpolitik” or “geopolitics” once again, and pursue a resolute policy of military expansion.<sup>2</sup>

Germany in particular might be in danger of overlooking a crucial point: military expansion cannot replace a political vision of a future

### *Abstract*

*The much-discussed changing world order can be described as a process of waning Western dominance with an uncertain outcome. Recent events and developments – such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the decision by many emerging non-Western countries not to join economic sanctions, and the war in Gaza – demonstrate both the West’s diminishing power and its decline as a moral ideal. In many ways, U.S. President Donald Trump is acting as a destroyer of the old liberal order, from which there will be no return even after his term in office. The parallel rise of China to become a major center of economic and political power appears to be a return to the historical norm. This phase of multipolarization is marked by uncertainty. Germany and Europe should not make the mistake of responding only with an uncoordinated military expansion initiative, accompanied by fantasies of cultural and geopolitical superiority. Meanwhile, more positive visions are being developed within Europe. These combine defense capabilities with adaptation to a world order that is still taking shape.*

worth living. The not-so-new underlying idea of this article is that the future world order will be multipolar – and that German and European foreign policy must develop concrete and actionable ideas for how Europe hopes to position itself in a world after Western hegemony.

## **The end of the end of history**

When did the end of history end? Perhaps with the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent wars in the Middle East. Not only did these wars fail to turn countries like Afghanistan and Iraq into liberal democracies in their own image. They also, once again – though not for the last time – exposed a gulf between the liberal self-image and the destructive reality of foreign policy. In economic terms, the West's star began to wane around the same time. The 2008 financial crisis triggered a recession that hit the old economies of the West harder than those of the emerging markets. Western growth rates were unable to regain their pre-crisis levels, while those of developing countries remained high. Since then, the West's share of global economic output has been steadily declining.<sup>3</sup>

A more recent date on which the West's loss of power became apparent was February 24, 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, although it did not feel that way at first. NATO, the Western military alliance that had already been written off, gained new members: Sweden and Finland. Ukraine's resilience and initial successes on the battlefield convinced even the skeptics in the German chancellery at the time that repelling the Russian aggressor was not only desirable but also possible. After a year of war, literary scholar Albrecht Koschorke wrote in a newspaper article: "The imperial nostalgia attributed to the Russian power elites meets, on the opposing side, with a distinct kind of nostalgia which they themselves are not yet fully aware of. It centers on the past future of liberalism as a global model and universal doctrine."<sup>4</sup> The historical triumph of the liberal model, as Fukuyama asserted over thirty years ago – might it still come to pass, thanks to Ukraine? Fueled by a warmongering fervor that was hardly matched by their own level

of commitment, London, Brussels and Joe Biden's Washington almost anticipated Putin's downfall, barely noticing that this perception placed them in a global minority. The West portrayed Ukraine's defensive struggle not so much as what it is – a struggle for state and national sovereignty against an imperialist aggressor. This interpretation would have resonated more widely outside the Western global minority. Rather, it was portrayed as a fight for democracy against dictatorship and oppression. In a sense, past sins caught up with the West here. The U.S. could hardly invoke the United Nations Charter, whose principle of

***The West portrayed Ukraine's defensive struggle not so much as what it is – a struggle for state and national sovereignty against an imperialist aggressor – but rather as a fight for democracy against dictatorship and oppression***

non-aggression Russia so flagrantly violated, given that the U.S. had itself repeatedly flouted this principle.

A large portion of the non-Western majority in the world did indeed condemn Russia's violation of international law through a vote in the United Nations General Assembly. However, only those states commonly considered part of the West have since participated in sanctions against Russia or in arms deliveries to Ukraine. Twenty years ago – or perhaps even fewer – this might have been enough to bring Russia to its knees. Today, Russia has economic and political alternatives, particularly in China and India, but also in Brazil, South Africa, and other countries.

The West's sanctions policy thus falls far short of the desired effect. This fact is only one of many signs of a process that the countries just mentioned would also describe as the "multipolarization" of the world order. This term implies a rejection of Western hegemony and support for a world with multiple and alternative centers of power. At the same time, the concept of multipolarity polarizes political debate, not least in Germany.<sup>5</sup> There are those, not few in number, who use it as an anti-Western rallying cry, which is why pro-Western

defenders of dominance see it primarily as a threat to be averted.

However, the fact that a world after Western dominance is taking shape is, first of all, a reality that should be observed as objectively as possible, regardless of what name one gives to this development. It is a reality that Europe and Germany should base their policies on. Whether this post-Western world is something to fear remains, as is so often the case, a matter of perspective. Before 1914, Europe was a multipolar system of states. The failure of this system led to the First World War. That is the main reason why the word “multipolarity” has an ominous ring in Europe. In the frequently

*In the frequently referenced Global South, multipolarity may well sound like the promise of a fairer and more democratic world, one that has been dominated by the West for too long*

referenced Global South, the situation is different. There, multipolarity may well sound like the promise of a fairer and more democratic world, one that has been dominated by the West for too long.<sup>6</sup>

Since October 7, 2023, global positions on the Gaza war have taken shape almost as a mirror image of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Following the Hamas massacre in southern Israel, it was primarily the United States, followed by Germany and the United Kingdom, that supported Israel’s actions in Gaza by providing weapons and diplomatic backing. The destruction of Gaza is a reality that the German public has long refused to acknowledge, yet it is one to which the German government has contributed. Alex Lo is a longtime columnist for the South China Morning Post, a Hong Kong newspaper, and is considered to be pro-China. In May 2025, Lo wrote in an almost triumphant tone that the Western world had dug its own grave in Gaza. While the West would endure as a geographical and political entity, he sustained, it had died as a moral ideal – independent of any actions by Xi Jinping or Vladimir Putin, both of whom simply welcomed the collapse of Western hegemony.<sup>7</sup>

## Donald Trump: the West’s decline manager?

In Germany, meanwhile, the end of the Western-dominated order is associated with one name above all others: Donald Trump. For the German public, Trump’s reelection as President of the United States in the fall of 2024 came as a shock. Afterwards, newspapers loudly proclaimed the end of the West – at least as we knew it. Germany and Europe, all agreed, would now have to go it alone. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz was elected just a few months after Trump. In the traditional post-election televised round-table debate, he announced that the era of foreign policy dependence on the United States was over. For a fleeting moment, the seasoned transatlanticist Merz sounded like the French General Charles de Gaulle, who had called very early on for post-war Europe to play an independent role on the world stage. Previously, the idea that Germany was less sovereign in foreign and security policy matters than it pretended to be had been voiced only on the far left or far right of the political spectrum in Germany. Now it became the majority opinion overnight, because of Donald Trump.

In one of his last interviews, Henry Kissinger was asked about Donald Trump. Kissinger – who passed away in 2023 – served as Richard Nixon’s national security advisor during the Vietnam War. Since then, he had been regarded as a geostrategist, a war criminal, or both. He replied that Trump was one of those historical figures who swept away the hypocrisy and false certainties of his time, and marked the end of an era. That need not mean, Kissinger said, that Trump had an alternative to the old order to offer, or was even aware of his historical role. It could all just be an accident.<sup>8</sup>

Trump, lord of chaos and renewal sent by history? It is true that Trump knows how to bury the promises of the liberal order, which have lost all credibility. His response to the globalized market economy’s broken promise of prosperity is tariffs. His response to the often-criticized hypocrisy of Western foreign policy is to prioritize “might is right” and a narrowly defined, often erratic self-interest.

He thus strips the West's global role not only of its veneer of integrity, but also of its claim to moral superiority. To put it another way, Donald Trump solves the problem of double standards in foreign policy by stripping that foreign policy of any moral basis whatsoever.

Behind Donald Trump's campaign slogan America First is the idea that the international order maintained by the U.S. has cost it more than it has benefited it. Perhaps one could say that the United States is an empire that is learning to think of itself as a nation again. Yet America First also means that an America with a strengthening sense of national identity will not simply relinquish its position of supremacy. So for the time being, we should perhaps speak of a contraction or streamlining of the hegemonic model of order, and a reduction towards a transactional approach. After all, the United States is still militarily dominant, and the dollar is still the reserve currency. The latter continues to secure a privileged position for the U.S. in the global business and financial markets. However, the evidence for a contraction is not only that former alliances are being weakened, but also that soft power is being rapidly reduced, for example by cutting development aid or the U.S. withdrawing from international cooperation organizations one after another.

### **After Trump: no return to liberal hegemony**

Anyone in Germany and Europe who still hopes today that four years of Trump will be followed by a Joe Biden equivalent in the White House fails to recognize that, even under the Democratic Party, liberal market globalization is no longer the governing model, and Europe has slipped down the list of American priorities. Trump I (2017–2021) was followed by a president – Joe Biden – who continued his predecessor's policies on key issues. One issue takes up a lot of space on the global economic map and in the minds of policymakers in Washington: China. In his address to a joint session of Congress in April 2021 to mark his first 100 days in office, Biden announced that the U.S. was in a competition with China to “win the

21<sup>st</sup> century”. To this end, his administration continued the punitive tariffs against China that Donald Trump had previously imposed. Added to this were industrial policy measures such as the CHIPS Act or the Inflation Reduction Act. These can be understood as attempts to sell the hegemonic competition with China to the American working class as the reindustrialization of the country, while simultaneously attempting to curb Chinese growth in high-tech sectors.

During Donald Trump's second term, the economic rivalry with China, having intensified under Joe Biden, is escalating into a trade war whose outcome remains uncertain. It is clear, however, that since 2016, there has been a striking continuity spanning the presiden-

***The contemporary great-power rivalry between the United States and China is the defining conflict that will shape the nature of a post-Western world and dictate how peaceful the transition toward it will be***

cies of Trump, Biden, and Trump's return to power. This continuity is defined by a shared commitment to limiting China's rise and defending the dominant position of the United States.<sup>9</sup> As a matter of fact, former President Barack Obama had already announced a “pivot to Asia”. But at that time, U.S.-China relations seemed friendly compared to today. The contemporary great-power rivalry between the United States and China is the defining conflict that will shape the nature of a post-Western world and dictate how peaceful the transition toward it will be.

### **China's resurgence**

There is something puzzling about the story of China's rise. And the more one examines this rise, the stronger that impression becomes. Individual factors are easy to identify: land reform, industrial policy, the absorption of technological know-how from foreign companies, the rapid development of the education system and infrastructure, and the sheer size of the population. Nevertheless, this rise can-

not be distilled into a coherent development package ready to be replicated in other countries. Instead, it is a success story that has a lot to do with improvisation and a few strokes of luck. Only in hindsight does this rise appear to be the realization of a long-cherished plan.

At the same time, talk of China's "rise" is misleading. Given that the country had always been a center of economic activity until its decline in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one should rather speak of a "resurgence". Over the centuries, China has consistently accounted for about a quarter of the world's population on average. China's current return to the center looks like a return to the normal course of world history. The relative decline of the West appears to be a return to a historical norm, with the Indian subcontinent and China once again as centers of global economic and political power.

To understand this resurgence, it is useful to take a look at China's position within the global economic structure. When China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, the United States was the world's dominant trading power. According to the Australian Lowy Institute, the United States was a more important trading partner than China for 80 percent of countries at that time. That relationship has now reversed. Today, about 70 percent of countries worldwide trade more with China than with the United States.<sup>10</sup> This amounts to nothing less than a fundamental and lasting restructuring of the global economy. On the African continent, the shift is most striking. China is now Africa's largest trading partner by far. In 2003, China was a bigger trading partner than the U.S. for only 18 African countries. Today, it

is 52 out of 54 African countries, covering nearly the entire continent.<sup>11</sup>

Driven by the world's largest industrial base, China is the world's dominant trading power by far. The People's Republic manufactures nearly one-third of global goods, with a rising trend that surpasses the combined output of Germany, Japan, South Korea and the U.S. combined. These enormous numbers explain why China is the undisputed world leader in exports and is poised to maintain this supremacy. In 2024, Chinese exports to the U.S. tripled American exports to China. In trade with the European Union, China exports twice as much as it imports.<sup>12</sup> China's trade surplus for the past year was 1.2 trillion U.S. dollars – a record set despite Trump's tariffs.

## A multipolar present?

China's economic power, which has been outlined here only in broad strokes, has led many commentators to speak of a "multipolar" world order even at this early stage. However, this is a complex matter, as a look at the current situation in the Middle East demonstrates. Despite the apparent lack of planning, U.S. action against the Iranian regime demonstrates that, at least in military terms, the United States remains the only superpower capable of projecting its power far beyond its own borders. For various reasons, neither Russia nor China were willing or able to provide military assistance to Iran during the airstrikes against Iran's nuclear program in June 2025 or against the Iranian regime in the spring of 2026.<sup>13</sup>

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the United States accounted for 33 percent of global military spending in 2025. China ranks second in military spending at 12 percent, Russia at 6.6 percent, followed by Germany at 3.9 percent.<sup>14</sup> On top of that, the U.S. armed forces maintain some 750 military facilities and bases all around the world. China, in contrast, officially has only one military base outside the People's Republic, in Djibouti, situated on the Horn of Africa. It may have a second one in Cambodia. These figures alone show that it would be premature to talk about the end

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*[The World after the West] (2025). Next year, he will publish a book on Europe's role in the post-Western world order.*

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of American military supremacy. Particularly in the military sphere, the world remains far from a truly “multipolar” system of equally balanced powers. It might be more accurate to speak of a “multipolarizing” world, in which actors such as Russia or, above all, China are increasingly able to establish regional – but not global – hegemonies to rival the United States.<sup>15</sup>

Hugh White, a longtime professor at the Australian National University and sought-after security expert, argues along these lines. In June 2025, he published a lengthy and highly acclaimed essay, in which he states that security policy multipolarity is emerging in both Europe and East Asia. According to White, China is not only at least equal to the Soviet Union as an economic rival, but – because its military security thinking is regionally limited, focusing mainly on Taiwan and the South China Sea – it is also an equal to the U.S. on the military level, to the extent that the U.S. would have to wage a potential war far from its own shores. Since China’s shipbuilding capacity already far exceeds that of the United States, time is on China’s side. Of course, no-one knows how the People’s Liberation Army would fare in a war. The last, brief armed conflict – with Vietnam in 1979 – was rather embarrassing. Today things are likely to be different.

## Rethinking Europe

What should Europe’s role be in a world where American hegemony and the liberal world order are in decline, yet no alternative form of unipolarity is in sight? Currently, Germany and Europe in particular are responding to the upheavals of the present day in one way above all else: military expansion. Few among the German public are currently interested in an absence of war that is based on more than the hoped-for deterrent effect of military power.

Of course, it would be reckless to deny the facts touched upon in this essay: On the eastern border of the political continent known as Europe, at least since the invasion of Ukraine, there is an enemy – Russia. Though Russia was not always an enemy and need not remain one, it will continue to be so for the foresee-

able future. In the West, the United States has abandoned its role as a benevolent hegemon – a privilege that was never universal, but specifically reserved for Europe. The U.S. assumed this role first and foremost for the Federal Republic of Germany; however, this Cold War-era commitment must now reinvent itself in an increasingly post-American world. Looking again and farther to the east, there is China – a new-old superpower that has overtaken Germany as the dominant industrial nation and left it behind in future technologies. While all of this may be true, it scarcely scratches the surface of the multiple challenges confronting Germany and its neighbors: the climate crisis, the migration issue, the AI revolution, or the rejection of liberalism within Western societies. Nevertheless – or perhaps precisely for these reasons – the question arises as to whether we might not be able to make more of the historical moment outlined here than just a military buildup that seems devoid of any forward-looking narrative.

Let us start with the military question. The territorial integrity of European Union member states faces no threat from China and is only abstractly challenged by the U.S. regarding Greenland; it remains, however, credibly and severely threatened by Russia. Although defense capabilities are necessary to deter this Russian threat, Europe’s primary issue is not one of insufficient funding. It is a problem of coordination. As economic historian Adam Tooze has calculated using data from SIPRI, European NATO members have spent over three trillion U.S. dollars on defense over the past decade. That is significantly more than Russia has spent over the same period. The key difference, as Tooze points out, is that Russia possesses a unified and focused defense production system, whereas Europe’s apparatus remains fragmented and inefficient.<sup>16</sup> Under current conditions, an increase in European defense spending primarily means higher revenues for national and American defense industries. Yet the goal should be to establish efficient defense capabilities within existing budgetary constraints. Nevertheless, shortly before the June 2025 NATO summit, Alliance members agreed to raise defense spending to

5% of GDP by 2035 – with 1.5% earmarked for critical infrastructure and resilience measures, a figure that doubles the global average. According to SIPRI, countries not currently involved in a conflict generally spend less than 2% of their GDP on defense.

Within the framework of a militarily integrated Europe, a strategically autonomous and non-aligned continent remains a compelling – and historically rooted – concept for debate. This concept has long been discussed in Paris, and the current Spanish government is taking steps in that direction. However, Berlin is reluctant to follow.

Thus the Spanish prime minister Pedro Sánchez, unlike the German governments, was quick to voice strong doubts about whether the war in Gaza was in line with international law. The message coming from Madrid is likely to go down better with the global majority. Spain also spoke out early on against the war in Iran, which violates international law and makes no sense politically, while Ger-

Sánchez acknowledged the reality of a world that is becoming multipolar, recognized China as the great power it has always been for most of its history, and praised China's rhetorical advocacy for a multilateral and rules-based world. However, Sánchez noted, with regard to Russia's economic dependence on China, Beijing must use its power responsibly and do more to end the wars of the present. Beside the closeness of Russian-Chinese relations, the second major European problem with China is the enormous trade deficit. Sánchez addressed this too, as a structural problem that must be resolved on the path to improved relations, while holding out the prospect of growing cooperation in the energy transition.<sup>18</sup>

### A new narrative

The idea of Europe only briefly outlined here, centering on non-alignment and non-aggression while maintaining a defense capability, could lead to a vision for the future that would be appropriate for a post-Western world. A political strategy based on historical realities should be geared toward managing decline with dignity and fitting into a world order that is still taking shape, rather than toward cultural conflict and old fantasies of superiority.<sup>19</sup> Here we can learn from the world outside the West. The countries of Southeast Asia, in particular, have long excelled at balancing U.S. and Chinese influence, securing optimal outcomes for themselves while consistently prioritizing non-military conflict resolution.<sup>20</sup> This vision of the future is neither radically pacifist nor is it hawkish. Yet there is little indication that it will gain much traction in Germany. Politicians are trying to bridge the gap between rhetoric and war-fighting capability by ramping up military spending. The opposite would be better: adjusting the tone to match one's own capabilities. A military buildup without a positive vision of the future could, in retrospect, turn out to be preparation for war. Developing a vision of the future for a world worth living in after the end of Western hegemony is one of the most urgent policy tasks of our time.

### *A political strategy based on historical realities should be geared toward managing decline with dignity and fitting into a world order that is still taking shape, rather than toward cultural conflict and old fantasies of superiority*

man Chancellor Friedrich Merz referred to it as “dirty work” that the U.S. and Israel were doing on behalf of the West back in June 2025.

And on the quintessential issue of the future, too, the social democratic government in Madrid is one step ahead of the European mainstream. Renewable energy makes up a larger share of electricity production in Spain than in Germany, and Spain uses much less coal in its energy supply than Germany.<sup>17</sup> The crisis in the Strait of Hormuz has once again underlined the need for the energy transition.

As for the stance toward China, Prime Minister Sánchez gave a speech at the prestigious Tsinghua University in Beijing in which he managed to frame a pointed critique of Sino-European relations in a way that was likely to strike a chord with Chinese government officials rather than hurting anyone's pride.

1 Von Lucke, Albrecht (2025): Die Zeit der Monster und die Ära der Verheerung. In: Blätter für Internationale Politik, January. (Translated from German.) This is a very loose translation of the original Italian, as von Lucke also explains. Instead of monsters, Gramsci talks about morbid symptoms or signs of illness during the interregnum.

2 For a forceful critique of “geopolitics” in particular, see Schlichte, Klaus (2026): Das Elend der Geopolitik. Hamburg.

3 Heather, Peter and Rapley, John (2023): Why Empires Fall. Rome, America and the Future of the West. London, p. 10.

4 Koschorke, Albrecht (2023): Die Tage des Westens sind gezählt. In: Die Zeit, March 3. [www.zeit.de/2023/10/weltordnung-westen-krieg-ukraine](http://www.zeit.de/2023/10/weltordnung-westen-krieg-ukraine) (all internet sources accessed May 21, 2026). (Translated from German.)

5 See also a recent study by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP) on “Multipolarities – The World Order Visions of Others”, which can be found at [www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2026S07/](http://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2026S07/).

6 India’s current foreign minister, S. Jaishankar, puts it this way, for example, in an interview recorded at the Asia Society in Delhi on March 27, 2025, accessible online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-VigX-WMbek>.

7 Lo, Alex (2025): The Western world has already dug its own grave in Gaza war. In: South China Morning Post, May 11.

8 Luce, Edward (2018): Henry Kissinger: ‘We are in a very, very grave period.’ In: Financial Times, July 20. <https://www.ft.com/content/926a66b0-8b49-11e8-bf9e-8771d5404543?syn-25a6b1a6=1>.

9 Tooze, Adam (2024): Facing war in the Middle East and Ukraine, the US looks feeble. But is it just an act? In: The Guardian, October 10.

10 These figures and compelling infographics can be found at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-versus-america-global-trade>.

11 For more information, see the Carnegie Endowment at <https://carnegieendowment.org/carnegie-africa-program-newsletter/should-africa-brace-for-trumps-tariffs?lang=en>.

12 Leahy, John et al. (2025): How China’s Record Trade Surplus Helped Spark Trump’s Tariff War. In: Financial Times, April 9. <https://ig.ft.com/china-trade-surplus/>.

13 This fact alone shows that the purported “CRINK” alliance of China, Russia, Iran and North Korea referred to by even some prominent foreign policy experts is more of an attempt to revive past neoconservative boogeymen. Although talk of a united four-way alliance is unconvincing, it is nevertheless true that Iran and North Korea, in particular, have provided Russia with direct military support.

14 Stockholm Peace Research Institute (2026): Trends in World Military Expenditure. Fact Sheet, April. [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2026-04/2604\\_milex\\_2025.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2026-04/2604_milex_2025.pdf).

15 On this point, see also the well-known German political scientist Volker Perthes and his latest book (2026): Die Multipolarisierung der Welt. Berlin.

16 Tooze, Adam (2025): Chartbook 389: Europe’s zombie armies. Or how to spend \$3.1 trillion and have precious little to show for it. June 8. <https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-389-europes-zombie-armies>.

17 See the country profiles on the International Energy Agency’s website: [www.iea.org/](http://www.iea.org/).

18 A transcript and analysis of the speech can be found on Kaiser Kuo’s “Sinica” Substack, which is well worth reading. See online at: <https://www.sinicapodcast.com/p/pm-pedro-sanchezs-tsinghua-speech>.

19 Marco Rubio, for example, expressed such fantasies at this year’s Munich Security Conference – and received a standing ovation for doing so. The full transcript can be found at <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/02/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-at-the-munich-security-conference>.

20 A separate chapter on this region of the world, the ASEAN alliance, its distinctive features and specific challenges can be found in the aforementioned book by Perthes, Volker (2026), see endnote 15, pp. 246–276.

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The full issue “European Security in a Changing World Order” can be retrieved from <https://www.ethikundmilitaer.de/en/magazine-datenbank/detail/01-2026/overview>.

# HOW RUSSIA COULD ESCALATE ITS WAR ON EUROPE

*Author: Elena Davlikanova*

## Introduction

When discussing a potential Russian attack against a NATO member state, the years 2029–2030 are increasingly treated as critical milestones. German military and intelligence assessments, along with multiple European forecasts, suggest that by the end of the decade Russia could regenerate sufficient military capacity to challenge NATO directly. Yet focusing excessively on these dates risks creating a false sense of certainty. Strategic timelines are not determined by force generation alone. As Jana Puglierin argues, state behavior emerges from the interaction of intentions, capabilities, and perceived opportunities.<sup>1</sup> The key question is therefore not simply when Russia will be militarily ready, but when Moscow may perceive conditions as sufficiently favorable.

The assumption that Russia requires several more years before contemplating a direct confrontation with NATO rests largely on quantitative calculations, which resemble miscalculations of 2021 and early 2022. While Russian forces have suffered enormous casualties and equipment losses, the Kremlin's logic of power grab adds qualitative variables. The Russian regime needs achievements that can be presented as a victory and that may not be significant territorial gains in Ukraine or NATO states but strategic objectives like dismantling the Alliance through exposing its disunity and unpreparedness.

Russia struggles to move beyond villages like Mala Tokmachka in Ukraine — where fighting has dragged on longer than the legendary siege of Carthage — but it can nonetheless succeed in disrupting Trans-Atlantic relations and meddling with political elites' and populations' opinions on defense and geopolitics. Moreover, its provocations against NATO states — e.g., violations of Polish or Romanian airspace — exposed a complete lack of preparedness to respond to new challenges and may motivate Russia to go all-in much earlier than experts expect. Despite heavy losses in manpower, the Kremlin may organize mobilization after the autumn elections in Russia, while we

## Abstract

*This article examines the conditions and operational logic under which Russia could escalate military aggression against European NATO member states. Drawing on the Sahaidachnyi Security Center's Denied War research and the Everywhere War Tracker, the authors argue that prevailing Western threat assessments, based on quantitative force-generation methodologies and timelines, systematically underestimate the qualitative and strategic dimensions of Russian capabilities and intent, respectively. The analysis demonstrates that Europe is already not in a state of peace: ongoing sub-threshold activities including cyber operations, infrastructure sabotage, airspace violations, and cognitive warfare constitute sequential phases of operational environment preparation consistent with Russian military doctrine. The article further identifies critical asymmetries in new-generation warfare capabilities, particularly in air offense capabilities, unmanned systems, electronic warfare, and attrition-based tactics, that render European militaries structurally underprepared relative to the threat. Five geostrategic scenarios are assessed, with the Suwalki Gap seizure identified as the operationally most plausible. The authors conclude that deterrence depends less on aggregate military potential than on perceived Western unity, and that Europe should reorient its preparedness logic toward a strategic environment in which the peace/war boundary is already indistinct.*

are already witnessing the rebirth of the Russian army, an army that is trained in modern warfare and insensitive to human losses – something European armies are lacking.

Hence, two opposing conclusions can be drawn. The first is skepticism about Russia's ability to threaten NATO militarily amid modest results of the so-called "special military operation". The second is that the Kremlin may conclude it is time to pursue a larger strategic prize: not another costly march toward Kyiv, but the weakening or effective dismantling of NATO's cohesion which will be a major symbolic triumph, perfectly aligned with Russia's geopolitical objectives in the present circumstances, especially the U.S.'s primary focus on China and grudge against NATO because of weak support in the war with Iran. Moreover, should the U.S. and China engage in conflict, Russia will immediately expand its aggression in its sphere of interest – which is the European post-Soviet space and beyond.

## Russia is already at war with Europe

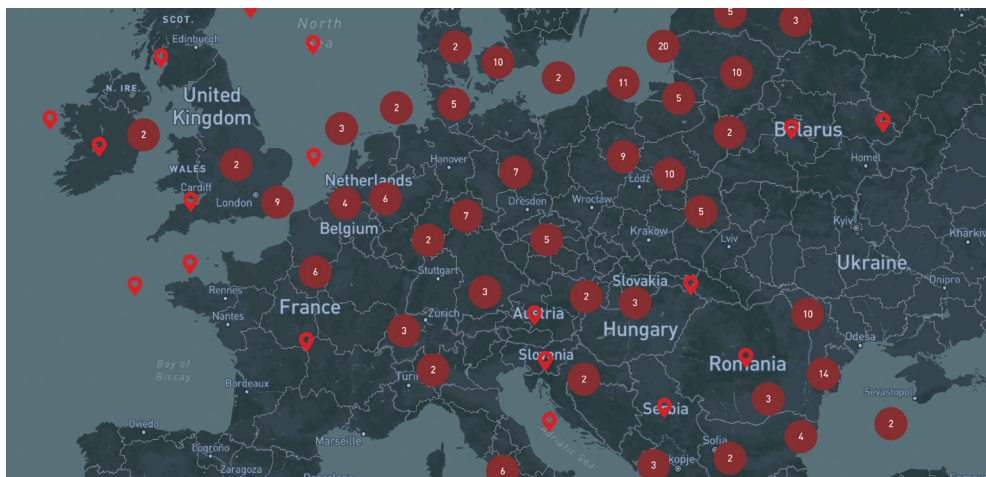
One of the main flaws in debates about Russia is the persistent assumption that Europe currently exists in a state of peace – or, if not peace, then at least not in a state of war. The Sahaidachnyi Security Center's *Everywhere War Tracker*<sup>2</sup> (screenshot below) clearly demonstrates the opposite because even the kinetic elements of war are simmering. Moreover, Russian military thought increasingly conceptual-

izes conflict as a continuum in which political, informational, economic, cyber, and kinetic instruments operate simultaneously rather than sequentially. In the *Denied War* report, based on research by the Sahaidachnyi Security Center think tank<sup>3</sup>, we argue that, fully in line with Russian authentic fighting doctrine, Moscow considers hybrid activities not as substitutes or a distinct type of a war but rather a concrete stage of environment-shaping operations preparing conditions for later military action.

An important part of the environment shaping is also cognitive – or mental<sup>4</sup> as Russia calls it – warfare. Russia sees itself in a civilizational confrontation and thus an existential war, where only one mindset can prevail while the other one should become extinct. Overall, while Russia might plan to restore its Soviet-time influence in Europe, it aims higher – at destroying the mindset of democratic societies and dismantling the European project, which will be a Russian strategic victory even amid little or no territory gains.

Evidence increasingly supports this interpretation. The *Everywhere War Tracker* documents a broad range of sub-threshold incidents across Europe, including cyber operations, maritime intrusions, sabotage activities, air-space violations, GPS interference, and critical infrastructure disruptions. Rather than being isolated events, their cumulative trajectory demonstrates both quantitative growth and qualitative evolution.

The *Denied War* report also observes a clear transition from early-stage "noise" to the oper-



ational preparation of the environment since mid-2023 in Russian sub-threshold activities. Activities have evolved from influence operations, disinformation campaigns, and sporadic cyber harassment toward infrastructure disruptions, activities of dedicated sabotage networks, electronic warfare attacks, airspace violations and systematic reconnaissance of strategic facilities.

Drone activity illustrates this transformation particularly clearly. Initially perceived largely as provocative actions, repeated UAV incursions over strategic sites, military facilities, and critical infrastructure may increasingly serve military purposes beyond signaling alone.

***One of the greatest analytical weaknesses in Western threat assessment is the persistent expectation that a future confrontation with Russia will resemble twentieth-century models of conventional war***

Gathering intelligence, mapping infrastructure, testing air defense, identifying vulnerabilities, collecting targeting data, and testing response times represent functions associated with operational planning.

Seen from this perspective, Russia may not be preparing for war against Europe. It may already be conducting one. The primary uncertainty is not about whether hostilities exist, but where the threshold into undeniable military confrontation ultimately lies.

**From sub-threshold to undeniable war: an operational scenario**

One of the greatest analytical weaknesses in Western threat assessment is the persistent expectation that a future confrontation with Russia will resemble twentieth-century models of conventional war. Instead, Russia will attack differently. It will most likely synthesize its traditional strategic doctrine with the newly acquired operational experience and new-generation warfare capabilities forged in Ukraine. While European militaries observe these individual components – drone swarms,

adaptive electronic warfare, dense real-time tactical kill-web, dispersed combined-arms ground maneuver, unmanned logistics and other things – on the Ukrainian battlefield, they fundamentally misjudge how this lethal algorithm will be synchronized and applied directly against NATO territory.

The *Denied War* report argues that the transition to war will not manifest as a sudden mechanized blitzkrieg across a border. Rather, it will unfold through a highly orchestrated operational pathway designed to blind, paralyze, and bleed the defender before large-scale ground combat even begins. If activated, this operational pathway would likely unfold across four integrated phases.

The first phase is actually the transition from sub-threshold to full-scale overt hostilities. After achieving the initial objective of desensitization – conditioning allied nations to a baseline of sub-threshold friction so that the crisis feels routine – the threshold into open conflict will be crossed with coordinated cyber and cyber-physical sabotage against critical infrastructure combined with cognitive / information operations to induce systemic shock – a manufactured sensation that “everything is collapsing”. Activated sleeper cells and deniable networks would attempt to target power grids, offshore energy infrastructure, subsea cables and optical fiber backbones (the “achilles heel” of the Nordic-Baltic region), and disable railway junctions. Crucially, port facilities would be prioritized for sabotage to explicitly hinder the arrival of NATO reinforcements and induce logistical chaos. Drone-enabled sabotage operations against energy and military infrastructure, including NATO air bases, modeled on the Ukrainian “Spiderweb” operation<sup>5</sup>, will be likely waged using tanker fleets and pre-disposed sleeper cells throughout the European continent.

At the almost synchronous second phase, Russia would launch a comprehensive, multi-domain air offensive targeting operational depth. Russia stockpiles and continues to produce an enormous mass of cruise and ballistic missiles. The Iskander-M tactical ballistic missile system (200+ deposit and 60 units produced per month)<sup>6</sup> presents a particular men-

ace as Europe has no immunity to it except for limited U.S.-exported Patriot PAC-3 arsenal. Its 500 km range allows it to cover any target in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and parts of Poland, Germany, and Sweden. Moscow also recently started mass-producing a 1000-km Iskander modification<sup>7</sup> that can reach most of Europe. The *Denied War* report points to the fact of particular concentration of these systems within the 152nd Missile Brigade in the Kaliningrad exclave, along with “Uragan” and “Smerch” Multiple Launch Rocket Systems within the 244th Artillery Brigade.

However, the air campaign would move beyond traditional missiles to heavily incorporate cheap and scalable long- and medium-range platforms: massed Geran/Gerber family fixed-wing UAVs, loitering munitions, UAV “mother-ships” with autonomous kamikaze munitions and mining assets, and automated relay systems designed to degrade command nodes and coastal logistics. A primary strategic objective during this phase is the preemptive neutralization of NATO’s high-end strategic platforms and airpower on the ground. While the success of this effort remains uncertain given NATO’s dispersal and physical protection measures, relying entirely on the assumption of unquestioned Western standalone air dominance is a dangerous gamble. Ukraine and Iran cases studies suggest that hybrid approaches combining massed unmanned systems and traditional airpower can severely challenge legacy aviation doctrines.

On the next phase, assuming Western airborne and naval assets survive and respond, Russia’s strategy relies on extreme asset dispersal and the establishment of a localized, highly lethal engagement area. This 40+ kilometer deep “kill zone” would be rendered virtually impenetrable to allied electronic assets. It relies on the mass deployment of unmanned systems crews integrated with layered ground-based air defenses. Advanced EW would suppress defender communications and networked systems while preserving safe, frequency-hopping, and fiber-optic command links for Russian forces. Operating within this bubble, highly experienced, dispersed teams of drone operators, akin to Russia’s “Rubikon” drone unit, would

systematically dismantle near-rear logistics and suppress any first-line strongholds.

Subsequently, once situational awareness is shattered and the kill zone established, Russian ground forces would advance on the ground. But instead of massive armored columns, this phase would rely on legions of tactical micro-groups operating under the autonomous, terminal-guidance cover of FPV drones and other lethal systems. While they could advance rapidly if facing an unprepared target, their default approach would be the methodical, creeping advance mastered in Ukraine to seize and hold key nodes. Once territory is taken, a fortified physical and electromagnetic bubble is erected to paralyze sustained counterattacks.

This final stage would likely be territorial anchoring. Russian planners understand they cannot win a full-scale long-range and long-lasting technological standoff with the West. By forcing the conflict into a protracted, bloody, close-quarters ground war on NATO soil, Russia seeks to exploit Europe’s lowest threshold: its societal intolerance for high human casualties. The political purpose will be not to seize big territories but to humiliate NATO and politically destroy it by proving it incapable.

Within such an operational scenario, assessing the balance of power through the raw calculus of legacy mechanized brigades is dangerously obsolete. The true metrics of readiness and deterrence now dictate a shift in focus toward affordable precision mass and agile electronic warfare on both the strategic and tactical level, layered air defense incorporating counter-UAS systems, resilient command and control, and highly adaptive last-mile logistics considering fusion in lethality between the frontline and rear.

## **Geostrategic scenarios of potential Russian aggression**

### **The Suwałki gambit**

Among the scenarios examined in *The Denied War*, the seizure of the Suwałki Gap appears as either the most plausible option or the indispensable part of all other broader options. The 65-km corridor (linear distance) between

Belarus and Kaliningrad (linear distance) represents both Russian and NATO's principal geographic vulnerability in the Baltic region. Its seizure would isolate the Baltic states from land reinforcement and create a limited territorial objective capable of generating disproportionate strategic effects. At the same time, from Moscow's perspective, its existence poses a permanent of a blockade of Kaliningrad by NATO forces, given the Alliance decides to do so, which could severely constrain Russia's subsequent options. Only control of the Suwałki Gap mitigates this risk. Otherwise, in any broader conventional war, a combined land and naval blockade remains a plausible Allied response. This strategic weakness explains why Russia is almost certainly planning its initial moves around securing the Suwałki Gap.

### Full-scale regional war in the Baltics

A large-scale Russian offensive against the Baltic states would integrate simultaneous operations across land, sea, air, cyber, and space domains, leveraging advanced technologies such as massed missile-drone strikes, drone swarms, electronic warfare, and naval drones. On the ground, it would involve multi-axis advances from Belarus, with primary emphasis on seizing the Suwałki Corridor, in an effort to rapidly paralyze the defense of the entire region and demonstrate full-scale war with NATO.

Russia's strategic culture favors ambitious, high-risk operations over limited objectives. As seen in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, where Moscow launched simultaneous advances on multiple axes rather than concentrating on more achievable goals like the Donbas, the Kremlin often opts for maximalist gambles. This pattern, combined with Putin's apparent overconfidence in its military power (bred by misleading victorious reports from his generals), makes a broad offensive aimed at the rapid capitulation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania a credible contingency.

### Gotland / Saaremaa / Hiiumaa seizure

The *Denied War* report considers independent Russian operations against Gotland and some strategic islands in the Baltic Sea relatively unlikely. However, within a broader regional conflict these islands could become supporting objectives. The strategic objective would be to create a strong Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) zone using anti-ship missiles, air defenses, and aerial and naval drone capabilities. This would block NATO naval reinforcements, isolate the Baltic states, and provide leverage for diplomatic ultimatums. However, operational risks are substantial. As demonstrated by coastal and island operations in the Russo-Ukrainian war, particularly Snake Island, an exposed garrison without secure, redundant logistics is highly vulnerable to isolation and eventual destruction. In the contested waters of the central Baltic, Russia cannot guarantee sustained supply lines. Consequently, any force deployed to these islands would lack strategic depth and could be systematically neutralized by NATO at a time of its choosing.

### Arctic escalation

The probability of a Russian attack on the the Svalbard archipelago depends heavily on the broader strategic context. As a standalone "limited invasion" it ranks among the least likely scenarios. However, in the event of a full-scale war in the Baltic region, a concurrent operation against Svalbard becomes highly probable as a secondary theater. Russia would likely seek to transform the archipelago into a forward base for air defenses, anti-ship missiles, radars, and drone operations. This would extend its A2/AD coverage across the North Atlantic, interdict NATO reinforcements, and divert Allied air and naval assets away from the primary theater. Military planning, as observed in recent "Zapad" exercises,<sup>8</sup> points to a *coup de main* operation: a surprise amphibious landing under the cover of naval drills, preceded by large-scale missile and drone strikes on Norwegian airfields and ports. Russia's Kola Peninsula bastion, strate-

gic bombers, and submarine fleet provide a strong foundation for this initial phase.

### Attack on Finland and Norway

According to the *Denied War* report, this remains the least probable scenario, bordering on unrealistic as a primary operation. It would involve a direct ground offensive from Murmansk into Finnmark (Norway) or from Petrozavodsk toward Joensuu and Rovaniemi in Finnish Lapland and Karelia. The theoretical aim would be to establish a defensive buffer protecting Russia's Kola Peninsula nuclear submarine bastions and securing dominance over the Barents Sea. Although open-source intelligence shows Russian military construction near the Finnish border, including new divisions and an army corps in Karelia, these efforts appear primarily defensive. They are intended to secure Russia's northern flank while its main forces are engaged elsewhere, rather than to support large-scale territorial conquest. The allocated forces are inadequate for seizing and holding vast, difficult terrain against determined resistance.

### Is Russia capable of attacking Europe?

Current battlefield tensions may actively stimulate a limited attack against a NATO member state. For instance, the Kremlin's calculus could involve leveraging this escalation to demand an immediate cessation of Western support for Ukraine in exchange for halting its aggression. Recent Russian actions confirm this operational groundwork, notably Vladimir Putin's decree authorizing the use of Russian armed forces abroad under the pretext of protecting Russian citizens,<sup>9</sup> which coincided with a disinformation campaign against the Baltic states inside Russia.<sup>10</sup>

Russian military capabilities should not be underestimated. Ukraine today represents one of the most fortified and combat-experienced military environments in the world. Years of battlefield adaptation have transformed it into a highly lethal battlespace saturated with drones, electronic warfare systems, precision

fires, and extensive defensive engineering. Yet Europe does not necessarily present the same challenge.

Paradoxically, despite NATO's aggregate superiority built for the previous-generation warfare, Europe may represent an easier target than Ukraine under the evolving circumstances. Firstly, European rearmament remains slower than the threat environment demands. Despite major announcements, military procurement cycles continue to operate on peacetime timelines while Russian industry increasingly functions under wartime conditions.

Secondly, it is not about stockpiles alone, but primarily about the new military technology and personnel skilled to use it for fighting the new-generation war. European militaries must avoid the trap of comparing themselves to Russia or assuming their potential response would mirror the fierce resistance currently demonstrated by Ukraine. After four years of high-intensity war, both Russia and Ukraine have not only accumulated colossal combat experience but have also forged the foundational capabilities of a new generation of unmanned, algorithmic war of attrition. These capabilities remain either non-existent or in their infancy across Europe. This gap will grant Russia exponentially higher tactical capabilities and an asymmetric advantage on a European battlefield. For European armies, a direct clash would not resemble the grinding, prolonged battle for a village like Mala Tokmachka; instead, it would likely feature a rapid Russian advance dozens of kilometers deep,

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accompanied by the immediate deployment of highly lethal kill zones.

Multiple Ukrainian red teaming exercises and theoretical wargames have exposed these vulnerabilities.<sup>11</sup> Yet they have shown not only a lack of preparedness among European armies, but also political hesitation and disunity in times of crisis. Ukraine has become the world's largest laboratory for modern warfare, forcing continuous adaptation in drone employment, electronic warfare, targeting cycles, distributed operations, and battlefield innovation. Many European militaries remain at an earlier stage of this adaptation process.

Thirdly, threat perception across Europe remains fragmented. Northern and Eastern flank countries increasingly perceive Russia as a

***While European societies have demonstrated substantial solidarity with Ukraine, supporting a partner under attack and accepting direct military risks are fundamentally different political choices***

long-term existential challenge, while parts of Central, Southern and Western Europe often prioritize other security concerns. Moreover, decades of relative peace have shaped strategic cultures emphasizing crisis management over societal mobilization. While European societies have demonstrated substantial solidarity with Ukraine, supporting a partner under attack and accepting direct military risks are fundamentally different political choices. Protests against the return of conscription in Germany is one such example.

Fourth, uncertainty surrounding the United States, which has itself become bogged down in the war against Iran and seems unwilling to challenge China over Taiwan, introduces another variable into Russian calculations. Perceptions of declining willingness to sustain extensive commitments abroad, strategic prioritization of the Indo-Pacific, and political debates regarding NATO obligations may alter Moscow's assessment of risks and opportunities. Article 5 has always depended not only on legal commitments but on political resolve.

Ultimately, assessing the Russian threat is not a matter of prophecy – a simplistic binary of whether Russia will attack Europe or not. Ukrainian long-standing experience of its antagonistic relationships with Russia shows that the latter has a long-standing strategic culture that prioritizes playing the long game. It shapes the operational environment well in advance, getting ready to strike wherever favorable windows of opportunity allow it to, and is significantly less likely to act if those windows remain closed. Therefore, without exaggeration, the higher Europe's level of preparedness for an attack, the lower the probability of that aggression occurring.

The question therefore is not whether Russia can export the war against Ukraine further into Europe. The question is how the Kremlin may plan to do so.

## Conclusion

Debates about a future Russian attack on Europe often oscillate between two extremes. One school argues that Russia's poor battlefield performance in Ukraine, mounting economic pressures, and immense casualties make a direct confrontation with NATO improbable. Another sees an almost inevitable countdown toward war by 2029–2030. Both perspectives risk oversimplifying a much more complex reality.

The question is not whether Russia is weak or strong in absolute terms. The question is whether Russia may identify a favorable combination of intentions, capabilities, and opportunities.

The evidence increasingly suggests that Moscow is systematically generating options. The *Denied War* report demonstrates that Russian military thinking does not separate sub-threshold activities from conventional conflict but treats them as sequential components of a unified campaign. Current activities across Europe increasingly resemble operational preparation of the environment rather than isolated acts of pressure. Considered separately, they do not necessarily indicate military escalation, but collectively suggest the gradual shaping of conditions un-

der which escalation could occur if perceived opportunities emerge.

Furthermore, Russia's threat should not be measured primarily by counting tanks, aircraft, or divisions. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that numerical comparisons increasingly fail to capture the evolving character of warfare. Russia has adapted faster than many expected in several critical domains. It has transformed large portions of its military into a system built around unmanned technologies, electronic warfare, long-range precision strikes, dispersed operations, and high tolerance for attrition. At the same time, it has continued integrating military and non-military instruments into a single strategic logic.

Europe faces a different challenge. Despite possessing considerable aggregate economic and military potential, adaptation remains uneven. Rearmament is accelerating but often still follows peacetime rhythms and outdated prioritization logic. Threat perceptions differ significantly among member states. Strategic cultures developed during decades of relative peace continue influencing societal and political willingness to accept risk. Many European militaries remain in the early stages of adapting to the lessons emerging from Ukraine.

Most importantly, deterrence depends not only on capabilities but on perceptions. Moscow does not require certainty of success. It only requires sufficient doubt regarding Western unity and response.

If this is correct, Europe should prepare not simply for the possibility of Russian aggression, but for a strategic environment in which the distinction between peace and war has already become increasingly difficult to identify.

1 Cf. Puglierin, Jana (2026): *Wer verteidigt Europa?* Hamburg, p. 48.

2 <https://sahasec.org/tracker/>.

3 Boiko, Stanislav, Davlikanova, Elena and Ogryzko, Lesia (2025): *The Denied War. The Russian Grey-Zone Aggression against Europe and Its Unfolding Trajectory*. <https://sahasec.org/news/the-denied-war-the-russian-grey-zone-aggression-against-europe-and-its-unfolding-trajectory/> (all internet sources accessed June 15, 2026).

4 See Davlikanova, Elena (2026): *Going mental: Russia's cognitive war against Europe*. European Policy Institute in Kyiv, 28. Mai. <https://epik.eu/publication/cognitive-war/>.

5 Petrenko, Roman (2025): *Ukraine's Operation Spiderweb: 18 months in the planning, 41 Russian bombers hit – photos*. In: *Ukrainska Pravda*, June 1. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/06/01/7515065/>.

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# THE EU AS A SECURITY AND MILITARY ACTOR IN UNCERTAIN TIMES: CAUGHT IN THE EXPECTATIONS-CAPABILITIES GAP?

**Author:** *Matthias Dembinski*

It has become a truism that Europe must take responsibility for its own security. Caught between the enduring Russian threat and American MAGA nationalism, including the associated tendencies toward retrenchment, Europe appears to have little alternative. Yet there is still no convincing answer to the pressing question of how this can be achieved. Three models are currently under discussion: (a) A leap in integration toward a common European security and defense policy, including a European army. (b) A strengthening of institutionalized intergovernmental cooperation among large and willing states through either a core group or a European Security Council. (c) A Europeanization of NATO's intergovernmental structures, with the European members shouldering the lion's share of the burden while the United States contributes, at most, certain core capabilities such as nuclear deterrence. This article focuses on the first model and only briefly discusses the other two. To provide a clearer understanding of the challenges involved, it begins by briefly outlining the threat environment, the EU's modest record as a security actor, and the contributions the United States has thus far made to European defense – contributions that Europe would ultimately have to replace.

## The point of departure

No one knows what form the Russian threat will take after the end of the war in Ukraine. Yet because all trust has been destroyed, and because Russia is unlikely to accept its de facto exclusion from Europe,<sup>1</sup> the threat scenarios developed by Western intelligence services and observers are, of necessity, based on worst-case assumptions. According to these scenarios, Russia could be capable of launching an attack within eight to ten years after the end of the war.<sup>2</sup> The key variable in these scenarios is Russia's projected military capabilities. The most straightforward indicator of these capabilities is defense spending. According to calculations by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the increase in Russian defense spending has now leveled off,

### *Abstract*

*Caught between the Russian threat and American retrenchment, expectations are increasingly directed toward the EU, which is expected to assume responsibility for ensuring security in Europe. However, in its current institutional form the EU would be overwhelmed by this task. Three models of European security are therefore currently under discussion: (a) a leap in EU integration, (b) the formation of a core group, and (c) functional and minilateral cooperation under the umbrella of a Europeanized NATO. All three models have advantages, but each also entails significant risks. Replacing the leadership provided by the indispensable superpower remains an unresolved challenge.*

with Russia currently devoting 7.3 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) to defense. Measured in exchange-rate terms, this corresponds to expenditure of 186.2 billion U.S. dollars. The five European states with the largest defense budgets – Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy and Poland – together spend 344.9 billion U.S. dollars. All European NATO member states now spend more than 2 percent of GDP on defense. Financial resources in Europe, then, are amply available. Nevertheless, for two reasons this comparison gives no grounds for reassurance. First, Russia can purchase more military capability for each dollar spent than European states can. Calculated on the basis of purchasing power parity, Russian expenditure amounts to 523.6 billion U.S. dollars.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, comparisons based on purchasing power parity are unreliable, and European states' defense spending will continue to rise in the coming years. Second, however, Russia has another strategic advantage: it is a state with a *single* political will and a *single* chain of command. The EU, by contrast, consists of 27 small and medium-sized states with 27 separate political wills; moreover, its military and defense-industrial structures remain fragmented along national lines.

The EU is virtually omnipresent as a global actor on the world stage. As a regulatory and normative power, it sets standards. As a diplomatic power, it coordinates closely with strategic partners and other regional organizations. As a development and trade-policy power that also converts its economic weight into political influence through sanctions, export controls and other trade-policy instruments, it significantly shapes the range of options available to other states. Nevertheless, the EU is different from, and behaves differently from, states of comparable size. It is a world power *sui generis* and is best understood as a bureaucratic actor. Its internal institutional structures translate into a distinctive pattern of external behavior. Because decision-making procedures in the Common Foreign and Security Policy are consensus-based, and because security-policy bureaucracies have developed since the European Council's Helsinki summit in 1999, the EU acts in a distinctively

rule-oriented and path-dependent manner. By contrast, it lacks an institution that Max Weber had already identified as the true bearer of politics, namely a leader who is capable of making swift and decisive decisions, who can prioritize objectives and deploy the instruments of power rapidly and with focus.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, the EU is also described in the literature as an astrategic power.<sup>5</sup> Compared with states, it has both advantages and disadvantages. It acts more slowly, but is also more

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advantages carry greater weight.  
In stormy times, it has a problem***

predictable. It only exercises coercive power to a very limited extent, but is less likely to become entangled in risky adventures. In normal times, its advantages carry greater weight. In stormy times, it has a problem.

The implicit comparison with states is reflected in a long-diagnosed gap between expectations placed on the EU and its actual capabilities. This applies in particular to the EU as a security and defense actor. At the very beginning of the wars of Yugoslav dissolution, Jacques Poos, then Luxembourg's foreign minister and president of the Council, proclaimed that this was the hour of the EU, not that of the Americans. Thirty years later, its representatives promise that the EU will learn the language of power and develop into a geopolitical actor.

This stands in contrast to a rather modest record. The Helsinki Headline Goal adopted at the 1999 European Council summit in Helsinki envisaged the capacity to deploy a 60,000-strong force, but this capability was never even remotely achieved. The far more modest EU Battlegroups – two units of roughly 1,000 troops each – were never deployed, despite numerous opportunities to do so. The numerous CSDP missions, for which member states provide personnel on an ad hoc basis, also became progressively less robust over time. Most operations were civilian in nature; in recent years, the few military missions have

served almost exclusively to train the armed forces of third countries. Observers also note that efficiency leaves much to be desired. This even applies to defense-industrial cooperation. Despite the numerous initiatives launched by the European Commission over recent decades, the complaint remains much the same today: fragmented defense markets generate substantial additional costs, which, according to a recent estimate by the European Parliamentary Research Service, amount to between 24 billion and 75 billion euros annually.<sup>6</sup> Responsibility for this lies with the member states themselves: they insist on their sovereignty and take a broad view of the exemptions for military goods from internal market rules laid down in Article 346 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. There are also concerns that the Commission's 2025 program, dubbed "ReArm Europe" and designed to mobilize up to 800 billion euros for defense, will do little to break this pattern.

In the field of collective defense and within NATO, the United States has so far provided strategic leadership, cohesion and military capabilities. The United States acted as the hegemonic power, taking the interests of small-

effectively, they can replace the strategic leadership and military capabilities that the United States has so far provided in the face of the continuing threat.

### **The first model: a truly Common European Security and Defense Policy**

The basic idea behind this model is straightforward: within a group of many small and medium-sized states, hegemonic leadership by a large state can best be replaced through deeper integration of military and defense-industrial structures. Such integration would not only enhance military interoperability and combat effectiveness but, through the resulting economies of scale, also improve defense-industrial efficiency. The EU Commissioner for Defense and Space, Andrius Kubilius, illustrates this basic idea with a hypothetical question: Would the United States be militarily stronger if it had 50 armies, 50 separate procurement systems and 50 defense industries? If the answer is no, then the implications for Europe are obvious.<sup>8</sup>

Unsurprisingly, this model enjoys support above all among economists.<sup>9</sup> Representatives of other disciplines, however, also regard crises as drivers of integration and believe that immense external pressure makes a leap in integration both necessary and possible. According to opinion polls, such a leap in integration would be welcomed by publics in many EU countries, not least in Germany. In Germany, an absolute majority supports the idea that security should in future be guaranteed by a European army. Even in Poland, 37 percent of respondents favor European solutions, while only 29 percent prefer the North Atlantic option and 24 percent the national option.<sup>10</sup> In the political sphere, the debate over a European army gained momentum during the first Trump administration. Among its most prominent proponents were German political leaders such as Angela Merkel and, the then defense minister, Ursula von der Leyen.<sup>11</sup> Since the first Trump administration, the European Commission has also promoted deeper defense cooperation un-

### ***In the field of collective defense and within NATO, the United States has so far provided strategic leadership, cohesion and military capabilities***

der members into account while setting the course that others generally followed willingly. The United States dominates the institutional architecture of NATO's military wing. The United States also contributes public goods in the form of five brigades stationed in Europe, substantial reinforcement forces, core military capabilities such as satellite-based reconnaissance and, above all, nuclear deterrence. Replacing the material contributions of the United States alone would require substantial additional expenditure.<sup>7</sup> The institutional role of the United States is even harder to replace. Models of European defense should therefore be assessed by the extent to which, and how

der slogans such as “European sovereignty,” without specifying in concrete terms what a leap in integration in this area would entail. The proposal put forward by Andrius Kubilius to establish a standing European force of around 100,000 troops likewise remains vague on key questions.<sup>12</sup>

There is a reason for this vagueness. Integrated military structures presuppose centralized military and political decision-making processes. However, such centralized decision-making structures could only be achieved at the cost of a significant transfer of sovereignty. A thought experiment quickly makes this clear. If decisions were made by a collective body such as the European Council in its current form, each member state could preserve its sovereignty thanks to the principle of consensus. At the same time, however, the common instrument would risk being paralyzed. To prevent integrated structures such as a European army from becoming structurally incapable of deployment, at a minimum majority voting would be required. Beyond that, substantial powers would also have to be delegated to a European actor, such as the president of the European Council. In short, as Kubilius’ hypothetical question suggests, close integration of military structures would have to go hand in hand with transforming the EU into a state-like entity. Such a trajectory, however, has become increasingly remote with successive rounds of enlargement. It is also open to normative objections. Transferring defense-policy powers to the EU could not be expected simply to shift loyalties from the national to the European level and thereby create the political and social foundations for a leap in integration. At best, the democratic quality of such an institutional structure would leave much to be desired. At worst, it could trigger protest and fragmentation. Rather than awakening a European *demos*, this path could lead the robust national *demos* to see their right to self-determination as severely curtailed.

As long as the political communities of the member states remain the building blocks of the European polity, any restriction of their capacity for self-determination in the field

of security and defense policy would therefore entail substantial costs. It is therefore unsurprising that states remain reluctant to abandon the consensus principle in any far-reaching way or to vest authority in supranational institutions. One example illustrates this point.

With the Strategic Compass adopted in March 2022, the member states sought to give new impetus to Europe’s faltering defense policy.<sup>13</sup> At the center of the initiative was the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (EURDC). This deployment force, comprising approximately 5,000 troops, is intended to ensure

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the EU’s military capacity to act in the future. Under a rotational arrangement, individual member states commit troops to the force for one year at a time. This integrative form of cooperation, however, shares the same fundamental flaw that prevented the deployment of the Battlegroups. It is far from certain that, in a crisis, the states currently contributing troops would see their national interests as sufficiently at stake to deploy their soldiers under EU command. Because doubts about this central initiative of the Strategic Compass evidently exist even among the heads of state or government, the document also provides for coalitions of the willing as a second, less sovereignty-constraining form of cooperation. The Strategic Compass cites Article 44 of the Treaty on European Union as the legal basis: under this provision, the Council, acting by consensus, would exercise overall authority over operations conducted by coalitions of the willing. In referring to coalitions of the willing, the Strategic Compass does little more than acknowledge what has in any case long been established state practice. Whether such coalitions would in fact accept the precautions imposed by Article 44 is, however, highly questionable.

Even the Commission now accepts the reservations surrounding integrated forms of cooperation in security policy. In a document accompanying the 2025 White Paper, it stated:

“Nothing in the White Paper nor in the Re-Arm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030 relates to the foundation of an EU army. This is not an objective of the European Commission or of the Union more generally. [...] Furthermore, all initiatives reflected in the Defence Package aim at strengthening national Armed Forces, improving their interoperability in line with NATO standards.”<sup>14</sup>

### The second model: promoting cooperation through core groups

The basic idea behind the second model is equally straightforward: if effective cooperation is difficult in a large group of states with veto powers and heterogeneous interests, a differentiated membership structure could facilitate cooperation. If a small group of states with similar interests or a similar willingness to integrate were to take the lead and form a core group or a more exclusive club, it could generate sufficient pull or leadership capacity. Proposals for such a defense-focused core Europe can be found, for example, in the work of Wolfgang Ischinger and Herfried Münkler.<sup>15</sup> The idea of a European Security Council points in a similar direction.

Angela Merkel and the German government floated this proposal during the first Trump administration, though without formulating it in any detail and without it gaining resonance in Europe.<sup>16</sup>

Proposals for a core Europe, a Europe of multiple speeds, or a Europe of concentric circles have a long history. One of the earliest proposals along these lines was put forward by Wolfgang Schäuble and Karl Lamers as early as 1994.<sup>17</sup> Their failure to materialize in the field of foreign and security policy reflects underlying structural constraints. One variant of this model assumes that close and institutionalized cooperation among the major states could simulate the hegemonic leadership previously provided by the United States. The obstacles to this variant are obvious. First, the European countries excluded from such an exclusive club would be unlikely to accept a subordinate position. Second, and more importantly, the club of major states – which would have to include at least Germany, France, Poland, the United Kingdom and Italy – would itself bring together countries with markedly different interests, perspectives and strategic cultures. Wolfgang Ischinger is aware of this problem. He therefore proposes combining this variant of core Europe with a second variant. The second variant would make greater willingness to integrate the criterion for admission to the exclusive club. Combining the two variants would therefore require the larger states to accept a substantial renunciation of sovereign rights and to support the move to majority voting. It is unclear, however, why larger states should be willing to renounce sovereignty in a smaller circle when they refuse to do so in the larger one.

### The third model: functional cooperation

The third model accepts that responsibility for security and defense rests with the states and can only be delegated to a limited extent. Rather than creating new superstructures from the top down, it seeks to organize cooperation on an intergovernmental basis, mak-

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ing use of existing institutions such as NATO. Through two mechanisms it seeks to compensate, at least in part, for the leadership provided by American hegemony: (a) through joint military planning, exercises and command structures for collective-defense contingencies, and (b) through closer minilateral cooperation guided by a functional logic.

Real-world developments are, in fact, moving in this direction. Observers have identified an accelerated growth of bilateral and minilateral cooperation in the fields of security policy and the defense-industrial sector since 2022.<sup>18</sup> Here, states with similar interests, perspectives and strategic cultures cooperate more closely with one another. In the field of security policy, examples range from the interlinking of the German and Dutch armies and the Franco-German Air Transport Squadron to looser arrangements such as the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8), to which Poland has also moved closer since the change of government in Warsaw.<sup>19</sup> This form of functional cooperation is particularly evident in the defense-industrial sector. The supply side is characterized by a highly dynamic increase in mergers and acquisitions among defense firms, driven by market forces. On the demand side, states with similar interests join forces to close capability gaps. The ongoing consolidation is thus complemented by state-negotiated forms of cooperation, such as the development of long-range precision weapons under the European Long-Range Strike Approach (ELSA).<sup>20</sup> Under this model, NATO would serve as the umbrella for this minilateral and functional cooperation, with its command structure increasingly shaped by European states. However, this model also entails risks. First, bottom-up minilateral defense cooperation could produce a proliferation of unrelated projects, preventing the expected economies of scale from materializing. Second, functional cooperation could produce asymmetric patterns in which the large EU member states build networks of smaller states around themselves while doing little to cooperate with other large states. Despite the favorable conditions for cooperation created by shared democratic systems

and the single market, divisions within Europe could therefore deepen.

### **The future of European defense**

After the period of the East-West conflict, the unipolar moment – the era of American global hegemony – is also drawing to a close. Europe is becoming a testing ground for whether security and stability can be sustained over the long term even without the indispensable superpower. Two concepts appear less viable: the idea that American hegemony could be replaced either through integrative forms of

***Real-world developments are moving in the direction of bilateral and minilateral cooperation in the fields of security policy and the defense-industrial sector since 2022***

cooperation culminating in a European army or through a core group of states. More likely, a Europeanized NATO will remain the umbrella under which functional cooperation continues to develop. Yet even under this model, key questions remain unresolved, including nuclear deterrence, the role of SACEUR and safeguards against the risks of a renationalization of security policy.

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# NON-PROLIFERATION IN AN “AGE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS” CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

*Author: Emmanuelle Maitre*

## **An “age of nuclear weapons” and proliferation temptations**

In his speech on nuclear deterrence at l’Île Longue, French President Emmanuel Macron announced that “the coming half-century will be an age of nuclear weapons.”<sup>1</sup>

Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) are increasingly relying on nuclear weapons to address the current challenges of the strategic environment. In recent years, they have been reaffirming the role of nuclear deterrence in their security strategies and investing heavily in the modernisation of their nuclear forces. But this trend is also visible among Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS). In South Korea, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Poland, Germany, Ukraine, to name a few, political leaders have more or less clearly stated that possessing nuclear weapons could serve their countries’ security.

Against this backdrop, the international normative framework, and in particular the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) appears to be a weak barrier against proliferation temptations. This instrument has regularly been declared to be in crisis since the beginning of the century, even if it continues to demonstrate its resilience since only North Korea has withdrawn from it to become a nuclear-weapon state to this day. Nevertheless, strategic competition between powers, regional conflicts and dysfunctional multilateralism are creating incentives to launch national nuclear programmes, particularly in East Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

In this context, the strength of the norm remains an important factor in persuading states to remain NNWS. But there are also other factors that deter states from proliferating, such as belonging to an alliance with nuclear guarantees, the fear of international isolation, and the apprehension of military retaliation or prohibitive economic costs – both direct and indirect. These motivations need to be reassessed in light of the current crisis of multilateralism, doubts about the credibility of U.S. security guarantees and the emergence of new security frameworks, especially in Europe.

## *Abstract*

*Geopolitical tensions, spread of conflicts, and an increased reliance on nuclear weapons are leading, in many countries, to a renewed debate about the desirability to develop national nuclear programmes. Those states have refrained so far from embarking on such developments, mostly out of respect for the non-proliferation norm, fear of the economic and political consequences, and to ensure the preservation of extended deterrence. The recent French assessment that its nuclear policy could contribute to increase incentives to respect the NPT within Europe feeds this logic. In the French mindset, thinking deterrence with a European dimension and pooling nuclear and conventional resources from different partners can significantly contribute to European security and makes proliferation detrimental to this overarching goal.*

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## The revival of nuclear deterrence

### Major powers' reaffirmation of their nuclear status

In February 2007 Vladimir Putin expressed Russia's dissatisfaction with the post-Cold War international order, denouncing what he perceived as unfair treatment of his country and the West's hegemonic ambitions. The following year, the war in Georgia showed Russia's determination to use force to maintain some form of control over former Soviet republics. With the first crisis in Ukraine in 2014–2015 (annexation of Crimea and conflict in the Donbass), it became clear that Russia's interventionism could call into question the foundations of European security. Russia demonstrated its intention to use a policy of "aggressive sanctuarization" with a strong nuclear component to alter the borders of a sovereign European state to its own advantage.

In Asia, while there are conceptual debates as to whether China is a revisionist or revolutionary power, it is clearly opposed to the post-Cold War international order in the Indo-Pacific. The main areas of tension are Taiwan, but also the South China Sea and the land border with India. More broadly, China explicitly seeks to reduce the United States' influence in Asia, and to establish itself as the world's leading superpower. Moreover, while Chinese developments in the nuclear field had been modest since the 1960s, rapid advances have been made in recent years, suggesting that Beijing seeks to establish itself as a leading nuclear power in the short to medium term.

While during the so-called second nuclear age (from the end of the Cold War until 2014, although the classification of nuclear ages is controversial) certain actors were considered deviants from the international order and were referred to as "proliferating" states, the consolidation of their nuclear forces now brings them into the equation of deterrence. Thus, despite the lack of diplomatic recognition of North Korea's nuclear status, Western military staffs no longer simply regard Pyong-

yang as a proliferation problem but seek to build deterrence strategies against it. Indeed, the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear strategy has major repercussions for the entire Indo-Pacific defence architecture. This is also true of the Indo-Pakistani dyad, whose nuclear rivalry extends beyond the Indian sub-continent because India is also involved in a strategic competition with China and some of its capacity choices reflect larger regional dynamics.

### Increase of arsenals

The current phenomenon of "nuclear rearmament" goes far beyond traditional modernisation efforts. It is marked by the introduction

## *The current phenomenon of "nuclear rearmament" goes far beyond traditional modernisation efforts*

of new capabilities that are likely to lead to greater dependence on nuclear forces, and by a sharp increase in several arsenals.

The most obvious case is China. Since the 1990s, China has progressively increased its arsenal while diversifying it (development of a naval component). In recent years, growth has been significantly faster. In 2021, the Pentagon told Congress that China's arsenal was likely to double by 2025. In December 2025, the Pentagon declared that China would in all likelihood have an arsenal of over 1,000 nuclear warheads by the end of the decade.<sup>2</sup> These developments call into question the Chinese government's willingness to stick to the official posture of minimal deterrence and a strategy of retaliation.

On the Russian side, extensive modernisation programmes were launched in the 2000s to replace systems inherited from the Soviet era. Most of these modernisation programmes did not lead to changes in strategy or strategic balances, as they coincided with the withdrawal of older weapons. However, Russia's non-compliance with the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty has enabled it

to develop a potentially dual-use system (capable of carrying nuclear or conventional warheads) over previously prohibited ranges (between 500 and 5,500 km). Secondly, in 2018, Vladimir Putin declared his intention to equip the country with new capabilities that are often referred to as “exotic” insofar as they do not replace older systems and represent new types of missiles. This is the case with the Kinzhal air-launched ballistic missile, described by Russia as hypersonic, which, although currently used as a conventional weapon (for strikes in Ukraine), is deemed to have a nuclear capability. Another weapon developed for speed and precision is the Tsirkon hypersonic cruise missile, which presumably exists in a nuclear or conventional version. Two other systems have been announced and are

***As tensions rise and nuclear powers rely increasingly on their nuclear capacities, the international regimes built to curb proliferation and regulate nuclear competition are under strain***

currently under development. The first is an underwater drone known as the “Poseidon”. The second, a nuclear-powered cruise missile dubbed “Burevestnik” 9M730, will probably be the last to enter operational service. Finally, the Russian decision to station nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory is also a source of concern.

So far, the United States has not decided to increase its nuclear arsenal, but the expiration of the New Start Treaty in February 2026 removes the legal constraint on doing so, which is seen as increasingly necessary among parts of the strategic community. Thus, the Strategic Posture Commission, a bipartisan group of experts, recommended in 2023 keeping open the possibility of uploading additional nuclear weapons on existing platforms or even launching new programmes.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that major powers are not the only ones opting to expand their arsenals: the United Kingdom announced an increase of its stockpile in 2021<sup>4</sup> and France did so in March 2026.<sup>5</sup>

**Increased fragility of the non-proliferation regime**

**Unresolved proliferation crises**

While the NPT has been mostly effective in stopping the spread of nuclear weapons, a few cases show that multilateral nuclear regulations may not always prevent a determined state from pursuing a nuclear programme. Thus, North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003 under contested circumstances and has since developed an ambitious programme despite sanctions and international condemnation. Many states still declare that they support diplomatic endeavours to obtain the “denuclearisation” of North Korea, but this aim appears increasingly unrealistic as Pyongyang displays its attachment to nuclear deterrence to ensure the security of the regime.

In Iran, the nuclear programme initiated in the 1970s has led to decades of diplomatic engagement, active counter-proliferation efforts (including sanctions, sabotage and assassinations) and two military operations to this day. Yet all these endeavours may only have reinforced Tehran’s conviction that a nuclear capability is necessary to secure the regime. While many capacities have been either traded away or destroyed, the remnants of nuclear material and the uncertainty that surrounds the programme continue to be a destabilising factor in the region.

**Tensions of the regime**

As tensions rise and nuclear powers rely increasingly on their nuclear capacities, the international regimes built to curb proliferation and regulate nuclear competition are under strain. Thus, arms control agreements are collapsing, and contrary to a trend which marked the end of the Cold War, arsenals are again increasing. Within the NPT, this is perceived extremely negatively by most NNWS that feel that the “Grand Bargain” of the nuclear order is no longer respected. Indeed, article VI of the NPT calls on all states to “pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race

at an early date and to nuclear disarmament.” For more than a decade now, no arms control agreement has been negotiated, and existing ones have either expired or collapsed. Measures such as the treaty prohibiting nuclear tests (CTBT) or the project to prohibit the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons have failed to enter into force or even to be adopted. Geopolitical tensions between NWS make it impossible to bring any tangible progress regarding disarmament to the table. Frustrated by this standstill, a group of NNWS negotiated and adopted the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in 2017. The disagreements surrounding this effort highlight the rift within the international community over the value and risks that nuclear weapons pose to global security.

This impasse in disarmament is also weakening the NPT’s other pillars. First, regarding proliferation, not only do some countries fail to comply with their obligations, but some NWS actually assist them by violating the regulations established by the UN Security Council and export control regimes. Finally, the targeting of civilian nuclear installations in military operations damages the credibility of commitments to the peaceful use of nuclear energy and to nuclear security.

## **Proliferation as a fatality?**

### **Nuclear deterrence: ultimate provider of security?**

At the time of the USSR’s dissolution, Ukraine was one of the Soviet republics where nuclear weapons were stationed. Like Belarus and Kazakhstan, it agreed to transfer them to Russia. In return, the Budapest Memorandum, signed in 1994 by Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom guaranteed Ukraine’s territorial integrity; France, the other Western nuclear power, did so in a separate declaration. However, Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 constituted a clear violation of this multilateral commitment. The fact that Ukraine and the international community were unable to protect the country’s territorial integrity highlights that a non-nuclear state remains

vulnerable to aggression by a nuclear power and fundamentally dependent on the latter’s goodwill. The full-scale invasion of 2022 only reinforced this perception. Other countries that also renounced nuclear weapons, whether voluntarily or under duress and in different circumstances, have also suffered aggression and subsequently seen their regimes overthrown (Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011, and, to some extent, Iran in 2025 and 2026). States such as North Korea draw the de facto conclusion that a state which has agreed to dispose of its nuclear capabilities is highly vulnerable.

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Whilst this interpretation may be debated, it is gaining ground and, with it, the principles underpinning the international non-proliferation regime are being called into question.

### **Proliferation temptations in various regions**

In this context, proliferation rhetoric is on the rise. In Asia, South Korea has historically been tempted to rely increasingly on nuclear weapons for its security. This has not only led to calls to reintroduce U.S. nuclear weapons on the peninsula, but also to a discussion about whether Seoul should develop its own nuclear weapons. This debate has intensified over recent years, displaying serious concerns in South Korea about the behaviour of its northern neighbour and the reliability of American support.<sup>6</sup> More surprisingly, Japanese leaders have also begun to reconsider their position on nuclear weapons. Thus, there is currently a debate over whether the three non-nuclear principles adopted in 1967 – Japan’s commitment not to (1) possess, (2) produce, or (3) allow nuclear weapons into its territory or territorial waters – should be reconsidered.<sup>7</sup> Although it was immediately disclaimed, a government official’s remark in 2025 that Japan

might benefit from possessing its own nuclear force marks a further step.<sup>8</sup>

In Europe as well, unexpected calls for nuclear rearmament have been voiced in recent years, driven by similar factors: a growing sense of threat and declining confidence in the US nuclear umbrella.<sup>9</sup> During Donald Trump's first term, there was a public debate in Germany, mostly in the press, about whether the country should develop its own nuclear programme. Trump's re-election has revived this debate. In Poland, elected officials have shown even greater openness to such proposals. In a speech to the Diet in 2025, Prime Minister Tusk stated that Poland should consider developing non-conventional weapons, while President Karol Nawrocki ambiguously declared that Poland should "join the nuclear

*In Europe as well, unexpected calls for nuclear rearmament have been voiced in recent years, driven by a growing sense of threat and declining confidence in the US nuclear umbrella*

project".<sup>10</sup> Even in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries where the public has historically suffered from what could be called a "nuclear allergy", columnists and former officials have made proposals for developing nuclear weapons.<sup>11</sup>

In the Middle East, the Iranian nuclear crisis has fuelled uncertainty as to whether other regional powers are willing and able to acquire nuclear capabilities as well. In particular, Mohammed bin Salman's statements in 2018 and 2021 suggest that Saudi Arabia would "follow suit" if Tehran managed to acquire the bomb.<sup>12</sup> Türkiye could be another candidate for proliferation, given President Erdoğan's ambiguous remarks about the unacceptability of the non-proliferation regime.<sup>13</sup>

## Options to restrain proliferation in a nuclear age

### The power of norms

#### Does the NPT still retain binding force?

To this day, the NPT remains one of the most widely ratified treaties, and its states parties regularly reaffirm their support for its underlying principles at review conferences. While many NNWS highlight the treaty's shortcomings (e.g., unequal status of states and lack of progress on disarmament), few contest the need to ensure that the vast majority of the international community remains free of nuclear weapons. This support is reflected in additional commitments undertaken by these states, such as the establishment of nuclear-weapon-free zones or the ratification of the TPNW.

This broad and enduring renunciation of nuclear weapons as a strategic option can, to some extent, be explained by constructivist theory.<sup>14</sup> This school of thought emphasises the role of norms and states' interest in promoting norms that are consistent with their identities and values. Whatever may have motivated states to sign the NPT, being a NNWS has, in many cases, become an inseparable part of their identity. In this case, the question no longer is to what extent refraining from nuclear weapons serves exclusively their "objective" national interests, since abiding by their own norms and promoting them on the international stage is an interest in its own right. An assumed NNWS identity alters an actor's perception of security and thus its political and strategic calculus. Whether out of conformity, sincere conviction or identification with a group, the leaders of certain countries therefore wish to reflect the non-nuclear consensus that exists within their society and elevate their national preference to a collective one. Subsequently, the principle of continuity, as well as an emerging rhetoric of conviction, often commits actors to cling to their commitment not to embark on a nuclear programme.

#### The rational logic of non-proliferation

However, the non-proliferation norm is, more than anything, a collective, pragmatic con-

viction that all nations share a fundamental interest in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. This norm was forged during an era of geopolitical instability. When the landmark Irish Resolution, which is regarded as a forerunner of the NPT, was introduced in 1958, tensions were abundant: the Berlin Crisis was intensifying, Fidel Castro's ascent in Cuba shifted regional dynamics, and both the United States and the Soviet Union conducted dozens of atmospheric nuclear tests. During this period, active proliferation programmes were numerous, and nuclear accidents were a persistent reality. The underlying logic of the non-proliferation movement was born out of necessity: the international community recognised that the only path toward eventual disarmament was to freeze the expansion of nuclear arsenals and end hazardous testing. Even if they could obtain nuclear weapons themselves, states' overall security would decrease if a vast number of states launched nuclear programmes. It was therefore rational to agree to constraints that would apply to all. This historical context mirrors the contemporary era, where non-proliferation remains a shared interest that transcends regional or national interests.

### Allies' politics and pressures

#### Costs to a nuclear programme

Normative pressure, as well as rational national interests, contribute to encouraging states to continue foregoing nuclear weapons. However, in the very short term, fear of costs also plays a major role. In the event of non-compliance with or withdrawal from the NPT, the matter is necessarily referred to the UN Security Council. Should the Council consider that such behaviour constitutes a "threat to peace", it is within its mandate to take the necessary action, as set out in Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter. This is why North Korea and Iran have been heavily sanctioned by the UNSC due to their nuclear activities. Nevertheless, it is clear that the UNSC is inherently political and cannot take a decision if one of its permanent members opposes it.

Logically, proliferation has implications for international nuclear cooperation: it is no longer possible to envisage this type of activity if IAEA safeguards are no longer respected.

Over the years, many states have adopted a range of legislative measures designed to deter third countries from engaging in proliferation-related activities. In the United States, in particular, the Glenn Amendment (22 USC 2799aa-1(b)) has the effect of suspending commercial activities, military assistance and development aid with a state accused of seek-

***Normative pressure, as well as rational national interests, contribute to encouraging states to continue foregoing nuclear weapons. However, in the very short term, fear of costs also plays a major role***

ing to develop or acquire a nuclear weapon. The Arms Export Control Act (22 USC 2753(f)) prohibits defence exports to a state that has violated its international non-proliferation commitments. The Foreign Assistance Act (22 USC 2429a-2) prohibits the provision of assistance to any NNWS which, in the President's estimation, has terminated, abrogated or substantially violated its comprehensive safeguards agreement with the IAEA.

In Europe, the states party to the Euratom Treaty are bound by the principles governing the implementation of Article III of the NPT. Furthermore, in its bilateral agreements with third states, Euratom requires, as a condition for transfers, that the recipient state be able to implement its safeguards agreements, or even the IAEA Additional Protocol, in accordance with the NPT.

More broadly, the European Union has adopted legal instruments affirming its support for the NPT and its regime. Regulation (EC) No 428/2009 states that, in accordance with the arms control treaties and agreements signed by Member States, authorisations or prohibitions on transfers of sensitive materials or technologies may be based on whether or not the recipient has ratified the relevant international treaties.

Unless it operates in a virtually self-sufficient manner, a proliferating state would in-

evitably suffer major economic consequences across a wide range of sectors. However, these repercussions could be alleviated by the support of a major power that could block action at the Security Council, ignore export control regimes and decide to bypass or modify its own legislation. Thus, Chinese and now Russian support has been instrumental for North Korea and largely mitigated the impact of international sanctions. This unofficial support has given rise to the idea that “friendly proliferation” could be envisaged under the protection of the United States.

### Does “friendly proliferation” exist?

The hope that the United States, in particular, may protect an ally tempted to acquire nuclear weapons, has fuelled a debate on the concept of “friendly proliferation”. Among conservatives in Washington, and sometimes within the circles of the Trump administration, some have considered that letting allies or partners develop their own nuclear capacities could be beneficial for Washington, as it would allow the United States to save resources for its own defence and to limit its strategic exposure.<sup>15</sup> This idea has also been defended, for instance in the Korean context, as the most efficient way to deter nuclear adversaries.<sup>16</sup> In reality, it is hard to imagine that the United States would tolerate proliferation, especially in Europe. To this day, the United States, but also Russia or China, have occasionally turned a blind eye to proliferation by their allies, but have in fact always been reluctant to the emergence of new nuclear weapon states, seen as potentially diluting their relative power and increasing strategic risks.

Moreover, if increasing fragmentation paralyses the international order and for instance makes UNSC mechanism irrelevant, it also means that each “patron” has less clout than previously. Thus, for an ally of the United States, it might be possible to hope that Washington would refrain from adopting strict sanctions following the revelation of proliferation-related activities, but this does not mean that it could escape all negative consequences. In Asia, Chinese economic reprisals could for instance be extremely harsh. In Europe, proliferation may lead to the implosion of the European Union as an alliance. Moreover, Russia has already used counter-proliferation as an excuse for its attack on Ukraine and could also pose a threat to an emerging nuclear country. In the Middle East, the risk of cascading nuclear programmes in the region, as well as preventive strikes against sites of concern, could be seen as a powerful deterrent.

### Extended deterrence

#### The United States’ role in providing security guarantees

The costs of proliferation remain therefore objectively high around the globe. However, in the face of high threat, decision-makers may be tempted to minimise it. This is why since the Cold War, nuclear patrons, and in particular the United States, have been putting forward incentives for remaining NNWS. Thus, US extended deterrence has been regularly promoted as the most efficient non-proliferation tool. Within NATO, the deployment of US systems in Europe or the creation of consultative mechanisms have been considered as essential to reassure allies and divert them from the lure of a national nuclear programme. Recently, the efforts put forward by the Biden administration to reassure South Korea, for instance through the creation of a Nuclear Consultative Group and the announcement of new joint exercises in 2023 follow the same logic.

Both during his first and second term, Donald Trump has damaged this relationship, by downgrading the logic of solidarity towards allies for whom he and his team have shown

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little respect, encouraging purely transactional relations, favouring a closer and nationalistic approach, and making it clear that strategic interests may not be shared.

However, no member of the administration has actually called into question the validity of existing extended deterrence mechanisms. Under-Secretary for Defense Elbridge Colby has in fact positively confirmed that they are still functional.<sup>17</sup> Both in Asia and Europe, allies continue to invest in increasing the credibility of US nuclear guarantees. So even if the link is damaged and the trust is diminished, the prospect of definitively severing the nuclear protection of such a strong ally as Washington because of a budding effort to develop a national capacity remains unappealing for a great majority of decision-makers.<sup>18</sup>

#### **“Forward deterrence”: a tool to curb proliferation in Europe?**

Interestingly, in his 2026 speech, French President Macron supported the US logic of presenting extended deterrence as a non-proliferation tool. Thus, he declared that “the forward deterrence approach that we are proposing is not escalatory, and as it enhances the feeling of security in Europe, it provides significant benefits to prevent potential future risks of proliferation on our continent.”<sup>19</sup> In the French mindset, thinking deterrence with a European dimension allows for a more credible tool to deter potential adversaries. Therefore, it puts European countries in a better position in the power balance. The idea is that different partners can contribute to European security by pooling their resources: for France and the United Kingdom, the nuclear forces are a major asset, but for other countries, conventional capacities play a huge role. This vision of a form of distribution makes proliferation detrimental to overall regional security. The French efforts have been generally welcomed by its partners, in particular the countries explicitly named by the President as cooperating with Paris on this issue: the United Kingdom, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Sweden, and Denmark. However, doubts continue and will continue to be heard on the credibility of these proposals, and for

some security experts or political leaders, this contribution will never be enough. The argument, which, ironically, was made in the 1960 by the French themselves, according to which one country should only depend on itself for its survival, will therefore find supporters as long as the level of threats remains so high.

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Geopolitical tensions, spread of conflicts, and an increased reliance on nuclear weapons are leading, in many countries, to a renewed debate about the desirability to develop national nuclear programmes. Those states

***In the French mindset, thinking  
deterrence with a European  
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to deter potential adversaries***

have refrained so far from embarking on such developments, mostly out of respect for the non-proliferation norm, fear of the economic and political consequences, and to ensure the preservation of extended deterrence. The recent French assessment that its nuclear policy could contribute to increase incentives to respect the NPT within Europe feeds this logic. Ultimately, decision-makers rely on a cost-benefit analysis based on their threat perception and their understanding of the costs. This decision must take into account that individual choices have global repercussions, and by opting to develop nuclear weapons for themselves, they may open the way for a wave of proliferation that would decrease their security in the long term. It is this reasoning that led to the adoption of the NPT in 1968 and remains fundamentally grounded today.

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# HOW DOES FRANCE'S NUCLEAR DETERRENT CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEFENSE OF EUROPE?

**Author:** Jean-Louis Lozier

France's nuclear deterrent, serving first and foremost to defend France's vital interests, also contributes to the defense of Europe. This contribution has been recognized within the North Atlantic Alliance since 1974, but remains little known. In a speech closely followed by France's European partners and its adversaries alike, President Emmanuel Macron announced a new concept for French nuclear deterrence: "forward deterrence" (*dissuasion avancée*). This article aims to explain the origins of this concept, outline its main pillars, and describe the partnerships that are sought. It then discusses the relationship with the U.S. doctrine of "extended deterrence", and finally offers some ethical considerations.

## A historical overview of the French nuclear deterrent

France's first efforts to develop a nuclear weapon date back to the mid-1950s. Based on scientific research that had begun even before World War II under the leadership of Frédéric Joliot-Curie, France's goal at the time was to acquire the industrial capability, particularly for the production of fissile material, to build its first weapon in the early 1960s. The main strategic rationale was that in order to survive in the post-World War II world, it was essential to possess nuclear weapons. This reasoning was fueled largely by Soviet nuclear blackmail and a lack of American backing to resist it, during the Franco-British operation in Suez in 1956.

Upon his return to power in 1958, General de Gaulle found a well-advanced nuclear program in place, enabling the first French nuclear test on February 13, 1960. He deliberately steered the program toward the creation of a fully sovereign and independent nuclear strike force, convinced that in this domain, decisions cannot be shared – especially with a more powerful ally that does not necessarily have the same interests. American hostility toward this policy of nuclear independence, coupled with NATO's adoption of the "flexible response" doctrine – widely perceived in Paris as an elastic doctrine allowing the U.S.

### Abstract

*Although this contribution remains little known, France's nuclear deterrent, serving first and foremost to defend France's vital interests, also contributes to the defense of Europe. The Franco-British partnership in the nuclear sphere, which has developed since the 1990s and is continuing to grow stronger, stands as firm evidence of this European dimension. In March 2026, in a speech closely followed by France's European partners and its adversaries alike, President Emmanuel Macron announced a new concept for French nuclear deterrence: "forward deterrence" (*dissuasion avancée*). This article aims to explain the origins of this concept, outline its main pillars, and describe the partnerships that are sought. It then discusses the relationship with the U.S. doctrine of "extended deterrence", and finally offers some ethical considerations with regard to the current strategic context and nuclear doctrine.*

to avoid nuclear involvement in the defense of Europe – led to France’s withdrawal from NATO’s integrated military command in 1967. The reflections on nuclear doctrine conducted under the aegis of General Lucien Poirier, as set out in the 1972 White Paper on Defense, clearly stated that a country’s vital interests could be defined only by “reference solely to that country itself”.<sup>1</sup> The perception that the French nuclear deterrent protected France – and France alone – thus became firmly established both in France and among its European allies. Nevertheless, the same 1972 White Paper emphasized that the limits of these vital interests must necessarily remain vague and that the logic of deterrence relies on a degree of uncertainty. Noting that France was not isolated and existed within a web of intertwined interests with its European neighbors, it thus pointed out that France’s nuclear deterrence strategy was a determining factor in European security. General de Gaulle had, in fact, clearly stated back in 1963<sup>2</sup> that nuclear weapons could, if necessary, play a part in protecting France’s allies. The contribution of France’s nuclear deterrent to the defense of Europe was recognized by its allies at the 1974 NATO summit in Ottawa. The final communiqué acknowledged that the two European states possessing nuclear forces were capable of playing a distinct deterrent role that contributed to the overall strengthening of Europe’s deterrent. It was primarily the role of London and Paris as a second decision-making center – complicating the adversary’s calculations – that this acknowledgement highlighted.

Nevertheless, the notion that the French deterrent served exclusively to defend France persisted throughout the Cold War, as evidenced by a famous exchange that took place in June 1987 during a meeting of G7 heads of state and government in Venice.<sup>3</sup> Asked by Margaret Thatcher about the use of French nuclear weapons were Bonn to be invaded by the Soviets, François Mitterrand replied that such a scenario would mean that the deterrent had failed. This was a situation that must not be allowed to occur. And, moreover, the mission of protecting the Federal Republic of Germany and Western Europe was the re-

sponsibility of the North Atlantic Alliance, not that of France.

However, the post-Cold War era and the construction of a political Europe in the 1990s led French statesmen to attempt to integrate this European dimension into their national deterrent more effectively. It had certainly been present since the beginning but had never been properly developed. In 1995, French Prime Minister Alain Juppé proposed to Germany the concept of “concerted deterrence” between the two countries. This pro-

## ***The notion that the French deterrent served exclusively to defend France persisted throughout the Cold War***

posal did not meet with a favorable response at the time. The lack of interest in the French deterrent among European countries, starting with Germany, during a period of happy globalization and the United States’ continued commitment to NATO, would thus persist for some thirty years. The only country with which France made progress in this area during that period was the United Kingdom.

### **The Franco-British nuclear axis**

Political talks between the two European nuclear powers led to the creation of a Joint Nuclear Commission in 1992. The initial discussions within this framework focused on comparing the two deterrents in terms of concepts and doctrines, missile defense, and nonproliferation. These discussions revealed that the two countries’ nuclear doctrines were closely aligned. In late October 1995, British Prime Minister John Major and French President Jacques Chirac issued a statement (the so-called Chequers Declaration) in which they affirmed that they could not identify any situation in which the vital interests of one of the two powers might be threatened without those of the other power also being threatened. This declaration was systematically reiterated in the following years by the leaders of

both nations, including after Brexit, until it was reinforced by the Northwood Declaration in 2025. This bilateral agreement clearly signaled a strong strategic alignment regarding the vital interests of both nations. Studies on the adoption of a joint air-launched nuclear missile, the ASLP<sup>4</sup> were conducted, but without success. The British ultimately rejected this option, given the risks it could pose to their nuclear relations with their American ally.

Reciprocal port calls by nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs)<sup>5</sup> also took

***The Franco-British partnership in the nuclear sphere, which is continuing to grow stronger, stands as firm evidence of the European dimension of the French deterrent***

place, with some British SSBNs calling at Île Longue in Brittany, the base for French SSBNs, while some of the latter were seen calling at Faslane in Scotland. The significance of these reciprocal port calls was essentially symbolic, however, and in no way reflected cooperation in the operational sphere, particularly regarding SSBN patrols.

The Anglo-French axis was further strengthened in 2010. As part of a broader treaty on defense and security cooperation (Lancaster House Treaties), French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Prime Minister David Cameron signed an agreement on joint radiographic and hydrodynamic facilities necessary for their simulation program. The main facility covered by this treaty, known as EPURE, is located at the headquarters of the French Alternative Energies and Atomic Energy Commission (CEA) in Valduc, France. Although the facility is shared, hydrodynamic testing is conducted independently.

The France-UK partnership gained significant momentum in July 2025, during a meeting at Northwood between British Prime Minister Keith Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron. Against a backdrop of announcements regarding U.S. disengagement from European defense, the two leaders reaffirmed the close relationship between their

countries in the area of nuclear deterrence. In particular, they reinforced the 1995 declaration, stating that “France and the United Kingdom agree that there is no extreme threat to Europe that would not prompt a response by our two nations.”<sup>6</sup> The joint declaration also announced deepened cooperation and coordination across nuclear policy, capabilities and operations.

The Franco-British partnership in the nuclear sphere, which is continuing to grow stronger, stands as firm evidence of the European dimension of the French deterrent. It is also, so far, the only such evidence, pending the developments announced by President Macron on March 2, 2026. This partnership, uniting the continent’s only two nuclear powers, is fundamental to the future of European defense. In the coming months and years, it will be interesting to see what tangible progress will be announced in the area of operational cooperation. The main factor that could limit the development of this cooperation, however, remains the very strong, existential link between British and American deterrence, particularly in terms of manufacturing and technology.

**Forward nuclear deterrence**

French nuclear doctrine is typically articulated in France through speeches delivered by the head of state. Generally, there is one such speech per term of office. It provides an opportunity for Presidents of the Republic to reaffirm the fundamentals of French doctrine, to affirm their personal commitment, and to provide the necessary political credibility to the national deterrent. Or, where appropriate, announce changes. In 2001, for example, President Jacques Chirac stated that France’s deterrent contributed to Europe’s security and that its primary role – since its beginnings in the 1960s – was to ensure that France’s survival would never be threatened by a military power with hostile intentions. He additionally said that it must also enable France to confront threats to its vital interests posed by regional powers possessing weapons of mass destruction. In this context, he announced a strategic nuclear weapons plan that would

enable France to possess a sufficiently diversified – and therefore flexible – arsenal to ensure the credibility of its deterrent under all circumstances, regardless of the location or nature of the threat.

In February 2020, President Macron delivered this speech for his first term in office. In it, he asserted that France's vital interests now had a European dimension. He expressed the hope that a strategic dialog would develop between France and willing European partners on the role of the French nuclear deterrent in Europe's collective security. This was a year in Europe in which illusions about the peace dividends of the post-Cold War era still held. It was marked by the election of President Biden and the warming of transatlantic relations following President Trump's first term, and above all by the Covid pandemic on which the efforts of all European governments were focused. In such a context, the French proposal received no response.

Six years later, in a completely changed geopolitical context, on March 2, 2026, Emmanuel Macron gave a speech at Île Longue, the base for France's SSBNs. This speech got a very different reception. Taking note of the increasingly hostile global environment, Russian revisionism – a major risk for Europe and France – the rapid expansion of China's nuclear arsenal, but also the growth of those of North Korea, Pakistan and India, and the reordering of U.S. strategic priorities, the French president announced a strengthening of France's deterrent to address this combination of threats. In a bold and assertive tone, he announced an increase in the number of nuclear warheads held by France, rejecting any nuclear arms race but seeking a balanced and coherent level of operational effectiveness for the deterrent in this new global context.

But probably the most important announcement in this speech concerned the concept of "forward nuclear deterrence". This is the tangible manifestation of the European dimension of the French nuclear deterrent. The fundamentals of the French deterrence doctrine remain the same: strictly defensive in nature, a refusal to engage in nuclear battle, a clear firebreak between conventional

and nuclear force; the possibility of resorting to a single, non-repeatable nuclear warning should an adversary misjudge France's vital interests, and, above all, decision-making that remains the exclusive prerogative of the French authorities. This concept allows for the development of a French deterrence strategy that extends deep into European territory, sending strong signals to both allies and adversaries.

"Forward deterrence" will be implemented gradually, within bilateral frameworks, to respect various political sensitivities among partners choosing to adopt this approach. It may include participation in exercises by French nuclear forces, for example the participation of aircraft in Strategic Air Forces<sup>7</sup>

***Forward nuclear deterrence in no way envisages the permanent deployment of nuclear weapons on partners' territories, but only on an ad-hoc and temporary basis, for example in the event of an escalation of a crisis***

exercises. It may also take the form of participation in strategic signaling actions, aimed at demonstrating to an adversary the shared resolve of European partners not to yield to any threats. It may involve the ad-hoc deployment of FAS assets, such as Rafale fighters equipped with French missiles, or refueling aircraft, to these partners' air bases. To be clear, this in no way envisages the permanent deployment of nuclear weapons on partners' territories, but only on an ad-hoc and temporary basis, for example in the event of an escalation of a crisis.

In early March, when this speech was delivered, eight countries had expressed their interest to France in this "forward deterrence" approach. Alongside the United Kingdom, which is linked to France through the Northwood Declaration, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Greece and Denmark have expressed interest in the "forward deterrence" concept. Bilateral coordination bodies have been established or will be established very soon. On May 27, 2026, Norway also joined this initiative.

## Forward nuclear deterrence, U.S. extended deterrence, and circumvention of deterrence

Several questions arise regarding this new concept of forward deterrence, two of which are particularly significant. The first concerns its relationship to U.S. and British extended deterrence within the NATO framework. The second concerns its relevance in the face of hybrid attacks seeking to circumvent deterrence from below, with the potential for the adversary to seek territorial gains and achieve *a fait accompli*.

The French doctrine of deterrence took shape from the 1960s onward amid a complicated relationship with American deterrence. France's determination to develop an independent nuclear force stemmed from French doubts about the United States' willingness to commit to the nuclear defense of Europe in the event of a Soviet attack, given that U.S. territory could then be at the mercy of Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

The U.S. response within NATO, aimed at preventing a recurrence of the French situation and nuclear proliferation by countries asking the same questions as Paris, was the extended deterrence system as we know it today. At the center of this system are the Nuclear Planning Group, of which France is not a member, and the countries possessing dual-capable aircraft (DCA), capable of deploying American B61 bombs using a dual-key system. The associated doctrine is that of nuclear war limited to the European theater. This limitation is made possible by the U.S. non-strategic nuclear ar-

senal based in Europe or at sea on the one hand, and on the other by the U.S. strategic arsenal and its counterforce strike capability, particularly against enemy command centers and strategic nuclear forces. This doctrine is therefore quite different from the French doctrine which refuses to engage in nuclear battle but carries the risk for the aggressor of a more rapid escalation to extremes in the event of an attack on vital French interests.

This American doctrine has prevailed with most of France's European partners, which partly explains the lack of response to French proposals put forward in the post-Cold War period (see above). Compared to American military strength – both conventional and nuclear – the French deterrent was clearly not considered credible enough to protect anything other than France itself.

President Trump's return to power, his softer approach to Russia, and his aggressive stance toward his European allies have clearly changed the perception of some of France's allies.

In response to criticism that the French cannot match American capabilities, it is worth noting that while the number of nuclear warheads is certainly important – particularly in a counterforce doctrine like the American one – a smaller number of nuclear weapons, such as those in the French arsenal, is capable of inflicting damage from which no country, however vast, can recover. President Macron thus emphasized that the SSBN in front of which he gave his March 2 speech had a firepower equivalent to all of the bombs dropped during World War II.

Moreover, France's unwillingness to engage in a limited nuclear war stems largely from the fact that such a so-called limitation may make sense for a power located on another continent, but not for a power situated directly within the theater of conflict.

Another frequently heard criticism is that if the French doubted that the Americans would risk New York to protect Paris, why would the French take this risk to protect Tallinn or Warsaw? The answer again lies in the asymmetry of the stakes. French interests are clearly too closely tied to those of their European part-

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*last assignments were “préfet maritime de l'Atlantique” and commander of operations in the Atlantic and Arctic areas.*

ners, both within the European Union and within NATO, for an attack threatening the survival of one of them not to be perceived as a vital threat.

All in all, the concept of forward deterrence is quite different from the extended deterrence provided by the United States to its European allies. It is not intended to replace it, but rather to complement it. This was stated very clearly by the French president in his speech.

Another major issue raised in the speech was the challenge of managing conflicts below the nuclear threshold. This issue is, of course, not new to nuclear strategy in general. It had already been the subject of numerous debates in France during the Cold War. But during the post-Cold War period, the French conventional armed forces played a predominantly expeditionary role, unrelated to the deterrence strategy in Europe. As a result, reflection in this area had diminished. Recent conflicts in the Ukraine and Middle East have highlighted the threat of drone or ballistic missile strikes, including those targeting a nuclear-armed state. Faced with this type of threat, the French president clearly emphasized the need for France and its European allies to acquire early warning and extended air defense capabilities to counter such threats. He also advocated the acquisition of conventional deep-strike capabilities to provide options for managing escalation. These three areas, in which France expects clear support from its allies – particularly through the various initiatives already launched<sup>8</sup> – provide conventional support to the nuclear deterrent.

Although not mentioned in the president's speech, it is necessary finally to note the threats from cyberspace and information warfare, which can also undermine nuclear deterrence. Coordination among Europeans in these areas can and must be improved.

## **Ethical considerations**

It is always difficult for the author of these lines – a former commander of a SSBN and head of the nuclear forces division of the French Joint Defense Staff – not to talk about ethics when writing an article on nuclear de-

terrence, particularly in a journal called *Ethics and Armed Forces*. There is a paradox in being prepared to use nuclear weapons, with their catastrophic consequences, to prevent France and its allies from being attacked and having their vital interests harmed. This raises moral questions. Of course, anyone involved in the development and operationalization of nuclear deterrence in whatever capacity – political, military, scientific or industrial – has to deal with the dilemmas posed by nuclear weapons. But in the democracies in which we are fortunate to live, these questions also arise for the citizens of countries that deploy deterrent forces, as well as for the citizens of countries which benefit from those deterrent forces. The aim here is not to list all the di-

*All in all, the concept of forward deterrence is quite different from the extended deterrence provided by the United States to its European allies*

lemmas or to theorize about whether nuclear deterrence meets the criteria of a just war,<sup>9</sup> but rather simply to summarize the question as the author of this article sees it today: “If it is morally desirable to pursue nuclear disarmament, can we do so under the current circumstances of a world of autocratic predators who disregard international law?” The answer regarding France's maintenance of a credible deterrent seems obvious; but this can only be done under the conditions, which France respects, of a strictly defensive doctrine. The use of nuclear weapons as a means of coercion – as Russia is doing in its war of aggression against Ukraine, for example – must be rejected.

President Macron also addressed this ethical dimension on March 2. He stated that beyond the consolidation of France's nuclear deterrent and its embedding in Europe through the concept of “forward deterrence”, France remains committed to the long-term goal of a world without nuclear weapons. Acknowledging the end of a significant portion of the European security architecture that was

built during the Cold War and its aftermath by the two nuclear superpowers, but without the Europeans, he called for the eventual reconstruction of a new security framework between the Europeans and the Russians, prioritizing European security interests above all else. The strategic considerations developed within the framework of forward deterrence will help to better organize European convergence in this area. This is also one of the key challenges of this new concept.

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The current strategic context is characterized by predatory policies in Europe and beyond, alongside a North Atlantic Alliance weakened by a U.S. administration moving away from the shared values on which the Alliance was founded in 1949. This clearly calls for a European response. This response begins with the political cohesion of European states, who must not forget that, whatever their individual political differences, today's Europe was built on the ruins of Nazi and Communist totalitarianism. It certainly requires an increase in each European country's financial commitment to defense. But it also requires a clearer definition of how the British and French deterrents should contribute to European security. The concept of "forward deterrence" proposed by President Macron addresses this need for France by sending strong signals about the European dimension of France's vital interests. While it does not provide nuclear security guarantees, its objective is to ensure that no enemy determined to threaten the survival of a European ally would believe that France would fail to respond – including in the nuclear domain. Furthermore, it is accompanied by a call for a European security architecture in which Europe is a key player in determining its own security tools. Bilateral talks between France and its partners who support this approach will therefore be crucial for the defense and security of Europe as a whole.

1 (Translated from French.) Par "référence unique à ce pays lui-même".

2 General de Gaulle's televised address of April 19, 1963 can be viewed on the website of the National Audio-visual Institute: [www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/caf89051394/allocution-du-general-de-gaulle-du-19041963](http://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/caf89051394/allocution-du-general-de-gaulle-du-19041963).

3 Védrine, Hubert (2016): *Les Mondes de François Mitterrand. A l'Elysée 1981-1995*. New edition. Paris, p. 720.

4 Air-Sol Longue Portée – long-range air-to-surface missile.

5 SSBN stands for Ship, Submersible, Ballistic, Nuclear.

6 Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street (2025): Press release: Northwood Declaration. 10 July. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/northwood-declaration-10-july-2025-uk-france-joint-nuclear-statement>.

7 Forces aériennes stratégiques (FAS).

8 JEWEL (Joint Early Warning for a European Lookout) is a space-based early warning system; the SAMP/T NG (Surface-to-Air Missile Platform/Terrain New Generation) missile system for air defense; ELSA (European Long-Range Strike Approach) for deep precision strike capabilities.

9 For a recent overview of discussions in France on this topic, see Rosselet, Mélanie (ed.) (2024): *Démocratie(s) et dissuasion*. Paris.

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# INDIA AND EUROPE: PARTNERS FOR A STABLE WORLD ORDER?

*Authors: Shounak Set and Ben Kienzle*

## *Abstract*

*When European Council President António Costa and Commission President Ursula von der Leyen attended India's Republic Day parade on 26 January 2026 as chief guests – the first EU leaders to hold that honour – the symbolism was unmistakable. The following day, at the 16<sup>th</sup> India–EU Summit in New Delhi, the two sides concluded a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) nearly two decades in the making; and a Security and Defence Partnership (SDP). While the FTA dominated the headlines as Von der Leyen called it the “mother of all deals”, the SDP was a historic milestone too. Yet beneath the triumphant rhetoric, a sober truth surfaced: this landmark was born not from a resurgence of faith in globalisation, but from its unravelling. Three converging pressures – US President Trump’s tariff offensive, China’s growing assertiveness, and Russia’s war in Ukraine – had finally forced Brussels and New Delhi to treat each other as meaningful partners beyond platitudes. As the international system enters an era of fragmentation, technological disruption, and institutional dysfunction, Brussels and New Delhi are discovering their convergences in world politics. In less than six months, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s 5-day visit to Europe (May 15–20) covering four countries (Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Italy), followed by another tour to France and Slovakia less than a month later (June 14–20) on the side-lines of the G7 Summit, underscored this growing partnership. These reflect the trend of expanding engagement beyond trade and immigration as defence and strategic issues are emerging as regular themes of cooperation. While economic ties had been an enduring driver of the India–EU relation, these novel developments in security deserve closer attention.*

When European Council President António Costa and Commission President Ursula von der Leyen attended India’s Republic Day parade on 26 January 2026 as chief guests – the first EU leaders to hold that honour – the symbolism was unmistakable. The following day, at the 16<sup>th</sup> India–EU Summit in New Delhi, the two sides concluded a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) nearly two decades in the making; and a Security and Defence Partnership (SDP). While the FTA dominated the headlines as Von der Leyen called it the “mother of all deals”, the SDP was a historic milestone too. Yet beneath the triumphant rhetoric, a sober truth surfaced: this landmark was born not from a resurgence of faith in globalisation, but from its unravelling. Three converging pressures – US President Trump’s tariff offensive, China’s growing assertiveness, and Russia’s war in Ukraine – had finally forced Brussels and New Delhi to treat each other as meaningful partners beyond platitudes. As the international system enters an era of fragmentation, technological disruption, and institutional dysfunction, Brussels and New Delhi are discovering their convergences in world politics. In less than six months, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s 5-day visit to Europe (May 15–20) covering four countries (Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Italy), followed by another tour to France and Slovakia less than a month later (June 14–20) on the side-lines of the G7 Summit, underscored this growing partnership. These reflect the trend of expanding engagement<sup>2</sup> beyond trade and immigration as defence and strategic issues are emerging as regular themes of cooperation; a veteran observer identified key gains beyond trade in the three sectors namely, “technology, green growth, defence”<sup>3</sup>. While economic ties had been an enduring driver of the India–EU relation, these novel developments in security deserve closer attention.

## **Europe and India: History, Policy and Prospect**

Europe (represented by EU for reasons of scope in this article) and India have a shared background as great powers with substantial

economic, diplomatic, and normative influence, yet neither possesses the comprehensive capabilities associated with superpowers like USA and China; this drives the rationale and the limitations of this emerging EU–India partnership. The growing frictions in relations with USA and declining American interest to act as the ultimate guarantor of the international rules-based order (IRBO), has generated uncertainty for Europe and India. Increasingly difficult relations with Washington over a range of issues – trade, technology governance, industrial policy – combined with differing approaches to China and Russia have induced both actors to diversify their external partnerships. At its core, the contemporary evolution of EU–India relations reflects a broader transformation in the global order, which can be interpreted as the latest manifestation of “middle power convergence”<sup>4</sup> as middle powers aim for cooperation with like-minded peers in face of instability posed by great power behaviour. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney’s January 2026 Davos speech<sup>5</sup> framed Europe as a strategic “middle power” partner for navigating global instability and popularized this concept: this bears relevance for EU–India relations too, although India and EU are default great powers actors by virtue of their scale, economic weight, and political influence despite limitations of military or geopolitical power projection capabilities of a superpower.

EU and India seek multipolarity rather than bipolar confrontation, acknowledge that the erosion of US power could destabilize the international system and yet are wary of excessive dependence on the latter. Both support the IRBO in principle – differing interpretations of sovereignty and strategic autonomy notwithstanding – and seek reliable partners capable of balancing superpower competition without compelling binary alignments. This convergence is prominent in domains of emerging technology (ET), strategic innovation and climate change. Initiatives like Global AI summits and digital governance forums reveal a growing awareness about ETs, shared standards, and data ecosystems. Here, Europe’s regulatory expertise and India’s digital scale create potential complementarities, while EU seeks

trusted technology partners beyond USA and China and India aims to avoid technological dependency. Historically, EU–India cooperation struggled to move beyond declaratory rhetoric and lacked urgency on both sides. For Europe, India was viewed primarily through economic or developmental lenses rather than as a key geopolitical partner. For India, the EU appeared fragmented, overly normative, and secondary compared to ties with major states such as the US and Russia, despite certain bilateral synergies with major European states (e.g. France and Germany). The challenge hitherto had been in translating shared interests, into coordinated action points and policies. EU’s consensus-driven multilevel governance and emphasis on human rights, sustainability,

### ***While neither Europe nor India can shape the transforming international order individually, harnessing their complementarities facilitates an emerging synergy***

and regulatory standards clashed with India’s centralized foreign policymaking and priorities of development and sovereignty. The reversal of globalization, weaponization of economic interdependence, and intensifying US–China competition are collectively restricting the geopolitical space for middle and great powers alike; leading to the logic for deeper EU–India cooperation despite obstacles and institutional asymmetries.

### **The security and defence partnership: light at the end of the tunnel?**

While neither Europe nor India can shape the transforming international order individually, harnessing their complementarities facilitates this emerging synergy. If Europe contributes capital, technological capability, institutional governance, and market access then India offers demographic scale, geopolitical reach, military capacity, and political legitimacy across the Global South. Accordingly, New Delhi and Brussels need to uphold the princi-

ple of issue-based diversification of partnerships as a strategic necessity and patiently preserve certain aspects of the existing IRBO while adapting it to reflect new realities; and recognize that the partnership can go beyond trade agreements and diplomatic symbolism to successfully navigate a new pathway beyond the binaries imposed by a truculent US or a recalcitrant China. Considering this, the SDP, signed by EU High Representative Kaja Kallas and Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar acquires significance. The first overarching

***Barely a decade back, convergences in the security domain were unthinkable despite limited cooperation in some strategic sectors***

EU-India security framework, this encompasses cooperation across maritime security, cyber and hybrid threats, counterterrorism, space security, defence industry and technology, and artificial intelligence. It also institutionalizes an annual ministerial-level EU-India Security and Defence Dialogue and creates thematic working streams to give the relationship operational continuity beyond summit rhetoric. The SDP therefore marks a significant expansion of cooperation beyond traditional vertices. While the exact implementation mechanisms remain under negotiation and many aspects will evolve gradually, the agreement contains several strategically important dimensions that cannot be underestimated. It is pivotal on three core frameworks facilitating intelligence sharing, defence industrial alignment and maritime security respectively. These assume significance, since barely a decade back, convergences<sup>6</sup> in the security domain were unthinkable despite limited cooperation in some strategic sectors.

The Security of Information Agreement (SoIA) establishes a legally binding classified intelligence-sharing framework, effectively a formal trust certification unlocking threat assessments, tech transfer, and intelligence cooperation. This provides the legal framework for official exchanges and signals an embryonic but meaningful institutionalization of strategic

trust covering cyber threats, counterterrorism, hybrid warfare, and critical infrastructure. Likewise, maritime security forms a distinctive feature of the partnership, driven by converging interests in the crucial geopolitical theatre of the Indo-Pacific. The EU seeks to safeguard the Indo-Pacific sea lanes underpinning its prosperity and to institutionalize a regional security presence through a credible regional partner: like India. Meanwhile India leverages European naval engagement as a supplementary counterweight to China's expanding maritime ambitions. The practical architecture – joint exercises, port visits, intelligence sharing, and anti-piracy coordination – deepens cooperation by building on established frameworks and existing practices in the western Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden. Critically, India's Indian Ocean geography makes it an indispensable fulcrum in any credible European Indo-Pacific strategy, rendering this not merely a bilateral naval arrangement but a structural anchor for Europe's broader global role. Additionally, the defence industrial dimension of the partnership reflects a calculated convergence of complementary imperatives; Europe's drive to reduce supply chain dependencies dovetails with India's *Make in India* agenda for augmenting its techno-industrial base. The India-EU Defence Industry Forum shifts India toward genuine co-development, aligns with India's *Aatmanirbhar Bharat* ("Self-reliant India"), and facilitates Indian eligibility for the EU's €150bn SAFE defence financing instrument. By combining European technological prowess with India's scale, the partnership creates conditions for crucial joint ventures and technology transfer that could potentially restructure supplier relationships. The significance extends beyond bilateral gains as expanding cooperation can reduce dependence on external suppliers – US and Russia respectively – and reorient the geometry of global arms trade in the long term.

Equally significant is the explicit incorporation of AI governance and technological security, reflecting a shared recognition that geopolitical competition has fundamentally expanded beyond conventional military domains into digital infrastructure, semiconductor supply chains, data governance, and the standard-set-

ting contests surrounding emerging technologies. Both parties understand that normative influence over AI and critical technology frameworks will be a defining axis of future power, making this dimension not merely a technical addendum but a forward-looking strategic bet – positioning the partnership at the intersection of hard security and the emerging contest for technological sovereignty. Additionally, the partnership also has a broader political objective: institutionalizing strategic dialogue between Brussels and New Delhi. This entails regular consultations on regional crises, Indo-Pacific security, global governance reform, and resilience against economic coercion. These underline the growing synergy and mutual understanding among both the parties and their interest in elevating and sustaining this relation; despite crucial differences and diverging priorities pertaining to terms of trade and the role of Russia and China. This transformed strategic landscape has not emerged overnight in a vacuum. Driven by external shocks – Covid-19 pandemic, supply chain disruptions, weaponized energy and trade, and rising tensions with China – alongside fears of a volatile US alliance, the European Union is pursuing strategic autonomy and diversifying its global partnerships to enhance its resilience, despite the centrality of the transatlantic relationship to European security<sup>7</sup>.

Accordingly, India's appeal to Europe rests on a rare combination – a fast-growing democratic economy with considerable military power backed by nuclear weapons, robust influence in the Global South – and crucially, an absence of the systemic rivalry that defines Europe's posture toward China and Russia. This makes India a credible partner in the drive towards a multipolar order. For India, the partnership serves its enduring formulation of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment. Europe serves as an additional but crucial pillar alongside cooperation with the US in the Indo-Pacific, residual defence ties with Russia, and Global South leadership. Europe delivers tangible strategic value through access to advanced technology, investment, market, and regulatory partnership essential to India's ambition of becoming a leading global actor. A less quantifiable

but equally significant dividend is legitimacy; closer institutional ties with major European partners reinforces New Delhi's drive for recognition not merely as a regional heavyweight in Asia, but as global power shaping norms and practices beyond its immediate neighbourhood. This directly contributes to the Indian position that "a multipolar world, which the EU prefers, is feasible only by a multipolar Asia"<sup>8</sup>, in contrast to the Chinese aim of a unipolar Asia and a bipolar world. The SDP endorses this status, generates "a logic of co-strategic autonomy"<sup>9</sup> and represents a meaningful insurance against dependence on any single superpower. Accordingly, beyond questions of economics and immigration, the relation is transcending to sensitive domains of defence cooperation,

### ***The EU–India partnership increasingly rests on a foundation of shared interests despite starkly divergent worldviews, strategic cultures and historical contexts***

intelligence exchanges, dual-use strategic technologies amongst multiple European countries and India. This represents a qualitative shift in EU–India relations and marks a new watershed, the impact of which is still unfolding and cannot be preordained.

### **Diverging strategic cultures, implementation risks and mutual (mis)perceptions**

The EU–India partnership increasingly rests on a foundation of shared interests despite starkly divergent worldviews, strategic cultures and historical contexts. For Brussels, India addresses a structural vulnerability that can no longer be deferred; excessive dependence on China across critical supply chains (rare earths, pharmaceuticals, semiconductors) at a moment of weaponized interdependence and geopolitical risks. India's scale, democracy, and manufacturing ambitions make it uniquely positioned as a partner. Economically, the FTA delivers preferential access across nearly the entirety of bilateral trade value and targets a doubling of

goods trade by 2032; strategically, it gives Europe a credible Indo-Pacific anchor that is neither a client nor rival but provides “the middle ground”<sup>10</sup> between US unpredictability and Chinese assertiveness. For New Delhi, punitive tariffs and American willingness to instrumentalize trade as geopolitical leverage have exposed the costs of insufficient diversification, making preferential EU market access economically and strategically imperative. The security partnership adds a further layer through accelerated access to European defence technology and co-production arrangements; and dovetails with Indian efforts to reduce its historical dependence on Russian military hardware while bolstering its existing relationships (for e.g. with France on Rafale jets, Scorpène submarine). Yet as the European Policy Centre<sup>11</sup> has noted, “one of the partnership’s key challenges will be the EU’s expectation that India distance itself from Moscow.” Russia’s consistent backing of India on Kashmir at the UN Security Council over five decades remains a strategic asset New Delhi is unwilling to surrender for European approbation. Both sides managed to navigate these differences through careful language in a joint statement that emphasized “rules-based international order with the UN at its core,” and launch “*Towards 2030: India–EU Joint Comprehensive Strategic Agenda*” for further deepening of ties<sup>12</sup>.

Europe approaches geopolitics through a distinct historical and institutional lens shaped by the European integration, multilateralism, and the preservation of a rules-based order. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has profoundly altered these assumptions, transforming hard security calculations from a peripheral activity into a central priority. The war is not a regional conflict but a direct challenge to the principles of territorial sovereignty, political independence, and the post-1945 European security architecture; these have forced Europe to acknowledge its status as an economic superpower with persistent limitations as a security actor. Consequently, the EU has placed increasing emphasis on deterrence, resilience, defence industrial capacity, and security cooperation among member states: with mixed results. The conflict has exposed a fundamental contradic-

tion; although the EU possesses considerable economic weight, regulatory influence, and diplomatic reach, its response to the war has highlighted its deep reliance on USA for credible hard-security guarantees. This has generated an uncomfortable realization that despite ambitions of being a key global actor, Europe lacks the military capabilities and decision-making structures necessary to operate autonomously. Concurrently, India’s multi-alignment posture is effectively the 21<sup>st</sup>-century successor to non-alignment; it isn’t rhetorical posturing but a deeply held conviction, hardened by the post-war exclusion of the Global South and repeatedly reaffirmed when “rules-based” frameworks are selectively enforced by great powers. Significantly, issue-based mini-lateral frameworks and summit diplomacy may initiate pathways for tangible partnerships, as demonstrated by the 3<sup>rd</sup> India-Nordic Summit (May 19, 2026) which generated agreements on maritime security, defence cooperation, AI and outer space, despite diametrically differing perceptions of Russia between Nordic states and India<sup>13</sup>.

Beneath these obvious tactical convergences, lies a deeper structural symmetry: both EU and India occupy analogous positions in the emerging global hierarchy – major powers of enormous weight and potential, yet short of superpower dominance, and facing structurally similar (but not identical) challenges. EU and India’s shared predicament is the foundation of a natural strategic affinity, reinforced by genuine complementarity of interests and assets; uncomfortable with Sino-US bipolarity, they advocate multipolarity, while carefully preserving their relationship with Washington and aiming to salvage the IRBO. Europe brings technology, capital, institutional depth, and regulatory capacity while India contributes demographic scale, hard power, Indo-Pacific reach, and unmatched influence across the Global South. Layered over this is a shared, if imperfect, democratic identity – two pluralist systems attempting to reconcile sovereignty and external engagement in a fragmenting global order with great power competition, technological disruption, and economic coercion. The future of EU–India relations then depend on transcend-

ing from transactional engagements towards genuine strategic collaborations; and the more instructive question is whether depth requires alignment. The institutional architecture under construction – the Defence Industry Forum, the SoIA framework, annual dialogue mechanisms – generates self-sustaining institutional and political momentum. This novel form of “modular partnership” concentrates cooperation on domains of genuine convergence (maritime security, critical minerals, cyber, defence industry) while managing divergences (Russia and China) and works “not from denying misalignment, but from engineering the partnership to function where interests overlap and to remain viable where they do not.”<sup>14</sup> Arguably, this can be a viable template for tangible partnerships, beyond conventional alliance politics, among great powers exercising strategic autonomy.

### Concluding remarks: enacting stability through managed friction

Within a month of the EU-India FTA and SDP, New Delhi hosted successive visits by German Chancellor Merz (January 12–13), French President Macron (February 17–19), and Slovak President Pellegrini (February 17–20), that resulted in a slew of notable bilateral advances in economy, technology and strategic issues. It’s evident that these are not isolated trends, as the engagement continues to expand with the latest development being a “Comprehensive Partnership” (June 15) between Slovakia and India that covers cooperation in defence, ETs and the civilian nuclear sector<sup>15</sup>. An artefact of the unfolding global (dis)order, the growing EU-India partnership represents an evolving experiment in pragmatic multipolar cooperation. This is a flexible partnership between two radically dissimilar actors endorsing their mutual aspirations and capabilities in an era of power transition and great power competition. Hence, the significance of this moment lies more in the agreement itself than traditional international relations postulates might suggest. Neither the dawn of an unwavering alliance, nor mundane diplomatic symbolism, this is more interesting historically. Two large, complex, multi-cultural,

democratic polities, shaped by very different histories and threat environments, are choosing structured engagement over comfortable distance precisely because the world has become too unpredictable for either to manage alone. The evolution of this partnership despite contrasting institutional and historical legacies (transatlantic cooperation and the genesis of the EU versus the Non-Aligned Movement), and

## *The growing EU-India partnership represents an evolving experiment in pragmatic multipolar cooperation*

absence of shared threat perceptions (European anxiety over Russian subversion in Europe and Indian concern over Chinese transgressions in Himalayas and Indian Ocean) warrants attention. This is perhaps a harder, slower, and more demanding form of convergence than a conventional alliance. Yet in this unfolding multipolar world, characterized by more of disruption and less of conviction, New Delhi and Brussels may also be embarking on a path which is refreshingly honest and potentially, more resilient.

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# “I BELIEVE THE SMARTER APPROACH IS TO RESPOND WITH STRATEGIC PATIENCE”

*According to estimates, the so-called Russian shadow fleet consists of several hundred or even over a thousand tankers – often older ones – which Russia uses to try to circumvent Western sanctions. Following several incidents of alleged sabotage and espionage in recent years, there has been increased discussion about the threat posed by this fleet. “Ethics and Armed Forces” spoke with a military analyst about this topic.*

## Commander Adrians, what exactly is meant by the Russian shadow fleet?

It is misleading to speak of a Russian “shadow fleet”. Even though the term has become established both here in Germany and internationally, one should not assume that it refers to an organized fleet of ships. Rather, the “shadow fleet” describes the phenomenon of maritime transport outside of established control mechanisms. In other words, it means the circumvention or disregard of certain insurance requirements or obligations to document cargo, for example. This kind of activity was already going on before Russia systematically began using tankers for oil exports that do not meet international safety and environmental standards, and whose ownership, registration and flag status are often – and likely deliberately – opaque.

This may all sound complicated, and it is! But it is not a new phenomenon. Until 2022, “shadow fleets” – also known as “gray fleets” or “dark fleets” – were mainly associated with countries in the Global South, such as Iran and Venezuela. In many European countries, however, the phenomenon received little attention.

## But why is this fleet so important to Russia, politically and economically?

The reason that Russia is now relying heavily on alternative maritime transport is that this is the only way it can profitably export large quantities of oil. Following the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Western nations introduced a “Russian oil price cap” in December 2022.<sup>1</sup> This means that if Russia wishes to sell and deliver oil at a price above this set

threshold, Western companies are forbidden from offering or providing shipping, financing or insurance services.

The introduction of the price cap serves two purposes that may seem contradictory at first glance:

First, it is intended to weaken Russia so that it can no longer finance its war against Ukraine. Because the Russian economy lacks diversification, it is dependent on energy exports. Decades ago, Moscow made the strategic mistake of orienting its distribution infrastructure toward Europe. Since European countries have reduced their imports, Russia has increasingly had to redirect its exports to more distant markets. To do this, it needs tankers.

Second, we don’t want to destabilize the global oil market. This would happen if there were an embargo on Russian oil. With the price cap in place, Russia can continue to export it legally.

Because Western companies dominate the various maritime transport sectors, the assumption was that Russia depended on them and would therefore have to lower its prices in order to continue using their services. Moscow has since circumvented this measure by using technically substandard and often opaquely registered tankers – that is, vessels that operate outside of established control mechanisms. Calling them a “shadow fleet” is a nice metaphor, but it doesn’t capture the full picture. Instead, one should say that Russia has created an alternative maritime service network with which it circumvents the price cap.

## Since when has the shadow fleet been perceived not only as a way of getting round sanctions but also as a security issue?

Since late 2024, there have been repeated incidents of damage to critical underwater infrastructure in the Baltic Sea. The vessels blamed for these incidents – or those actually responsible – are civilian and have ties to Russia. Consequently, the West has come to suspect that Russia is using them to carry out strategic sabotage. Not just random acts of vandalism, as it were, but actions designed to severely impair an adversary’s ability to act.

It is important to note, however, that not all civilian vessels with ties to Russia belong to the

“shadow fleet” or should be counted as part of it. It is easy to use this term in debates because it has become familiar and immediately provides a context for understanding. But as I explained earlier, this is a complex phenomenon. That’s why I don’t like the term, and when I do use it – simply because it has become established – I always put it in quotation marks.

#### **To what extent can the shadow fleet be understood as part of hybrid warfare?**

I find such questions problematic because they suggest several assumptions that in my view are incorrect.

First, Russia’s “shadow fleet” should be understood as a phenomenon rather than a structured organization. Consequently, it cannot be viewed as a unified policy instrument; at most, individual vessels might serve that purpose. Even if a distinct pattern of activity emerges from these individual ships, it is more accurate to view it as a separate phenomenon. While this pattern may often intertwine with the “shadow fleet,” the two should not be equated.

Second, the term “hybrid warfare” is also problematic because it is inherently a Western concept. Applying it to Russian strategy constitutes a methodological error that can easily lead to flawed conclusions, as the term lacks the same meaning and significance in Russian military discourse as it does in the West. Today, virtually every Russian action – or even perceived action – directed at Western nations is reflexively labeled “hybrid”. But what does that actually mean?! Ultimately, relying on a foreign loanword that is uncommon in everyday German to explain such a multifaceted geopolitical phenomenon is a poor linguistic choice.

What can be said without bias is that Russian-linked civilian vessels have repeatedly served as platforms for activities designed to heighten Western security concerns. These incidents include signal jamming and drone deployments. Both the resulting psychological impact – specifically, Western unease – and the ambiguity surrounding Moscow’s operational attribution and strategic intent align with the goal of “information warfare”, as it is called in Russian military discourse. This has a technical and a psychological component. While – to the

best of my knowledge – the maritime dimension of this strategy remains understudied, the term is far more precise than “hybrid warfare.” It better encapsulates the Russian doctrine, which is described as “controlled destabilization” or “organized chaos”.

#### **What evidence exists of individual vessels engaging in espionage, sabotage, or reconnaissance – and where does speculation begin?**

Often, the only thing that can be proven is that something unusual has taken place – that is, after damage has been discovered or after a drone’s overflight couldn’t be attributed to anyone. So we are frequently caught off guard. Taking action against this and identifying those responsible has always been difficult. As a result, the initiative and the advan-

## ***Russia’s “shadow fleet” should be understood as a phenomenon rather than a structured organization***

tage usually lie with those who successfully stage a surprise operation.

In many cases, therefore, it is impossible to state with certainty that Russia is behind a specific action. Plausibility and circumstantial evidence, however compelling, do not equal proof. Such concrete proof remains essential if an actor is to be held legally accountable, whether through diplomatic means or international law.

In cases of damage to critical underwater infrastructure, the vessels later implicated were identified due to anomalous navigational behavior – such as lingering at low speeds or maintaining specific courses – combined with clear links to Russia. Similarly, when drones are spotted over critical infrastructure such as airports, wind farms, or military bases, the focus of the question shifts to identifying which state or non-state actor possesses both the strategic interest and the capability to conduct such operations.

#### **Why is the Baltic Sea in particular so sensitive for Russia and for NATO?**

The Baltic Sea resembles a one-way street in a residential area: For most Baltic countries,

### ***Profile***

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the sea is their only connection to the oceans. Consequently, and because the vast majority of goods are transported by sea, maritime traffic is particularly heavy. Furthermore, the Baltic Sea separates the Scandinavian Peninsula from Central Europe and is relatively narrow compared to other marginal seas. Due to these geographical conditions, incidents such as disruptions to radio communications usually have an immediate impact on several Baltic countries.

Russia has always been at a disadvantage in the Baltic Sea region because it is located at the eastern end. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, its coastline not only shrank but was

## *Russia's capacity to shape the Baltic maritime order has shrunk to mere provocations*

also divided between the Kaliningrad exclave and the area around the eastern part of the Gulf of Finland. This situation fuels the fear of encirclement and invasion that is deeply rooted in Russian security thinking.

Distrust of the West among Russian elites has grown since the turn of the millennium in the wake of so-called "color revolutions" in various countries as well as the Arab Spring. Within Russian political and military circles, these uprisings are rarely viewed as genuine expressions of popular sovereignty; instead, they are perceived as Western-orchestrated or at least Western-assisted operations. Consequently, a pervasive fear of losing domestic authority and geopolitical control has led Moscow to prioritize securing its immediate geographic periphery. In this context, experts often interpret the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the backing of separatists in the Donbas, and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine as manifestations of an escalatory security policy thinking which is rooted in a deep-seated mistrust of Western intentions. Within NATO, there was concern regarding potential Russian aggression against other neighboring nations like the Baltic States.

The Baltic Sea vividly illustrates the consequences of Russia's changed security perception of itself and other countries. While the geogra-

phical realities of this enclosed sea inherently dictate regional cooperation, Moscow began modernizing its military capabilities in the Baltic Sea region as early as 2007 and has built defensive as well as offensive capabilities. Following the events of 2014 and 2022, Russia has no longer been viewed as a partner, forcing the other Baltic countries to prioritize deterrence and defense against Moscow. This dynamic has triggered a classic security dilemma. For the West, it has fostered greater unity, manifested in Finland and Sweden joining NATO. Conversely, Russia's capacity to shape the Baltic maritime order has shrunk to mere provocations. The Kremlin knows that democratic societies shy away from escalation. The question is only how far Russia will go – after all, it remains dependent on free passage through the Baltic Sea. In my opinion, Russian provocations should always be interpreted in the context of information warfare which is aimed at creating societal unrest.

**Since early 2025, NATO has responded with Operation Baltic Sentry. Is this operation primarily about surveillance, deterrence, protecting critical infrastructure or all of the above?**

It is primarily about protecting critical underwater infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> That is the main objective. To achieve it, surveillance is important – that is, establishing and maintaining situational awareness. This in turn creates a deterrent effect.

**And has this already had an impact?**

The frequency of serious incidents involving underwater infrastructure has decreased since the start of this "enhanced vigilance activity", as it is called, but they have not completely stopped. Aside from that, I think it is still too early to draw any conclusions. We should just get used to the idea that surveillance and monitoring activities like "Baltic Sentry" will continue unless or until Russia changes its foreign policy.

**Without going into the details of international law, what practical measures are available to European countries and NATO?**

First and foremost, the goal is to achieve the most comprehensive situational awareness

possible in order to detect anomalies quickly and respond in time. This is achieved through sensor fusion and information sharing. In international security discourse, this approach is referred to as “deterrence by attribution”. This means that adversarial forces who threaten our security can no longer assume they will remain one step ahead or that they have to fear immediate exposure.

Other options include stopping and inspecting suspicious tankers at sea. However, there are differing legal requirements and levels of political willingness among nations in this regard. In my view, this is not likely to change anytime soon. However, it may be an advantage when dealing with Russia. When countries act unilaterally, it becomes more difficult for Russian propaganda to condemn the entire West. Furthermore, unilateral actions do not preclude international cooperation.<sup>3</sup> A recent example is the joint effort by France and the United Kingdom in intercepting and inspecting tankers. In such scenarios, one nation executes the physical operation while the other provides remote reconnaissance and surveillance support, remaining clear of direct involvement.

**In your view, what are the biggest limitations: legal, political or military?**

In my opinion, there is no political consensus, either in Germany or in the West, on what an acceptable and achievable end state in dealing with the Russian “shadow fleet” would actually look like. The question is, what exactly are we working toward? Earlier I mentioned the supposed dilemma regarding Russian oil. The price cap was a very good idea, but once again we underestimated Russia’s ingenuity. Whatever we do, the Kremlin will likely find a solution. In this back-and-forth, it all comes down to who is faster.

**Are we seeing a shift in strategy among Western nations in how they deal with the “shadow fleet”? For example, toward more aggressive inspections or detentions of individual vessels, as recently observed?**

In my view, the actions of countries such as France, the United Kingdom and Belgium outside the Baltic Sea represent an expansion of

their strategy. I do not yet see a complete strategic shift, that is, a significant change from their previous approach. Such things usually become clear only with the passage of time.

**Concurrently, Russia is sending political and military signals of its intent to provide enhanced protection for its vessels. Recent indicators include stationing a destroyer off Fehmarn or deploying naval escorts. How do you interpret these maneuvers?**

Russia is increasing its presence along the maritime route through the Baltic Sea in the form of warships, each of which has a specific area of responsibility within which it patrols. That is why you often see them off the coast of Fehmarn, for example. The underlying message is

***“Deterrence by attribution” means that adversarial forces who threaten our security can no longer assume they will remain one step ahead or that they have to fear immediate exposure***

that Russia is prepared to assert its interests and, if necessary, defend them. On the face of it, that seems threatening. But it’s important to note that this places a particularly heavy strain on the Russian Navy and will wear it down over the long term. It means that warships have to go to the shipyard more often. But for a long time, the Russian shipbuilding industry has faced various difficulties, such as shortages of personnel and spare parts. This repeatedly results in warships remaining in dry dock or at the pier longer than originally planned, meaning they are not available for deployment. Russia already has to redeploy units from other fleets to the Baltic Sea to make up for the shortfalls. So it is only a matter of time before Russia will be unable to continue protecting tankers in this way. In addition, it is even less able to maintain such a presence outside the Baltic Sea because it lacks the necessary large warships and supply ships, not to mention overseas bases.

**There have also been reports that Russia is placing private military contractors aboard its tankers. What do we know about this?**

This issue has been discussed in expert circles for some time and, according to recent media reports,<sup>4</sup> appears to have been on the rise since the beginning of this year. This is likely due to increased inspections both in the Baltic Sea and in other European maritime areas. These teams, which are typically small – consisting of fewer than ten people – would have two main tasks: on the one hand, to deter Western nations from conducting inspections through their presence and the fact that they carry arms; and on the other hand, to prevent the civilian crew from cooperating too readily and allowing themselves to be inspected.

***Whether deploying security personnel aboard Russian tankers will impress Western nations remains to be seen in the coming months***

Whether this will impress Western nations remains to be seen in the coming months.

The Kremlin is likely to continue deploying security personnel aboard ships: First, this fuels the narrative spread by Russian politicians like Putin that Western inspections are illegal and constitute an act of piracy. Second, escorting by warships is no longer necessary for every tanker, since some can now, in theory, protect themselves. Third, equipping individual merchant ships with security personnel is sufficient to increase the West's intelligence-gathering and decision-making burden. In this way, the Kremlin regains dominance over escalation for the time being. However, the question remains, as it often does, of how long Russia will continue to deploy security personnel on tankers and what countermeasures the West will take. In my view, successfully boarding one or two tankers with such personnel on board would be enough to embarrass Russia. This would also send a clear signal to buyers of Russian oil: namely, that they can no longer rely on deliveries via the "shadow fleet."

**Does this mark a shift away from plausible deniability toward a more overt state-backed protection strategy?**

That is difficult to predict at the moment. Russia will probably seek further ways to protect the tankers, and test new methods, such as flying the Russian flag. But once again, it remains highly questionable whether such measures will effectively deter Western nations from conducting vessel inspections if there are legitimate doubts regarding the ships' official flag status.

**To what extent do these maritime and aerial encounters pose a risk of inadvertent escalation?**

That is difficult to quantify. In my view, we must better distinguish between intent, miscalculations, and mistakes. However, even if not every incident is intentional, the impact can be exactly the same.

The response to such incidents depends on our political willingness to escalate. But we must be clear: If we do nothing, Russia will interpret this as weakness. And if we do too much, Russia will accuse us of aggression. Yet this dilemma should not make us lose our heads. Instead, we should exercise strategic patience. By this I mean long-term security planning that makes use of all instruments of state power – not just diplomatic or military ones, but both, plus others such as intelligence and financial means. It is important to strictly follow this path in order to grow stronger over time and not allow ourselves to be worn down by provocations or crises.

**What constitutes prudent escalation management in difficult situations?**

There is no one-size-fits-all answer. Decisions are highly contingent on the specific circumstances and are often made in a matter of minutes, if not seconds. It's up to the military leaders to quickly evaluate their immediate situation and formulate a proportional response, making the standard of training and experience of personnel on the ground paramount.

In my view, there is a structural deficit in communication formats and channels capable of resolving any misunderstandings that could lead to a major escalation. During the Cold War, such mechanisms reportedly existed at the

technical level, for instance through dedicated radio channels. While these channels remain in place, they have since become politicized – or more accurately, communication through them is often conducted in a highly political manner. This fundamentally undermines mutual trust, at least regarding maritime safety.

**What does this mean for the crews of our own ships, who must observe, assess and endure such situations?**

On the one hand, it means uncertainty. On the other, we should view every Russian provocation or mistake as a learning experience. Russia might step up its actions, but at the same time we are learning and improving. As long as we respond with strategic patience, it is difficult for Moscow to read our intentions. While this approach may seem overly passive to outsiders, I believe it is the smarter strategy. Otherwise, Russia controls our reflexes – a classic Soviet strategy.

**In naval circles, it is sometimes said that national and Alliance defense in the Baltic Sea is not just an emergency scenario, but a daily reality. Is that an exaggeration, or does it accurately describe the situation today?**

That depends on our definition of “defense”. Traditionally, we define it in terms of a state of war. From a Western perspective, however, there is no such state with Russia. While we are observing heightened tensions, we remain formally at peace. It’s important to protect our values and principles. We do this through the presence of warships, for example, and by conducting exercises that involve civilian actors and organizations.

We must realize that if we allow ourselves to become panicky, we are falling for Russia’s information warfare tricks. That is why, once again, strategic patience is crucial.

**Commander Adrians, thank you very much for the interview.**

*Questions by Rüdiger Frank.*

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