The End of Illusion: Why Europe Needs Independence from the United States

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Why is America's commitment to European security in jeopardy? Over the past decade, European leaders have acted as though the main answer is Donald Trump. If Trump is the problem, then the natural solution is to muddle through – to remain in the US president's good-enough graces so the United States continues to orchestrate European defence for four more years, until transatlantic normality returns to Washington. But the risk of muddling through is rising. Judging by the furious start of Trump's second term, big changes may be unavoidable. Already, the Trump administration has threatened to stop aiding Ukraine altogether, talked of annexing Greenland from Denmark, demanded that NATO allies spend 5% of GDP on defence, announced a plan to hike tariffs on Europe and openly expressed support for right-wing populist parties. Even so, if the turn in US foreign policy has fundamentally arisen from Trump's peculiarities, European leaders could be forgiven for doing all they can to wait out the Trumpian whirlwind and clutch tightly to the US security umbrella. American protection, after all, is understood to have underwritten Europe's peace and prosperity for the past 80 years.

In fact, however, the US security umbrella over Europe has been floating away for more than three decades. The responsibility lies not mainly with

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Trump, or anti-establishment political currents more broadly – although these have certainly played an accelerating role – but rather with the mainstream foreign-policy consensus itself. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has installed itself as the leader of European defence, yet it has possessed little willingness to uphold its defence commitments by fighting a major war. Successive US administrations retained America's predominant role in NATO, supported the eastward enlargement of the Alliance and suppressed European initiatives to build autonomous defence capabilities. But American leaders made those decisions in the expectation – and perhaps on the condition – that the costs and risks of defending Europe would remain extremely low.

So long as Europe's security environment remained benign, America's commitment to defend a growing collection of countries across Europe did not collide with its limited resolve to do so. Yet the contradiction was bound to produce a transatlantic crisis at some point, in part because the very expansion of NATO produced new security obligations detached from specific US interests. It did not help that Trump ascended to the White House precisely as US unipolarity receded and Russian aggression resurged, but he inherited the basic dilemma rather than creating it. Had he remained just a real-estate developer and TV personality, the NATO alliance would still be undergoing a reckoning today. Instead of overturning an eight-decade legacy, the United States is now grappling for the first time with just how much it wishes to do for its recently acquired allies in Eastern Europe in the face of a Russian conventional-military threat that is real but far more limited than that posed by the Soviet Union. Europe, then, has much to gain by becoming responsible for and capable of defending itself, with or without US support – and much less to lose than is widely assumed.

America's fraught commitment

Throughout the Cold War, leaders on both sides of the Atlantic wondered whether the United States would honour its defence obligations if they came due. They had reason for doubt. When the United States negotiated NATO's founding treaty, it insisted on excising language in Article 5, the collective-security provision, that explicitly guaranteed the use of military

force in response to aggression.[1] Weary of alienating the senators needed to ratify the treaty, secretary of state Dean Acheson claimed the United States would not indefinitely station 'substantial numbers of troops' in Europe.[2] The Truman administration decided only afterward to dispatch four US Army divisions to the continent, a move that provoked intense debate in Congress. Not until the 1960s did US policymakers stop seeking ways to replace the US troop presence with European forces, in part to keep West Germany from acquiring nuclear weapons.[3] The nuclear factor, however, raised another mind-bending credibility problem: would the United States really risk trading, say, Boston for Berlin in a crisis?

The American commitment nonetheless remained credible enough to deter the Soviet Union and assure European allies. The US political system of the mid-to-late twentieth century internalised the price of the defence obligations it assumed. The country had fought two major wars in Europe and would likely fight again to prevent a totalitarian great power from controlling the same territory American soldiers had liberated to resolve the Second World War. In the Soviet Union, moreover, the United States faced a communist adversary whose conventional forces were capable of overrunning the entire continent. The initial confrontation could have come in Germany, the dividing line between east and west, where the European balance of power was immediately at stake. From the early 1950s through the 1980s, the United States stationed hundreds of thousands of active-duty military personnel in Europe, especially West Germany, along with large numbers of tactical nuclear weapons.[4]

As the Cold War ended, it was hardly clear that the US military commitment to Europe would survive. In 1989, Jeane Kirkpatrick, a neo-conservative adviser to Ronald Reagan, doubted that 'American taxpayers will accept a prolonged US presence in Europe in the absence of a persuasive Soviet threat'.[5] And Americans would be right, in Kirkpatrick's view, to want their troops home. Totalitarian great powers with expansionist aims – the threat that compelled the United States to cast off its tradition of avoiding entangling alliances overseas – were no more.[6] The United States should look forward to becoming 'a normal country in a normal time'.[7]

But George H.W. Bush had other ideas. As the Warsaw Pact fell apart, his administration worked aggressively and effectively to preserve the US

military presence in Europe by keeping NATO alive. For Bush, US leadership of the Alliance remained invaluable even in the absence of an external threat. American pre-eminence would still constrain a reunified Germany, consolidate European democracies and keep the United States itself from reverting to the so-called isolationism of the pre-Second World War era.[8] However one judges those rationales, they shifted the primary purpose of the Alliance. The prevention of long-term problems took precedence over the mission of deterrence and defence against aggression.

US military dominance in Europe thus came to rest on a new political logic, which in an important sense inverted the old one. In the 1940s and 1950s, the threat to US interests in Europe was so considerable as to elicit a serious US commitment. In the 1990s, by contrast, threats were so minuscule that America's military burden hardly seemed burdensome at all. For the foreseeable future, the United States could obtain modest benefits by paying low costs and assuming small risks. Under Bush and his successor, Bill Clinton, Washington acted to stabilise the Balkans and encourage the transition to capitalist democracy in the former Eastern bloc – all the while cutting defence spending and reducing the US military presence in Europe to slightly above 100,000 personnel.

Wishful thinking

In the latter half of the 1990s, Washington championed the open-ended enlargement of NATO, initiating a process that has doubled the membership of the Alliance from 16 in 1990 to 32 at present. Consistent bipartisan US support for NATO enlargement, spanning three decades, indicated a degree of commitment to defend the organisation's members from attack. But the commitment, though widely affirmed, was shallow. The United States backed NATO expansion less out of a willingness to defend new members than in the belief that once it offered them protection, no attack would occur and no defence become necessary.

At first, some observers could not see why the Senate would sign on. 'Will Americans be prepared to foot the bill and, in keeping with Article [5] of the North Atlantic Treaty, pledge their lives to defend countries many would have trouble locating on a map?', political scientist Charles Kupchan

asked in 1995. His answer was an obvious no.[9] Likewise, the *New York Times* editorial board opined that expanding NATO would 'unwisely commit American troops in advance to defend countries, with nuclear weapons if necessary, where no vital American security interest may be involved'.[10] To those who focused on the defence commitment at the heart of NATO, and considered that it might someday come due, enlarging the Alliance was a dubious proposition with long odds.

In the event, however, supporters of enlargement did not need to argue that Americans would or should take up arms for the new countries admitted into NATO. Instead, they deflected the issue, pointing to the modest benefits of enlargement while downplaying the scope and risk of the defence obligations it entailed. The Clinton administration and other enlargement advocates managed to get the Senate to take on commitments that the country at large had little intention of fulfilling.

Firstly, the White House decided to start small while holding out a 'robust open door' to additional aspirants for NATO membership.[11] In the first round, NATO brought in just three countries: the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. They made an attractive trio, with diasporic communities in politically important US states and a Central European location that made them more militarily defensible than states farther east. Meanwhile, the Alliance made clear that many more countries, including the Baltic states, would receive serious consideration in the not-too-distant future, based largely on their progress towards liberal democracy. Senators could object only to the few compelling candidates before them, yet they set a precedent that paved the way for many more.

Secondly, proponents of enlargement contended that the European security environment would remain benign, all but assuming away the possibility that the United States would have to defend NATO allies.[12] In congressional testimony, secretary of state Madeleine Albright maintained that the United States would not increase its military presence in Europe as NATO got bigger. 'In the current and foreseeable security environment in Europe, we simply see no need', she said. She credited the extension of the US security guarantee with providing deterrence for new members, without allowing that it might also increase the risk

of eventual US military involvement. As Albright put it: 'A larger NATO will make us safer by expanding the area in Europe where wars simply do not happen.'[13] By this logic, enlargement was essentially risk free, and the more countries it embraced, the better.

In the run-up to the Senate debate, the Department of Defense, backed by RAND Corporation analysts who favoured expanding NATO, released cost estimates showing that enlargement would come cheap. The United States would foot a tiny bill – perhaps less than $2 billion over ten to 15 years – because Russia would not turn hostile and only a light NATO military presence would be needed.[14] (The Congressional Budget Office considered the prospect of a renewed Russian threat and projected a much higher defence cost, but still excluded the possibility of engaging in direct combat to uphold Article 5.[15]) Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis was indignant: 'Has it occurred to the Administration that the act of expanding NATO, especially if former Soviet states are included, could itself alter the current security environment?'[16] As two scholars observed in *Foreign Affairs*, 'most proponents of new NATO missions in Eastern Europe act as if there is little prospect that the mutual defense promises embodied in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty will ever have to be honored', and that 'the mere paper declaration of protection by the United States and the existing NATO members will be sufficient'.[17]

Thirdly, even while beginning with three carefully chosen candidates, the Clinton administration cast European security as indivisible, effectively treating the entire continent as a US vital interest. In her testimony, Albright directly rebutted concerns that, as she put it, 'in times of crisis Americans will make no sacrifice to defend a distant city with an unpronounceable name'. Her answer: the United States had already waged the Cold War 'in part because these nations were held captive' – an arguably accurate statement that nonetheless ignored the fact that the United States had never taken up arms to liberate them and indeed accepted de facto Soviet control over them.[18] Even senator Joe Biden, who became a stalwart supporter of NATO enlargement, cast doubt on Albright's contention. 'There is very little consensus about why this is in the vital interest of the United States', he responded. For Biden, the lesson of the Vietnam War was that a 'foreign

policy, no matter how well or poorly constructed, cannot be maintained without the informed consent of the American people. Right now there is not informed consent.'[19]

Biden's point remains difficult to deny. Despite voting 80 to 19 to approve the first round of enlargement, senators scarcely considered what would happen if the security environment deteriorated while NATO moved eastward and its European members remained dependent on the United States, a dependency that Albright's '3Ds' dictum – no European 'decoupling' from NATO, no 'duplication' of NATO capabilities, and no 'discrimination' against non-European Union NATO members[20] – actively encouraged. Still less did the American public, which, the *Los Angeles Times* summed up, was 'acutely uninterested' in enlargement.[21] Only 5% of Americans surveyed by Pew followed the issue very closely.[22] As none other than George Kennan, the Cold War diplomat, remarked after the Senate vote: 'We have signed up to protect a whole series of countries, even though we have neither the resources nor the intention to do so in any serious way.' [23]

In effect, American political leaders made commitments first and hoped the will and resources to honour them would materialise later, or never be needed. The stage was set: if Russia ever became threatening again, NATO would rely on the United States to act and America's willingness to deliver would be highly uncertain.

Unexamined momentum

At least the Senate held extensive hearings to evaluate the first round of enlargement and aired stark differences of view. The same cannot be said thereafter. Objectively considered, the second round, ratified by the Senate in 2003, should have elicited greater scrutiny and fiercer disagreement. In the Alliance's 'big bang', seven more members joined, including the three small, hard-to-defend Baltic states along Russia's border that the Soviet Union had incorporated as constituent republics. Yet the Senate approved their membership in NATO unanimously, voting 96–0. 'This is remarkable', senator John Edwards marvelled during the brief floor debate, 'especially considering how contentious the issue of NATO enlargement was less than half a decade ago'.[24]

Senators voted in unison because they did not contemplate having to defend America's new allies in the future. During the debate, the word Russia was uttered a single time, by Edwards, who did so to praise how relations with Moscow were shaping up. Indeed, despite considerable tensions with Russia over NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999, time appeared to have vindicated enlargement. The costs, in senator Jack Reed's assessment, had proven 'less than we imagined'.[25] Unable to stop the Alliance from expanding, Russia had largely acquiesced in the first round of enlargement, obtaining NATO's agreement to avoid permanently stationing 'substantial combat forces' on the territory of new members.[26] Russia didn't put up much of a fight over the second round either, hoping to use its interest in fighting terrorism to improve relations with Washington.

When the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland made slow progress in improving their military forces, NATO's secretary general was frustrated, but the senators looked the other way.[27] In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Washington sought less to address European security challenges than to gain support for its 'global war on terror'. The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations titled its hearing 'An Enlarged NATO: Mending Fences and Moving Forward on Iraq'.[28] Republicans emphasised their desire to reward America's new and aspiring allies for supporting US wars in Afghanistan and especially Iraq. Democrats spoke of ending the transatlantic rift over Iraq and promoting multilateralism. Partly out of a desire to obtain allied help in the greater Middle East, where US forces risked being spread thin, the United States took on extensive new military commitments across Eastern Europe. Overstretch bred more overstretch.

The original strategy of the Clinton administration – starting small to establish a precedent, the easier to push many more countries through NATO's open door later – succeeded spectacularly. Erstwhile opponents of enlargement found no use in standing athwart history. Senator Jim Jeffords, for example, had voted against the first round but reluctantly supported the second. As he explained, 'there was no logical end point once NATO began to expand'. Having deemed the first three countries qualified for membership, the United States had to apply the same criteria to new aspirants. But Jeffords continued to maintain that enlargement had

been a mistake. NATO, he warned, had strayed from its core purpose as an 'effective military alliance'. Adding so many members 'runs the risk that divergent views will lead to paralysis, or worse yet, irrelevance when action is required'.[29]

Seeking to identify the root of transatlantic tensions over Iraq, historian Robert Kagan famously wrote that Americans were from Mars and Europeans from Venus.[30] The United States thought its unrivalled instruments of coercion brought order to an unruly world. Europe believed it had tamed power politics through the civilising arts of rules, diplomacy and cooperation. Yet however glaring the divergence appeared at the time – especially over disputes beyond the North Atlantic area – Americans and Europeans converged around the same wishful thinking in managing their own common alliance: merely bringing countries into NATO all but sufficed to defend them.

Reality intrudes

In the decades that followed, Americans and Europeans alike slowly awoke to the harsh dilemmas of geopolitics. It took Moscow's repeated use of force to spur NATO to attend to its deterrence and defence posture. In the years after the Russo-Georgian war, NATO finally began to develop plans to defend the Baltic states.[31] In 2014, Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine compelled the Alliance to establish a continuous air, land and maritime presence along the eastern flank. NATO deployed four multinational battlegroups to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland in 2017, each meant to constitute a tripwire with reinforcements planned in case of attack. Eastern-flank countries, though, were less than fully reassured.[32] Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO had stationed approximately 4,000 troops under its direct control in the eight countries ranging from Estonia to Bulgaria.[33] That number increased after the invasion began, and the Alliance now aims at a 'new force model' intended to provide at least 300,000 troops at high levels of readiness.[34]

As the potential need to defend NATO territory has grown more concrete, however, the United States has not evinced a greater willingness to uphold

European defence commitments than it did during its unipolar moment in the 1990s and early 2000s. The total number of US troops in Europe dropped to post-Cold War lows from 2008 to 2022, even as NATO reinforced its eastern flank.[35] Each US president in that period has demanded greater burden-sharing from European allies and made it clear that Asia has greater strategic significance to the United States than Europe does. Even under Biden, who dubbed the US commitment to NATO a 'sacred obligation' and proclaimed it would aid Ukraine's defence for 'as long as it takes', the US emphasised that China was its primary adversary and the Indo-Pacific its priority theatre.[36]

Trump, who has remade the Republican Party in his image, has publicly cast doubt on whether he would defend NATO allies if they were attacked. He has hiked the level of defence spending demanded of European allies from 2% of GDP in his first term to 5% today. And it is far from clear that any amount of expenditure would suffice to convince Trump that it was worth sacrificing American blood and treasure to uphold a commitment he may not value in the first place.

Neither is it clear how Congress or most American voters would react to an assault on NATO territory. In 1995, Kupchan incorrectly predicted that the Senate would refuse to sign on to a commitment it did not intend to fulfil. But his underlying premise – that support for NATO enlargement was widespread but 'skin deep' – has not been proven wrong. To the contrary, his warning looks painfully prescient:

> When the promises now being made to Central Europeans come due, feel-good resolutions will give way to hard-headed debate about how much NATO expansion will cost US taxpayers and whether Americans should be prepared to die to defend Bratislava (that's the capital of Slovakia). The domestic consensus will unravel. The Poles and their neighbors will be left hanging. Russia will be relieved, but alienated anyway. And the United States and its NATO allies will have lots of mud on their faces.[37]

The United States chose to deprive itself of the opportunity to have that hard-headed debate when it embarked on NATO enlargement in the first

place. As a result, not only Europeans but Americans too are confronting what their actual defence perimeter and responsibilities should be based on present circumstances rather than brittle promises from past eras.

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Fundamental considerations, not tactical manoeuvres, should guide conduct. Even if European leaders manage to appease Trump and retain the United States as the primary guarantor of European security, the victory will be pyrrhic. Europe is now set to devote a good deal of its collective wealth to defence. To ask so much of European citizens while still leaving them dependent on the United States – for critical capabilities, combat-ready personnel, political leadership and military command – would disserve every member of NATO, under-securing Europe while overburdening America.

Europe cannot replace the United States overnight, nor should it want to forgo what support America will provide. But Europe needs a worthy outcome for its defence build-up: to become capable of and responsible for defending itself. That objective follows from three essential features of the current security environment. Firstly, Europe has a greater interest in defending European territory than the United States does. Secondly, while Russia can inflict immense damage against its neighbours, it lacks the capability to overrun Europe and thereby threaten America's long-standing interest in preventing one country from dominating the region. Thirdly, Europe's latent power dwarfs Russia's. The EU has nine times Russia's GDP and three times its population, and already significantly outspends Russia on defence.[38]

Europe can defend itself, and should America-proof, not Trump-proof, its security. Friedrich Merz, Germany's chancellor-in-waiting, articulated the goal well. 'My absolute priority', he said, 'will be to strengthen Europe as quickly as possible so that, step by step, we can really achieve independence from the United States.'[39] To deliver, European leaders should present Washington with a plan to replace most US military personnel and infrastructure in Europe over the next decade. In return, the Trump administration should stay in NATO, providing military support

to allies as long as they continue to increase their capacity with the urgency they have recently found. It should encourage Europe to build its own defence-industrial base rather than buy American, ensuring that the uptick in spending becomes a lasting trend. Meanwhile, Trump should avoid inflicting too much economic pain on allies that are stepping up at long last.

Wishful thinking can sustain itself for quite some time, but for NATO, time is up. A redivision of transatlantic labour is the only way to provide for Europe's essential defence needs, remove some of the tensions that are roiling the relationship and allow common interests to eventually return to the fore. To Europeans accustomed to living under American protection, change may be disorienting. Yet the United States has not really defended Europe for a generation now. The Alliance has nothing to lose but its illusions.

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