

Opinion – Anchored Autonomy: Europe’s Strategy for a Post-Complacent Age

Written by Stefan Messingschlager

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STEFAN MESSINGSCHLAGER, NOV 13 2025

Europe’s strategic environment in 2025 has ended the post-Cold War habit of complacency. A transactional Washington linking tariffs to security, a sustained Russian war, and visible European capability gaps have created a new asymmetry of leverage. The right response is neither decoupling nor denial but anchored autonomy: a European build-up of military enablers and economic resilience that reduces coercible dependence while reinforcing NATO’s core. This article traces the shock, the emerging European answer, the stubborn gaps, and sets out a practical path to autonomy without alliance erosion.

Trump’s Return: Europe’s Strategic Awakening

Donald Trump’s return to the White House in January 2025 sent shockwaves through European capitals, confronting them with unsettling strategic realities. Within weeks, the new administration signalled a decisive pivot towards the Indo-Pacific, shifting America’s strategic focus from Europe to China. Newly appointed U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth explicitly informed NATO allies they should anticipate substantial reductions in America’s military footprint on the continent, clearly reflecting Washington’s changing geopolitical priorities. Although Trump publicly reaffirmed NATO’s Article 5 commitment at the June 2025 NATO summit in The Hague, European leaders remain unsettled by Washington’s shifting stance on Ukraine. Positioning itself increasingly as a mediator rather than guarantor of defence, the U.S. repeatedly questioned – and temporarily suspended – military support for Ukraine’s defence against Russia’s ongoing invasion. Particularly alarming were December 2024 reports of proposed peace plans involving territorial concessions, coupled with suggestions that Washington might negotiate NATO’s eastern deployments directly with the Kremlin. These developments reignited deep-seated anxieties among frontline states. Governments in Warsaw, Tallinn, and Riga now openly fear a geopolitical compromise reminiscent of historical spheres-of-influence arrangements negotiated without their consent.

Against this backdrop of resurgent anxiety, Germany’s Chancellor-elect Friedrich Merz offered a stark public appraisal. A lifelong Atlanticist, Merz stunned observers by declaring on live television that, given recent U.S. actions, “the Americans, [...] this administration, are largely indifferent to the fate of Europe.” His candid statement, unprecedented from a German leader, crystallized Europe’s emerging strategic calculus. Merz even suggested that European capitals might soon need to seek nuclear security assurances from Paris or London rather than Washington. Coming from the incoming leader of Europe’s largest economy, such comments marked a historic turning point. Merz warned it was now “five minutes to midnight for Europe” implying that, without swift action, the post-1945 security order risked unravelling entirely. Trump’s second presidency thus represents a clear strategic turning point for Europe. For decades, European nations took the U.S. security guarantee largely for granted. Today, they face the daunting prospect of navigating an uncertain future without assured American backing. European officials openly acknowledge that Europe remains incapable of independently defending itself, especially if a Washington–Moscow grand bargain were ever realized. Yet far from clarifying American intentions, events in mid-July 2025 deepened the fog. On 14 July Trump pivoted from overtures to overt pressure, vowing to levy secondary tariffs on Russia’s principal trading partners – including China, India and Türkiye – unless the Kremlin accepted “a quick, fair peace” within thirty days. Rather than reassuring Europeans, the threat underscored how abruptly U.S. policy could shift from conciliation to coercion. The episode exposed not only the risk of American disengagement but

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also the volatility of Washington’s engagement – reinforcing Europe’s case for credible strategic autonomy.

The urgency of this strategic imperative was further underscored on 28 July 2025, when President Trump explicitly leveraged America’s security umbrella in high-stakes trade negotiations with Brussels, tying economic concessions directly to U.S. defence commitments. Facing a U.S. ultimatum threatening 30% tariffs on EU exports by 1 August – and thinly veiled suggestions that NATO guarantees might hinge on European compliance – EU leaders felt compelled to strike a last-minute accord. The result was the politically bruising “Trump-von der Leyen” deal, capping tariffs at 15% on most EU goods in exchange for major concessions, including €750 billion in U.S. energy purchases and substantial new arms orders. As EU Trade Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič conceded, “it’s not only about trade; it’s about security, it’s about Ukraine, it’s about today’s volatility.” By explicitly exploiting Europe’s military dependence as transactional leverage, Washington made clear that even fundamental security assurances were no longer unconditional.

***Readiness 2030*: Europe’s Bold Push for Autonomy**

Faced with growing uncertainty over American security guarantees, Europe has decisively embraced its most ambitious defence initiative in decades: the European Commission’s *Readiness 2030* programme, unveiled in March 2025. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen framed the €800 billion initiative as a direct response to the “clear and present danger” posed by U.S. strategic reprioritization toward the Indo-Pacific and Russia’s ongoing aggression against Ukraine. The programme signals a significant shift in European strategic thinking, aiming to reduce dependency on external allies – above all, the United States. Central to the initiative is a strategic relaxation of EU fiscal rules, mobilizing roughly €650 billion for enhanced national defence budgets. Additionally, a novel €150 billion EU defence-loan facility will finance joint strategic projects, from advanced missile-defence systems to coordinated drone and cyber capabilities. The establishment of a fully operational, EU-led Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) – a 5,000-strong force designed explicitly for autonomous regional crisis management – stands as a tangible milestone of Europe’s growing defence autonomy.

Yet, translating *Readiness 2030* into tangible outcomes faces substantial political and structural hurdles. Initial political resistance from member states such as Italy and Spain over its assertive branding (“ReArm Europe”) underscores lingering divisions regarding Europe’s strategic priorities. Moreover, historical impediments – national sovereignty concerns, industrial interests, and fragmented procurement policies – continue to challenge European defence integration. Nevertheless, the scale and urgency of the initiative reveal a fundamental shift in Europe’s security mindset. Trump’s transactional return and the sustained pressure from Russia have galvanized European leaders into measures previously deemed politically unrealistic. Successfully implemented, *Readiness 2030* could recalibrate Europe’s role within NATO – transforming it from a dependent junior partner into a credible and capable security pillar. Achieving genuine strategic autonomy thus remains tightly anchored to preserving transatlantic cohesion, requiring Europe to balance bold political ambitions with practical structural reforms.

NATO’s Moment of Truth: Burden-Sharing and Eastern Anxiety

As Europe accelerates its drive toward strategic autonomy under the ambitious *Readiness 2030* initiative, NATO faces deep internal tensions and mounting strategic uncertainties. At the June 2025 NATO summit in The Hague, President Trump pressed European allies and Canada to sharply increase defence spending to an unprecedented 5% of GDP – far exceeding NATO’s traditional 2% benchmark. Intended to appease Washington, this ambitious pledge instead exposed stark divisions within the alliance. Eastern European members, acutely aware of Russia’s persistent threat, enthusiastically embraced the new spending target. Poland already commits around 4% of GDP to defence, is rapidly acquiring advanced weapon systems, and plans further increases. The Baltic states similarly declared their willingness to meet the 5% goal, driven by fears of abandonment and Russian aggression. By contrast, major Western European nations – Germany, France, Italy, and Spain – remain significantly below this ambitious threshold, constrained by domestic political and fiscal realities.

These disparities risk generating internal fractures at precisely the moment NATO requires unity. Operationally, despite ambitious NATO plans to expand high-readiness forces to nearly 600,000 troops, European militaries remain

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dependent on crucial U.S. capabilities, including strategic airlift, advanced intelligence, and nuclear deterrence. Eastern European governments fear a potential “Yalta 2.0” scenario, where Washington negotiates Europe’s security with Moscow directly, leaving them vulnerable. Recent U.S. statements explicitly linking military support to European spending commitments have amplified these anxieties.

NATO’s core dilemma is clear: Europe must strengthen autonomy without undermining America’s indispensable security anchor. To navigate this complexity, Europe’s pursuit of autonomy must complement rather than replace American engagement, ensuring that NATO remains both cohesive and capable amid an increasingly uncertain geopolitical landscape. How difficult this balance will become is particularly evident in the July 2025 tariff confrontation, which further exacerbated existing strains. Building on Brussels’ July climb-down, Washington’s economic coercion soon spilled directly into alliance politics. In its most explicit form yet, the Trump administration tied tariff relief to continued defence assurances, underscoring how military dependence now hangs over Europe like a sword of Damocles, threatening to undermine an already fragile transatlantic order.

Facing Hard Realities: Persistent Gaps in European Defence

Despite unprecedented political resolve and significant budget increases, Europe’s quest for genuine strategic autonomy remains fundamentally constrained by deep-rooted capability gaps. Decades of reliance on U.S. military dominance have left critical shortfalls across multiple areas: nuclear deterrence, strategic logistics, interoperability, and advanced technologies. Foremost among these is Europe’s enduring nuclear dependence. The continent’s security still largely rests on America’s nuclear umbrella, notably the forward-deployed U.S. tactical nuclear weapons. While France and the United Kingdom possess independent nuclear arsenals, neither currently provides comprehensive deterrent assurances covering NATO’s eastern flank. Discussions about a broader European nuclear umbrella, potentially anchored by France, have underscored significant political, operational, and ethical complexities. Europe’s nuclear security thus remains tightly tied to American commitments, severely limiting genuine autonomy.

Additionally, Europe’s conventional military capabilities remain hindered by critical shortages in strategic logistics, airlift, and advanced intelligence assets – capabilities essential for modern, high-intensity operations. The war in Ukraine starkly exposed Europe’s industrial limitations, including inadequate munitions stockpiles and insufficient production capacities. Despite recent investments, Europe still operates only minimal independent logistics and airlift assets, remaining heavily reliant on U.S. strategic infrastructure for sustained operations. Moreover, Europe’s military effectiveness suffers profoundly from fragmentation and lack of interoperability. Historically, European nations have pursued independent procurement strategies, resulting in a patchwork of incompatible weapon systems and logistical frameworks. Without radical standardization and joint procurement reforms, increased European defence spending risks inefficiency, perpetuating persistent capability deficits.

Finally, Europe remains significantly behind competitors like the U.S. and China in critical emerging defence domains – particularly cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing. Without rapid advancement and integration in these areas, Europe risks strategic irrelevance amidst accelerating global technological competition.

Thus, while Europe’s pursuit of autonomy is both urgent and commendable, structural limitations impose clear constraints. Closing these persistent capability gaps demands sustained political resolve, fundamental industrial reform, and targeted investments. Until Europe adequately addresses these vulnerabilities, its security will inevitably depend on continued, robust transatlantic cooperation.

Charting a Balanced Course: Strategic Autonomy without Alienating America

By mid-2025, Europe stands at a pivotal crossroads. The shock of Trump’s transactional return – now compounded by Russia’s sustained aggression – has propelled EU leaders toward credible strategic autonomy. Yet severe obstacles remain: persistent capability gaps, entrenched political divisions, and continued reliance on U.S. strategic assets. Europe’s most viable path therefore lies in incremental self-reliance that sustains, rather than strains, the transatlantic bond.

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Europe must translate ambitious declarations into concrete capabilities. Flagship initiatives such as *Readiness 2030* and the symbolic 5% NATO spending pledge will matter only if they deliver measurable progress in force integration. Pragmatic burden-sharing is imperative: southern member states could reinforce NATO's eastern flank, while others specialize in strategic lift, logistics, or intelligence – maximizing limited resources through specialization, not redundancy. Hand in hand with capability building, Brussels and Washington need frank dialogue on shifting responsibilities. Any drawdown of U.S. forces should be planned, phased, and transparent, allowing Europe to prepare credible contingency arrangements – above all, an enlarged, high-readiness multinational reaction force. Managed prudently, such adjustments would buttress NATO's resilience while freeing the United States to concentrate on Indo-Pacific priorities. The July 2025 trade ultimatum starkly exposed how economic pressure can be yoked to Europe's military dependence. By accepting higher tariffs to keep U.S. security guarantees intact, EU leaders learned a costly lesson: without its own deterrent, Europe remains vulnerable to coercion on every front. Redressing that asymmetry is now part and parcel of strategic autonomy.

Equally crucial is domestic legitimacy. Governments must explain that stronger European defence neither signals decoupling nor neutrality, but a mature assumption of responsibility. Societal support is indispensable for sustained investment and for reassuring sceptical Eastern partners that greater EU agency will reinforce, not replace, the American pillar of NATO. A Europe less beholden to U.S. protection would also bargain from firmer ground. Reducing dependency blunts the leverage behind future ultimatums – whether on trade, energy, or technology – and ensures that transatlantic deals rest on mutual respect, not asymmetric pressure. Europe's strategic challenge is clear: advance credible self-reliance while preserving robust transatlantic engagement. Anchored autonomy – self-confident, yet firmly allied – remains Europe's most realistic compass for navigating an increasingly volatile geopolitical seascape.

Securing Europe's Future Through Anchored Autonomy

Europe's security landscape in 2025 is marked by urgency, tempered realism, and historic opportunity. Trump's transactional return and America's accelerated pivot toward the Indo-Pacific have decisively ended Europe's post-Cold War strategic complacency. Simultaneously, Russia's prolonged aggression in Ukraine highlights persistent European capability gaps and enduring dependence on American military assets. Europe's quest for strategic autonomy, embodied in ambitious initiatives like *Readiness 2030*, has thus shifted from aspirational to existential. Yet achieving genuine autonomy remains incremental rather than immediate. Despite increased political resolve and unprecedented investments, fundamental limitations persist – particularly in nuclear deterrence, strategic logistics, interoperability, and advanced military technologies. Europe's security infrastructure, long intertwined with America's, cannot be rapidly disentangled or reinvented. Therefore, Europe's realistic trajectory toward autonomy must prioritize achievable milestones, targeted capability enhancements, and pragmatic integration rather than unrealistic expectations of rapid independence. Crucially, this incremental autonomy must reinforce – not undermine – the transatlantic alliance. By assuming greater strategic responsibility, Europe can significantly alleviate American burdens, allowing Washington to more effectively prioritize its Indo-Pacific commitments.

Ultimately, Europe's strategic future lies neither in passive reliance nor isolationism, but in carefully balancing credible self-reliance with indispensable transatlantic cooperation. This vision of anchored autonomy requires not only military strength but also economic resilience. The transatlantic trade ultimatum of July 2025 stands as a wake-up call: it revealed how easily dependence can be weaponised. Europe must internalize this lesson. Anchored autonomy will demand bolstering both defence capabilities and economic fortitude so that Europe's future rests on its own strength – ensuring the transatlantic partnership remains a choice rather than an imposed vulnerability.

About the author:

Stefan Messingschlager is a Research Associate in Modern History at Helmut Schmidt University in Hamburg and a Non-resident Fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) in Berlin, with peer-reviewed publications in

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English, German, and Mandarin.