

Schuman Paper

n°802

16th September 2025

The Four Challenges facing European Defence

Jean-Marc VIGILANT

After five centuries of Western global domination, we are living in a period of geopolitical change of the same magnitude as the end of the Cold War. Because European empires nearly destroyed themselves during the two World Wars of the 20th century, they established, under the impetus of the United States, an international order to regulate relations between powers. But today, with its aggression in Ukraine, Russia has ended the longest period of peace on the European continent since the fall of the Roman Empire. Until 1945, virtually every generation of Europeans had experienced war in their own country. During the eighty years that followed – with the notable exception of the Balkan wars resulting from the break-up of Yugoslavia and the final aftershocks of the Soviet empire's collapse after the Cold War – almost three generations of Europeans have not known war on their soil.

Over the past thirty years, emerging or transitional powers have observed us and developed to the point where they are now able to challenge the international order established by the Western victors of the Second World War. We are witnessing the return of power politics and the undermining of international law, through the unrestrained use of violence to settle political disputes.

Beyond the military war in Ukraine – whose aim it is to erase that country as an independent nation – Russia is attacking the very foundations of European liberal democracies, whose attractiveness to Russian people represents a threat to Vladimir Putin's autocratic regime.

As early as 2013, General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, theorised the possibility of destroying a state without firing a shot, through the intensive use of hybrid strategies.

He even recommended allocating four times more financial resources to them than to conventional armed forces. Since then, Russia has extensively implemented these strategies, especially against European countries, aiming to bypass or weaken power by combining direct and indirect actions, legal and illegal, often subversive and ambiguous, below the perceived threshold of response.

At the same time, in their new strategic approach, the United States no longer wishes to act as the world's policeman promoting liberal democratic values. Their president, Donald Trump, recognises neither allies nor enemies, but only the strong, whom he respects, and the weak, whom he despises. He now operates within an imperial logic of establishing spheres of influence with other assertive or even autocratic great powers, as illustrated by the bilateral summit in Alaska with the Russian president – from which those most concerned, Ukraine and the Europeans, were excluded.

In the face of this new strategic isolation, Europeans must demonstrate greater solidarity among themselves. Europe is not as weak as it believes. Ten times richer than Russia, as wealthy and more populous than the United States, and one of the biggest players in global trade, it must regain its self-confidence and the will to defend its interests by reconnecting with power.

But which Europe are we talking about? It is difficult to address strategic and defence questions without considering the essential contribution of the United Kingdom. That is why, despite Brexit, the Europe considered in this study consists of EU members together with their principal Western European partners, whether neutral or within NATO.

The Four Challenges facing European Defence

In this uncertain world, and in the context of the war in Ukraine, Europeans face four short-, medium- and long-term challenges:

- Asserting their cohesion
- Continuing their support for Ukraine
- Strengthening their contribution to NATO
- Developing a genuine European strategic autonomy

To achieve these four objectives successively, the necessary actions must be pursued simultaneously. Each result obtained will form a solid foundation to progress on to the next stage, thereby contributing to the subsequent goal. We shall now detail them and see how they complement each other in achieving the final objective of European strategic autonomy.

1. EUROPEAN COHESION

Just as the British conquered and dominated the Indian subcontinent through a system of alliances, indirect control and by maintaining dissension among maharajahs, sultans and other local rulers, the Americans learnt from their masters. They prefer to engage Europeans bilaterally to obstruct any form of cohesion among them, which would allow them to carry greater weight by rebalancing the power relationship.

Kept under the illusion that they can secure a “better deal” than their neighbour with the American giant – whether in economic, political or security terms – Europeans are more in competition with one another than with the rest of the world. Too comfortably settled for decades in a dependency on American leadership, which is unquestionable because the US is much more powerful and unchallenged due to its geographical distance, Europeans too often forget that they share more interests with each other than with their American ally.

Today, competition is global, and the relevant scale to preserve and defend our interests is the European continent, with the European Union at its heart. We must therefore seek the best possible way to avoid setting long-term collective interests against short-term national interests.

In the economic sphere, this means that after legitimate national preference, European preference should be prioritised for goods or services we cannot produce ourselves, before systematically turning to extra-European solutions^[1] to the detriment of our neighbours. Only under this condition shall we reinforce one another so as to carry more weight in international competition.

This European cohesion must also be expressed in strategic terms, by valuing our diversity while respecting our specificities, by pooling our strengths to offset our individual weaknesses, and by developing a common strategic culture – the foundation of any aspiration to strategic autonomy on a European scale.

2. SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

Since the beginning of Russian aggression against countries formerly on the fringes of the Soviet empire – Moldova, Georgia, and then in 2014 Crimea and Ukraine – the weakness of the European response has emboldened Vladimir Putin in his intention to annex Ukraine without fearing opposition.

However, from the outbreak of open conflict in Ukraine in February 2022, Europeans demonstrated their unity in supporting Ukraine by sending weapons and resources, even slightly surpassing the United States in overall cumulative financial volume (\$138 billion against \$122 billion in August 2025). Yet this commendable European effort does not at present make up for existing shortfalls in certain critical capabilities (air defence, deep-strike, satellite communications, intelligence, space observation...) and strategic enablers that are primarily of American origin.

While Russia has largely internationalised the conflict by involving North Korea militarily as early as 2023, and by receiving explicit support from China and other countries worldwide, the West has provided an inadequate response – always too little and too late – paralysed by the risk of escalation and accusations of co-belligerence voiced by Moscow.

Europe must stop just supporting Ukraine so that it does not lose, and instead it must commit resolutely to

[1] According to SIPRI, nearly 70% of the value of arms purchased by European NATO countries came from outside Europe over the period 2020-2024.

ensuring that Russian aggression in Ukraine is brought to a permanent end. There is no need to fear a collapse of Russia, for this has already happened with the Soviet Union in 1991 without extraordinary consequences. Despite its strategic depth and immense resources, Russia must not achieve its strategic objectives, because its fight is illegitimate. It must, however, come under the maximum possible pressure – a combination of constraints of all kinds, including military – so that it concludes the game is no longer worth the candle. Conversely, Ukraine is in a state of legitimate defence, and its struggle is existential for the survival of the nation. In this respect, it deserves full support, at the very least to preserve what remains of free Ukraine. If it is not realistic in the short term to envisage the reconquest of territories captured by Russia, this will be addressed in the longer term by non-military means – through a comparison between the reconstruction and level of development of the illegally occupied territories and a free, democratic Ukraine anchored to the EU.

On the one hand, Europeans must progressively increase their financial and military support for Ukraine, in view of uncertainties surrounding American support. On the other hand, if ongoing discussions do not fully convince President Trump of the alignment of United States interests with those of Ukraine and the Europeans in the face of Putin, the Europeans must prepare to offset a possible American disengagement in the short to medium term.

Pending a possible security guarantee within the framework of a defence agreement with the United States or with Europeans, Ukraine's best security guarantee is the quality of its own army. Europeans must therefore contribute to its strengthening by training its personnel and supplying military equipment. Depending on the option chosen, in line with the desired level of ambition and available resources, the Ukrainian army must be capable either of harassing the enemy to prevent it from controlling new territories, or of defending the border or the frontline once it has stabilised.

Diplomatic negotiations and pressure of all kinds – military, economic, political and media – must continue to compel Russia to end its aggression.

Led by France and the United Kingdom, the coalition of the willing^[2] includes the majority of NATO and EU countries, as well as Asian partner nations – with the notable exception of the United States, European neutral countries, as well as pro-Russian nations. Since the beginning of 2025, general staffs of these countries have been planning options for the deployment of land, air and naval forces. As soon as a ceasefire agreement (or peace agreement, in Trump's words) is reached, these forces could be deployed in Ukraine and neighbouring countries to monitor its implementation and contribute to the strengthening of the Ukrainian army. They would also provide a security guarantee to Ukrainians by deterring Russia from attacking certain strategic sites protected by soldiers belonging, among others, to nuclear powers – modelled on NATO's reassurance missions on the eastern flank and in the Baltic states.

3. STRENGTHENING THE EUROPEAN PILLAR OF NATO

NATO is today the main instrument of collective defence for most European countries. By providing the Atlantic Alliance with permanent political leadership and military command, NATO ensures the interoperability of European and American armed forces and enables their integration without delay to conduct any type of military operation.

However, the transatlantic bond that once united Europeans and Americans has been weakened considerably over the past three decades. Initially facing a common enemy – the Soviet Union – during the Cold War, the Americans declared in 2011 that their priority was now Asia, due to strategic competition with China. They made it clear that the European theatre was of lesser importance, and successive administrations have tried to disengage militarily. US European Command (US EUCOM) thus declined from 110,000 troops in 1991 to around 60,000 in 2013. Following Russia's actions, notably in Ukraine from 2014, and at the request of NATO's Eastern European allies – as well as tensions in the Middle East – the Americans gradually reinforced their contribution from 2015 onwards, reaching 85,000 to 105,000 US troops on the European continent. From the American perspective, NATO is primarily the gathering of European allies, since most US military forces in Europe

^[2] 32 members: 23 EU countries (except Austria, Malta, Hungary, Slovakia) + Ukraine, Norway, Turkey, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the European Commission and the Secretary General of NATO.

The Four Challenges facing European Defence

remain under national American command within US EUCOM. The same American general commands both the Alliance's forces in Europe (SACEUR) and US forces in Europe (COM EUCOM). The ambiguity deliberately maintained over whether American forces are assigned to EUCOM or to NATO was reassuring for European allies and a deterrent for potential adversaries.

Yet, faced with the increasingly evident divergence between European and American interests in Europe, Europeans must invest more heavily in NATO so that the organisation can function regardless of the level of American engagement, for it remains the main instrument of European military integration.

Despite the outcome of the Hague summit in June 2025, which bought time by securing President Trump's commitment to support Article 5 in exchange for increased European allied investment in their own defence, the reduction of American forces in Europe seems inevitable. This could even be accelerated if the forthcoming US national security strategy – due for publication this autumn – confirms the option that the United States no longer has strategic interests in Europe.

By casting doubt on US commitment to supporting Europeans under NATO's Article 5 – notably after threatening to abandon them to Russia if they did not increase their defence budgets – the American president has permanently eroded allied confidence and weakened the Alliance's deterrent power. He also stripped the last NATO summit of any substance by refusing to allow discussion of the level of ambition, transformation, and the Alliance's new posture in the face of emerging security challenges.

This purely transactional approach has at least led European, Turkish and Canadian leaders to commit to increasing their defence budgets. This is not so much a victory for Trump as it is good news for Europeans, who, by doing so, will strengthen their national military capabilities and progressively acquire strategic enablers which are currently provided by the Americans, but which may be lacking in the future.

By increasing their military contribution, Europeans will naturally consolidate the European pillar of the Alliance and will be entitled to seek greater responsibility within its commands, in a more balanced manner vis-à-vis their American ally.

Nevertheless, since the arrival of the Trump administration in the White House, there have been discussions in Washington over whether to retain the post of SACEUR and to merge the US strategic commands EUCOM and AFRICOM, as was partly the case before 2007. But "he who pays the piper calls the tune". For the time being, the United States remains the most eminent member of the Atlantic Alliance and continues to provide nuclear bombs to the five allied countries^[3] participating in NATO's shared nuclear deterrence. Under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and to prevent any risk of uncontrolled escalation, the United States retains absolute control over the allies taking part in this sensitive mission. That is why the US administration has decided, for now, that the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) will remain an American.

It should be recalled, however, that at the time of the signing of the Washington Treaty in 1949, the massive commitment of US troops to Europe, at the express request of European allies, was intended to be temporary. For the United States, the creation of NATO was an emergency measure to give Europeans time to rebuild their defence capabilities after the Second World War, in the face of the growing Soviet threat. In 1951, two years before becoming President of the United States, General Dwight Eisenhower expressed it in these terms: "If in ten years, all American troops stationed in Europe for national defence purposes have not returned to the United States, then this project will have failed." Subsequently, the Korean War, the Berlin blockade and the Cold War prevented this wish from being realised, and NATO fully played its protective and defensive role against the USSR.

Other voices in the United States have revived this proposal over the past decade. Notably Barry Posen, Professor of International Relations at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who, in his 2014 book *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy*, called for

[3] Belgium, Germany, Italy,
Netherlands, Turkey

a gradual US withdrawal from NATO over ten years, accompanied by a progressive transfer of all its functions to Europeans.

The rise in European strength within the Alliance is therefore not taboo in the United States and can quite easily be organised in good faith with the Americans, so as to gradually compensate for their probable disengagement from Europe.

4. TOWARDS A EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Considering the situation that unfolded in Alaska on 15 August 2025, when American President Donald Trump welcomed Russian President Vladimir Putin with full honours, we cannot rule out the hypothesis of such a divergence of views between Europeans and Americans that the latter would oppose NATO's use for the defence of European interests.

Most European allies are still in shock – torn between astonishment and denial – at discovering the ideological alignment and community of interests between Trump and Putin. They therefore struggle to make sense of the current situation and to imagine a world without American protection. France underwent such an awakening in 1956 during the Suez Crisis. Faced with implicit and explicit threats from the two nuclear powers of the time – the United States and the Soviet Union – France and the United Kingdom had to abandon control of the Suez Canal. The two countries drew diametrically opposed conclusions. General de Gaulle decided to equip France with its own nuclear deterrent so that it might recover strategic autonomy and never again be threatened by anyone. The British, by contrast, chose to align themselves as closely as possible with the Americans in the hope of influencing them and avoiding further surprises.

In matters of defence, Europeans must seek strategic autonomy that enables them to assess situations, decide, equip themselves, plan and act independently to defend their interests.

To be credible, this strategic autonomy must also incorporate the nuclear dimension, which is already

possible thanks to the existence of the two European nuclear powers, France and the United Kingdom. The agreement to coordinate their nuclear deterrents, while respecting the sovereign character of their national control, represents a first step towards a possible extended European nuclear deterrent.

At the conventional operational level, a command and control (C2)[4] system should therefore be envisaged, possibly based on a European pillar of NATO, but which is detachable, modelled on US forces in Europe. These could, when required, be integrated into or excluded from the NATO command chain.

To avoid starting from scratch, it would be preferable initially to use Europeanised NATO building blocks, such as staff elements manned by European personnel, to constitute this C2 system. A certain degree of duplication should then be accepted, particularly for critical capabilities (communications, observation, etc.), as was the case with the GALILEO positioning system, which the Americans opposed because they already provided GPS to the Alliance under their full control.

However, the European military command structure must not be a simple copy of NATO's, but rather complementary to it, with the ability to substitute if necessary. On the one hand, it must be far more resilient to survive a high-intensity conflict, through the hardening of command infrastructure, dispersal of assets and greater decentralisation of decision-making processes. On the other hand, the command system – from political to tactical level – must allow for better integration of all the diplomatic, informational, military and economic instruments of power of the member states, for a genuinely multi-domain approach. Only under these conditions will the EU and its partners be able to bring their full added value to bear, both in the face of hybrid strategies and in the event of all-out war.

To reflect on this new command structure and define an effective new politico-military organisation in a European framework, a dedicated team has to be appointed, comprising a core group of EU officers and officials, possibly supplemented by representatives of partner countries. This team's mission would be akin to that of

[4] C2 simplified acronym for Command, Control, Communication, Computer, Cyber, Intelligence, Surveillance, Targeting (CS2ISTAR)

The Four Challenges facing European Defence

Allied Command Transformation (ACT), currently under the authority of French Admiral Pierre Vandier. This NATO strategic command, based in Norfolk, USA, is responsible for adapting NATO's command structure and transforming the military capabilities of allied forces.

At the capability level, Europeans must sustainably and independently strengthen their military capabilities, through a consolidated and more efficient European defence industrial and technological base. All the necessary technical and scientific expertise exists in Europe. But what is lacking is a genuine internal defence market, to give visibility to companies and to public and also private investors. This specific market cannot be governed by the general rules of competition so strongly defended by the European Commission, because the only clients of defence companies are governments. To align the interests of European governments and industries, we must first encourage the consolidation of requirements, which will naturally lead to a consolidation of supply, i.e. the creation of world-class European defence companies.

Thus, European armed forces must agree to procure identical weapon systems to benefit from economies of scale. This will enhance their interoperability and contribute to creating mass and the stockpiles necessary to hold out in combat despite predictable attrition. It is better to have a large quantity of systems meeting 90% of the needs of the various armies than 20 different systems, each meeting 100% of specific national requirements but arriving too late and in too few numbers because of excessive cost.

Defence planning remains the responsibility of states, including within the EU. However, to take greater advantage of the fact that 23 countries belong both to NATO and the EU, it is vital for greater efficiency that Turkish and Cypriot obstacles to the exchange of classified information between the two organisations be lifted. NATO's defence planning process is very well managed for the benefit of most allies who lack complete national defence planning capacity, but it relies heavily – and logically – on the significant contribution of US military capabilities. Whatever the framework of engagement – national, NATO, EU or coalition – countries only have one set of armed forces. It is therefore essential that their

national defence planning be as coherent as possible, to meet the different scenarios for engagement within the framework of an alliance or coalition at European level.

In this respect, the EU must avoid the catalogue approach of filling capability gaps in an emergency or acquiring the same weapons as adversaries without deeper reflection. The argument of urgency to purchase off-the-shelf equipment, mainly American, is no longer valid, as delivery times have lengthened considerably due to dwindling stockpiles and limits in US production capacity. The European Commission can play a facilitating role by encouraging member states to make better use of existing tools such as the European Defence Agency ([EDA](#)) and the Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation ([OCCAR](#)), particularly to develop capabilities or strategic enablers that exceed the resources of a single country – such as space infrastructures.

Finally, it is necessary to deepen the European financial market and remove bureaucratic and ideological obstacles such as the penalisation of the defence sector in ESG (environmental, social, governance) criteria. This would allow public and private investment to be better directed towards the European defence industry, innovative dual-use technologies (robotics, quantum computing, biotechnology, nanotechnology), and critical and strategic infrastructures (energy, mobility, communications, data, space, etc.).

Every year, around €300 billion of European savings^[5] flows mainly into the American economy, because of numerous barriers to innovation and growth in Europe. To lift these barriers, to support creativity in Europe and avoid the brain drain as well as the loss of ideas, European countries and institutions must reconnect with the culture of risk that enabled Europe to dominate the world at the end of the previous millennium, thanks to major scientific discoveries and the industrial revolution.

Faced with the uncertainties regarding the new strategic environment, Europeans no longer have a choice: they too must fully and collectively engage in the great power

^[5] According to the European Commission in 2024

competition, to defend their interests and remain the beacon of liberal democracy in the world.

History teaches us that weakness is provocative. After the Munich Agreements in 1938, Winston Churchill, with remarkable foresight, declared: *"You were given the choice between war and dishonour. You chose dishonour, and you will have war."* Sadly, it only takes one country to trigger a war, but it takes two to make peace.

Our pacifist stance and our refusal to escalate will not protect us from the imperialist ambitions of our troublesome, revisionist, paranoid neighbour, Russia.

The only way to live peacefully alongside a pacified Russia is to persuade its leaders that they have nothing to gain from crossing their borders, because they would encounter an obstacle stronger than themselves.

To achieve this, Europeans must urgently develop a shared strategic culture, notably through common training pathways for their political, economic and military elites – for example in a European war college – to respond more effectively to the four defence challenges confronting Europe.

In this way, European countries will be able to strengthen their cohesion in a rapidly changing strategic environment, and support Ukraine in the long term to prevent the continuation of Russian aggression, despite American disengagement. The organisation of the coalition of the willing on this occasion may serve as a foundation – alongside a reinforced European pillar within NATO – for the development of the instruments of European strategic autonomy.

Given the current unreliability of our American ally, our best guarantee of security on the continent will be our renewed solidarity among Europeans in the service of a genuine European strategic autonomy, and our common determination to defend our interests against all forms of threat.

French Air and Space Force Major General (ret)

Jean-Marc Vigilant

Chairman of EuroDéfense-France association

You can read all of our publications on our site:

www.robert-schuman.eu/en

Publishing Director: Pascale JOANNIN

ISSN 2402-614X

The opinions expressed in this text are the sole responsibility of the author.

© All rights reserved, Fondation Robert Schuman, 2025

THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France, Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.