



By: Shlomo Ben-Ami

# Europe's road to strategic sovereignty will be long and difficult



No alliance is eternal; it lasts only until it is no longer useful for at least one of the parties.

That was true for France and Israel in the last century, when an intimate strategic alliance forged in the mid-1950s – which included French complicity in Israel's nuclear program – was abruptly ended in 1967 by French President Charles de Gaulle, who was pursuing rapprochement with the Arab world.

It is true today for Europe and the United States – whether Europe likes it or not.

De Gaulle was always committed to securing his country's strategic independence, advocating, for example, a French nuclear force.

But his position was not isolationist; on the contrary, it included a grand vision for a Europe extending from the Atlantic to the Urals.

That is why he proposed a pragmatic entente with Russia: he considered it to be part of the European order, even as other Western leaders regarded it as an ideological enemy. Russia could not be considered European unless and until it embraced “Western values.”

US President Donald Trump does not care about Western values. He would rather let Russian President Vladimir Putin carve up Ukraine and leave the chronically unarmed Europe to deal with the consequences.

Trump plays the role of the peacemaker in Ukraine, but who needs a peacemaker unwilling to provide security guarantees when reasonable doubts exist about Putin's readiness to hold up his end of the deal?

Trump has even threatened to annex Greenland – a move that would be tantamount to declaring war on a Europe that has spent the last 80 years counting on the US to protect it.

## Europe's road to strategic sovereignty

Europe is “mortal,” as French President Emmanuel Macron **put** it last year; it “can die.”

For some, such as former German Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor Joschka Fischer, Europe must **become** Gaullist – “act[ing] as one people to become a truly global power” – to ensure its survival.

But in France, practically everyone – from Marine Le Pen on the far right to Jean-Luc Mélenchon on the far left – is already a Gaullist, and the United Kingdom never abandoned its independent military tradition.

**Europe's road to strategic sovereignty will be long and difficult, and Gaullism will not be enough to traverse it successfully**

Moreover, Germany and Central and Eastern European countries have embraced the need for rearmament.

But the fact is that Europe's road to strategic sovereignty will be long and difficult, and Gaullism will not be enough to traverse it successfully.

## Defense spending is just the beginning

Begin with money. The European Union might seem to be stepping up to the challenge of increasing its defense spending: its white paper for European defense readiness, published in March, **anticipates** over €800 billion (\$924 billion) in such investment over the next four years.

Furthermore, European countries are being allowed to **activate** the “national escape clause” to avoid penalties if increased defense spending causes them to exceed the EU's 3%-of-GDP deficit ceiling.

But the US is **demanding** that NATO countries spend 5% of their GDP on defense, or, in Vice President J.D. Vance's **words**, to stop

“freeloading.”

And most European countries have not even reached the 2%-of-GDP NATO target. Even Poland – Europe’s top defense spender, as a share of GDP – is **below** the 5% threshold.

**Europe has been outsourcing its digital infrastructure to US tech giants for decades, thereby compromising its own security and autonomy**

And defense spending is just the beginning. The Ukraine war is a postmodern conflict, fought partly in the digital sphere.

But Europe has been outsourcing its digital infrastructure to US tech giants for decades, thereby compromising its own security and autonomy.

Notably, the 2018 CLOUD Act **granted** US authorities sweeping powers to access data held by American companies, even data stored in European data centers. As a result, government records, commercial information, and personal data of European citizens all lie exposed, without the legal protections afforded to Americans.

Trump’s decision in March to **suspend** Ukraine’s access to satellite imagery demonstrates how quickly these dependencies can become existential threats.

If US firms cut off access to key platforms or components, Europe would face not only economic disruption, but also grave security risks.

## The EU might have to rethink some of its core principles

Meeting the challenges ahead will require Europe to answer difficult questions, possibly in unorthodox ways. It is now clear that any European defense strategy must integrate Ukraine’s military experience, and that of the

UK.

But should Europe wait until its own defense industry produces all the advanced materials it needs to implement its new strategy, or should it “buy American,” thereby vindicating Trump’s bullying?

Should it invite other external partners to cooperate on cyberweapons, AI-based systems, anti-ballistic missile defense, and drones?



*Should Europe wait until its own defense industry produces all the advanced materials it needs to implement its new strategy?*

In answering such questions, the EU might have to rethink some of its core principles.

European unity is under severe strain, as some EU member states embrace illiberalism, and others face rising nationalism and Euroskepticism.

Against this backdrop, the EU might be better off building a strategic military-political “coalition of the willing,” which excludes countries that would act as spoilers, such as Hungary and Slovakia.

Even such a bloc would have to balance security priorities. Member states in Central and Eastern Europe are concerned primarily about the prospect of Russian aggression, whereas others, such as Italy and Spain, worry more about the complex security, migration, and economic challenges posed by instability in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and North Africa.

Finally, there is the nuclear question. Recent events – from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which surrendered its nuclear weapons in 1994, to the rapid conclusion of the recent showdown between India and Pakistan – have highlighted the enduring effectiveness of nuclear deterrence.

De Gaulle never thought his Force de frappe should serve Europe’s defense, but today, only France and the UK can provide a Europe-wide nuclear umbrella. In this sense, Europe will need more than Gaullism to achieve genuine security.

Shlomo Ben-Ami, a former Israeli foreign minister, is Vice President of the Toledo International Center for Peace.