



By: Ana Palacio

Europe must become a strategic actor in its own right



In recent weeks, unidentified drones violated European Union airspace, prompting an emergency **meeting** of European leaders, hosted by Denmark.

In fact, such incursions have **proliferated** over the last three months, with at least ten countries, from Poland and Romania to the Baltics and even France, reporting suspicious drone activity.

This trend underscores just how **exposed** Europe is to security threats linked to Russia's hybrid-warfare campaign.

But perhaps the biggest risk to Europe's security comes from the United States, where President Donald Trump's administration is adopting a foreign-policy posture that combines insularity and confrontation.

The Trump administration has made no secret of its disdain for America's security commitments, including those to its NATO allies.

US Vice President J.D. Vance's **tirade** at the Munich Security Conference in February – when he told European leaders that the biggest threat to their security comes “from within” – is a case in point.

While the Trump administration claims that it is merely demanding that NATO countries uphold their own commitments, particularly concerning defense spending, it would be foolhardy for Europe to count on the US to uphold its end of any bargain.

A warrior ethos

For the Trump administration, “America First” is no mere slogan; it is a policy ethos used to justify inward-looking, capricious, and transactional approaches with no basis in rules, norms, or values.

But it is not actually “America” that comes first; it is Trump and his inner **circle**, who have raked in staggering riches since his return to the White House.

Trump's new executive **order** providing a full security guarantee to Qatar – which recently gave the US a \$400 million jet that Trump is now modifying to serve as a new Air Force One – underscores just how erratic and opportunistic US foreign policy has become.

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Now, however, the Trump administration has gone from transactional to confrontational.

In an extraordinary meeting at Marine Corps Base Quantico, US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth **lectured** more than 800 military leaders, who had been flown in from around the world at great expense, about reclaiming a “warrior ethos,” rejecting “stupid” rules of engagement, and renouncing “woke garbage,” including “climate-change worship.”

But it was Trump who **summed** up America's new approach to security, as he **affirmed** that the “Department of Defense” is now, once again, to be called the “Department of War.” (Congress has not yet approved the name change.)

This reverses a 1949 **decision** aimed at communicating America's commitment to restraint, legality, and civilian control of the military, at a time when the US was stepping into its role as the guarantor of a stable, rules-based world order.

It thus signals America's abandonment of that order, which underpinned international relations – including broad-based multilateral cooperation and mutually beneficial economic engagement – for more than eight decades.

New strategic reality

To be sure, this was more a confirmation of a policy shift than an announcement of one.

Though the US has accrued untold benefits

from its dominant position within the rules-based international order, the Trump administration has long railed against the associated costs and constraints.

Nonetheless, recent US moves herald a harsher world, in which skies and sea lanes are contested, supply chains are increasingly fragile, alliances are in flux, forceful power projection eclipses diplomacy, and the country that long underwrote global stability is nowhere to be found.

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In fact, America's forthcoming National Defense Strategy **places** "domestic and regional missions" aimed at protecting the "homeland" above efforts to counter threats from powerful foes like China or Russia, according to those who have seen a draft.

The rest of the world is already beginning to adjust to this new strategic reality. Some, such as Australia and Japan, are doubling down on defense cooperation with the US, in the hopes that it has not lost sight of its interest in limiting China's hegemonic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific.

Others, such as India, Turkey, and the Gulf states, are hedging their bets through strategic diversification. Europe's response, however, leaves much to be desired.

The era of "war" has begun

Even if major withdrawals of US forces from Europe are avoided, a troop realignment is all but inevitable.

So, if a security crisis does erupt – not a farfetched scenario, given Russia's hybrid

warfare – the EU must be prepared to meet it.

But while Poland, the Baltics, and the Nordic countries are racing ahead with rearmament, other countries are lagging.



Whatever happens next, Europe cannot lose sight of the existential nature of the security challenges it faces – or of America's unreliability as a partner

Even EU-level initiatives – including the European Defense Fund, a common EU defense industrial strategy, the Act in Support of Ammunition Production, the European Defense Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act, and the Security Action for Europe financing tool – are undercut by fragmentation.

Three imperatives stand out. First, Europe must focus on boosting its military capacity – ammunition, training, and air-defense capabilities – not on issuing more communiqués.

Second, it must ensure cohesion: sanctions and export controls need to be applied uniformly, without carve-outs.

Lastly, Europe must leverage its economic heft to strengthen its geopolitical position.

The EU has the scale to deliver rapid progress on rearmament, including predictable, multi-year orders for European industry.

But without a unified strategic approach, inefficiencies will drain resources, and interoperability will suffer.

The EU would also benefit from greater cooperation with the United Kingdom. But,

while the new EU-UK Security and Defense Partnership is a step in the right direction, engagement will not be straightforward.

Though the UK government still views NATO as the cornerstone of British security, it will also seek to assume a leadership role in tech-heavy coalitions like AUKUS (with Australia and the US) and the Global Combat Air Program (with Japan and Italy).

The age of “defense” is over, and the era of “war” has begun. EU fragmentation, often discussed as a technicality, is now a grave liability, and defense spending, once viewed as discretionary, is now a matter of survival.

Whatever happens next, Europe cannot lose sight of the existential nature of the security challenges it faces – or of America’s unreliability as a partner. It must become a strategic actor in its own right.

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