

NATO is becoming more European. What does this mean?

The Status quo: A brief assessment

At first glance, the prospect of a “more European NATO” carries a certain allure: the chance for the continent to mold the world’s most powerful alliance around its own needs and priorities. Yet when one considers who coined the phrase and under what circumstances, it looks different. Beneath the surface lies a sobering reality.

Two forces drive this shift. The first points eastward: Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its continued saber-rattling against Poland, Estonia, and NATO’s eastern flank. Once again, Europe has become the alliance’s frontline, echoing NATO’s very origins as a protection against the Soviet Union. Yet it is the second force that makes today’s transformation truly decisive: American retraction.

After decades of assigning European security a central spot in its global strategy, Washington’s gaze has shifted. The United States is re-casting its grand strategy, naming China and the Indo-Pacific as the defining challenges of the Trump administration’s foreign policy, while increasingly treating Russia as a European problem. The forthcoming posture review will likely reflect this pivot, for example through partial troop withdrawals from European countries (1). For much of NATO’s history, America’s presence in Europe was sacrosanct, but with China rising as both economic and military rival, Washington is rebalancing its priorities.

This is not merely a strategic calculation but also the product of fatigue. Years of costly missions abroad and deep domestic polarization have fostered skepticism towards alliances where the U.S. appears to shoulder more than it gains — as is the perception of NATO (2). Washington’s rationale is no longer about leading the free world, but defending American competitiveness. China’s challenge is now central to US strategic imagination. From the American perspective, the confrontation with China is seen as a contest, not unlike the Western-style duel: Who pulls first, who has the bigger gun, and will someone duck or go down? Harsh tariffs and threats to companies who consider switching to Chinese technologies are only the opening shots in a broader contest for hegemony (3). As American attention tilts across the Pacific, the weight it assigns to other threats inevitably diminishes.

For NATO, this is nothing short of a tectonic shift. From its founding, the alliance was held together not only by shared values of peace, freedom, and solidarity, but by American leadership, in political, financial, and military matters. Yet as Defense Secretary Hegseth made explicit, the US will no longer commit significant capabilities to containing Russia (4). At the same time, the Trump administration extends a hand to Moscow with a friendliness unseen in decades, openly pursuing closer ties even as Putin blocks American-led peace initiatives to end the Ukraine war.

Thus, whether Europe is ready or not, NATO is becoming more European by default. This will leave a vacuum that Europe must try to fill. The pressing question is now: How can Europeans actively shape this transition in their own interest rather than stumble into it? To turn NATO’s Europeanization from an imposed reality into a strategic opportunity, I argue that three steps are essential.

1. Accept the new reality and assume responsibility

Nowhere is this more urgent than in Germany. As Europe's biggest economy and in light of the recent monumental investments in defense capabilities, our country has a special, though demanding role to fulfill. The biggest challenge may be detaching itself from an outdated mindset and old habits: For decades, the United States has been not only one of Germany's closest partners but an integral part of its national identity. Forged after World War II, American influence shaped the foundations of postwar West Germany, and with reunification, the allure of the Western liberal model only grew. America: ally, protector, inspiration. Yet embedded in this framing was a quiet subordination, a profound dependency, and a habitual orientation westward. Having rebuilt itself under American patronage, Germany usually aligned with Washington's strategic priorities rather than pursued an independent foreign policy course, for example, joining NATO operations in Afghanistan despite domestic skepticism. Rarely did Berlin dare to diverge; Germany's vocal opposition to the 2003 Iraq War remains an exception (5).

After the proclaimed *Zeitenwende* arguably failed (6), it now seems that Germany has understood what is expected of it and is beginning to act. Without US retraction, Germany might never have found the urgency for monumental investments in defense, infrastructure, and deeper cooperation with France and the UK. The continued American presence, beneficial as it was, stifled Europe's autonomy and sustained the illusion that the Union could avoid difficult decisions. The new strategic vacuum now requires bolder steps from both Germany and Europe, with German ambition anchored in a European framework to increase collective resilience and strengthen the continent as a whole. That includes enhancing EU mechanisms like PESCO and the European Defence Fund, pooling capabilities, and aligning procurement. Perhaps the justified American push for higher defense spending and for Europe to take ownership of its security challenges is the call to awaken a sleeping giant. Germany should drop its hesitation, use the newly gained scope of action to translate their billions-defense pledge into actual progress, and lead in strengthening intra-European bonds. Its cooperative instincts, pragmatism, and aversion to escalation could form a leadership profile well suited to Europe's needs.

2. Balance leadership between big and small states

France, the UK, and Germany will naturally be central to European defense. Yet a truly European NATO cannot become the private project of a few heavyweights in the West. Poland, with its massive defense buildup of around 4,5% of GDP this year, the highest in NATO in relative terms, has emerged as an indispensable partner (7). But leadership cannot stop there. Smaller members such as Estonia and Lithuania, who may not command vast resources but live with the Russian threat on their borders, bring both urgency and invaluable local knowledge.

Their contributions are not symbolic. In spring, Estonia increased their defense spending goal to an impressive 5,4% of GDP until 2029 and has invested heavily in modern air defence and communication systems (8). Lithuania just unveiled plans for a multi-layer border defense line, enabling full NATO and EU integration at their frontier (9). The Baltic states, together with Poland, will be the next line of defense should Russia choose another regional war. Without their commitment, NATO's credibility would falter.

Valuing their voices is therefore not just a moral obligation but a strategic necessity. Europe cannot credibly deter Russia if those most directly threatened feel sidelined. History offers a warning: when frontline states are ignored, they turn elsewhere, whether to unilateral action or alternative partnerships, weakening the cohesion of the whole.

Thus, Europe's defense architecture must rest on solidarity: the larger states providing resources and industry, the smaller states contributing urgency, proximity, and regional expertise. Only in this balance lies both credibility and resilience. Yet balancing leadership is not only a challenge between large and small members; it also proves difficult among the heavyweights themselves. Too often, national interests and industrial rivalries stand in the way of genuine cooperation. A striking example is the stalled development of the Future Combat Air System (FCAS): originally designed as an equal partnership between Germany, France, and Spain, the project has become mired in disputes after Dassault Aviation demanded control over 80 percent of the workshare, far beyond the agreed one-third split (10). Such quarrels risk turning ambitious projects into symbols of paralysis. If Europe wants its collective defense to succeed, it must move beyond narrow nationalist competition and prioritize efficiency and trust. Otherwise, shared projects will remain fragile, and Europe's strategic autonomy will never truly rise above vocal commitments.

3. Prioritize unity and anchor strength in shared values

Arguably, the greatest danger to a more European NATO is not American disengagement nor even Russia, but the distinctly European problem of fragmentation. Already, cracks are visible: while Poland doubles down on rearmament, Spain resists new spending goals; while the Baltic states press for urgency, southern members hesitate (11). Without Washington setting the tone, disputes over budgets, priorities, and doctrines risk disabling the alliance.

If Europe wants to preserve peace, it must cultivate a mobilization mentality, recognizing that filling the American gap will demand sacrifices and coordination on a scale unseen in decades. That requires pooling capabilities, accelerating industrial production, and accepting compromises. Yet beyond hardware, what will hold Europe together is the political will to act as one.

NATO's essence has never been simply tanks and aircraft, but the defense of a community of values: freedom, democracy, and solidarity. These are not abstract ideals, they are what allowed Europe to turn a continent of wars into a continent of peace. A more European NATO will only be credible if it preserves that dual role: deterring external threats while embodying the promise of peace within.

This is easier said than done in an age of resurgent populism, disinformation, and polarized societies. These forces threaten to erode cohesion from within, slowing international cooperation and even questioning commitment to NATO and the EU. A holistic security concept must therefore extend beyond defense budgets. It must invest in media literacy, public dialogue, and civic resilience to ensure that Europe's unity cannot be fractured by fake news, hate speech, or extremist rhetoric.

If NATO's Europeanization is to succeed, it must rest not only on stronger armies but also on stronger societies. Only then can Europe show that peace, unity, and freedom are not dreamy relics of the past, but living values worth defending.

Conclusion: Security through solidarity

NATO's Europeanization is not a choice freely made, but a reality imposed by shifting global dynamics. America's pivot to the Pacific has closed a chapter in which Europe could outsource its security to Washington. The next chapter will be written on this continent, by us, or by others in our place.

If Europe accepts responsibility, balances leadership between its heavyweights and its frontline states, and anchors its strength in unity and values, then a "more European NATO" can become more than a euphemism for American retreat. It can prove that Europeans, once torn apart by wars, are indeed capable of defending peace together.

But this will not be decided in ministries and headquarters alone. A more European NATO will only endure if its societies support it: if citizens are willing to support policies investing in defense, resist disinformation, and trust one another across borders. That requires open communication, honest debate, and a shared recognition that security is not a burden imposed from above, but a collective good sustained from below.

The task is demanding, the sacrifices real, and the risks undeniable. Yet it is precisely because of this that the opportunity is historic. By filling the vacuum with solidarity, not rivalry, Europe can both preserve the transatlantic bond and show that it is mature enough to stand on its own feet. The essence of NATO has always been that no member stands alone. Now it falls to Europe to make those words ring true, not only in Washington, but in Warsaw, Tallinn, and Berlin.

A more European NATO does not have to mean a weaker alliance. On the contrary, if Europe makes the most of the chances it has and tackles the challenges that come with them together, it could create a NATO even truer to its founding spirit: Strong because it is united, credible because it is shared, and peaceful because it is anchored in the resilience of its people as much as in the strength of its armies.

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