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With the Alliance's US pillar in doubt, is strengthening of the European pillar possible and what Europeans must and can do about that?

You don't need to be a political expert to see how the US-Israel war against Iran marked a turning point in transatlantic relations, further weakening the American pillar in Europe. Even before that, several other decisions, like the suspension of military assistance, the imposition of tariffs on European partners, and repeated criticism of NATO, have already signaled that the bridge between the allies was beginning to crack. This growing uncertainty has led many people to question the backbone of European security – NATO. Even more, the media have often begun referring to the alliance as "Schrödinger's NATO". The phrase "Schrödinger's NATO" refers to the current state of NATO, which became increasingly evident in recent years. The phrase derives from a famous Schrödinger's thought experiment, and according to Matthias (2025), the concept refers to a cat sealed inside a box, considered simultaneously alive and dead until the moment when the observer opens the box and determines the cat's fate. Applying this analogy to NATO, Dr. Orhan Dragas (2025) explains that, 'as long as the box remains closed, as long as no one dares to open it and check, the alliance both exists and does not exist'. On one hand, the latest reports from Reuters (2026) claim that the US keeps approximately 68,000 troops in Europe (compared to the usual 80,000 to 100,000 troops [Keaten J. & Finley B., 2026]). On the other hand, there are continuous claims by US President Donald Trump, one of the most recent made on March 26, 2026: 'we're very disappointed with NATO, because NATO's done absolutely nothing'. These mixed signals create a situation in which NATO appears both intact and uncertain. It continues to exist as a seemingly functional alliance, but while fully relying on America, there is a high chance for Europeans to find a dead cat in the box once it is opened at the most needed time.

For these reasons, the central question becomes how Europe should respond. Should we burn the bridge and rely solely on ourselves, should we try to fix the bridge or maybe even start building other bridges? These are the questions that I am planning to address in my essay.

It goes without saying that the first and foremost priority in times like this is defense. The growing Russian threat, instability in the Middle East, and continuing concerns about the unstable future of the Indo-Pacific region have significantly increased the demand for a more resilient European security architecture. Europe must be ready 'to fight tonight', and as a former Lithuanian Minister of National Defense, Dovilė Šakalienė says Europe needs to be ready to defend itself **when** it is attacked and not **if**. Even though it would be primarily defensive in nature, it is worth keeping in mind what Prussian strategist Clausewitz (1832, p. 357) said: 'the defensive form of war is not a simple shield, but a shield made up of well-directed blows'. The question, therefore, is not only whether Europe is prepared to defend

itself, but whether it has military capabilities, industrial capacities, and political unity to deliver a 'well-directed blow' if required. To answer this question, I will start by looking at the current issues and their possible solutions.

Europe needs to address capability gaps in air and missile defense, strategic airlift, ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance), and other critical military capabilities. Nevertheless, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine gave a very useful and much-needed push for Europe to take bigger steps in order to do that. For example, Felix Gasper (2026) calculated that with the current ambitious target set by NATO to spend at least 5.0% of each country's GDP on defense, 'the Europeans and Canada could spend more than the US by the end of the decade'. In addition, it has been pointed out that Europe's defense procurement is still fragmented, which results in unnecessary duplication and higher costs. In her presentation, Hannah Preuss (2025) explains that, at the moment, the majority of European defense contracts are signed on the national level; this pushes up the prices, reduces specialization, and keeps national firms smaller. Juan Mejino-López and Guntram B. Wolff (2024) illustrate this by arguing that when each country orders 50 or 100 tanks, rather than jointly procuring several hundred tanks, the cost of each tank ends up being much higher than in the larger market. As a result, in the EU there are around 178 major weapon systems, compared to 30 types used by the US (Olsson, 2022). This fragmentation slows Europe's development of more advanced military capabilities and results in higher costs per unit. To change this, the European Commission launched a €1.5 billion initiative running from 2025 to 2027 to boost military manufacturing and strengthen joint procurement. These, in my opinion, are among the most impactful initiatives; however, these are not the only ones, and all the joint steps can influence the defense gap even more.

Financial investment alone, however, cannot close Europe's capability gap. The experience gained on the real battlefield with Russia is equally important, if not more. That's why, in my opinion, Ukraine is playing a crucial role in Europe's defense. Due to the fact that Europe should stay in a readiness mode as soon as possible, it would not be wise to attempt simply to replicate either the American or Ukrainian model of defense. This would be unrealistic in the short term; therefore, one of the best solutions would be to include Ukrainian combat experience in European military training to create a new, developed model. At the moment, not many countries can offer military personnel trained in actual war settings. The reason why experience on the actual battlefield is so important can be described by the military exercise that happened between NATO and Ukraine – Hedgehog 2025 exercise (Bazhenova, 2026). During the training, Ukraine, embedded with Estonia, acted as a mock enemy; a joint force of NATO countries tried to attack Ukraine, but in the first couple of hours, Ukraine destroyed 17 armored vehicles and attacked 30 other targets. The Ukrainian team consisted of 10 drone operators, and they were actively using the Ukrainian Delta system. To put it in short, a Ukrainian unit of ten operators destroyed 2 NATO battalions within a day with the simple use of their native technologies. The good side

of this story is that Ukraine is ready to share these technologies with our allies, and an experiment like that illustrates how much Europe needs Ukraine.

Beyond combat experience, Ukraine has demonstrated remarkable innovation in military technology. As a famous quote goes, 'diamonds are made under pressure' and by these diamonds I mean Ukrainian military technologies developed in the times of the full-scale invasion. Ukraine has been forced to develop effective technologies rapidly and at relatively low cost. These attributes are invaluable for a Europe that wants to strengthen military capabilities without raising costs dramatically. One example is the Ukrainian Delta system, a situational awareness system. It integrates information from UAV feeds, satellite imagery, and radar tracks, using AI technologies to build a single management system. While the existing similar American tool Palantir has been mostly used by NATO, Liyuba Shipovich (2026), CEO of Dignitas Ukraine, told in March 2026: 'Palantir has great visualization tools, but Delta is better for data collection. Palantir is mostly used at command centers with strong internet'. Together with Delta, there are other innovations like Sea Baby naval drones, Magura V5 drones, and the Brave1 platform, which have already developed into BraveTech EU. To conclude, my examples have shown that Ukraine can be viewed not only as a recipient of military assistance, but also as a crucial source of military innovation and battlefield expertise capable of strengthening the continent's long-term defense capabilities.

A further question concerns Europe's relationship with the United States and why the continent finds itself in its current position. In one recent report, the BBC pointed out that last year US spending on defense comprised around 60% of NATO's combined allied defense spending (Reuben, 2026). Together with that, NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte (2026) scolded European MPs during one of his parliament appearances, saying that: 'If anyone thinks here...that the European Union or Europe as a whole can defend itself without the US, keep on dreaming, you can't'. This raises the question of whether Europe should even try to pursue total autonomy and whether it can exist without support from the US. To answer, I think it is important to look at the history and understand how Europe became dependent on the US. The answer is simple: 80 years ago, Europe was in one of its darkest moments; after World War II, countries on the European continent were either in ruins or were suffering economically. At this point, the savior emerged: the United States decided to fund and rebuild Europe in exchange for reliable allies and while simultaneously strengthening America's political and strategic influence. Postwar frameworks, such as the Bretton Woods system, the Marshall Plan, and NATO explained by Nil Delgado Sánchez (2025) '...formed a broader structure through which the United States institutionalised its postwar leadership in Europe' and it is because of them '...the European Union has been unable to develop a truly autonomous policy path, being forced to stay under the umbrella of the United States' foreign policy'. This was reinforced by the American nuclear umbrella, the Cold War alliance, and decades of shared strategic interests, which explains that Europe's dependency on the US was a rational decision at times of crisis.

Although times have changed and, with the gain of more power and stability, there have been talks to make Europe more independent and rely only on the European continent. One of the ideas has been actively supported since 2018 by French President Emmanuel Macron, who is pushing the idea to create a 'true, European army'. 8 years ago, the President was saying: '...we must have a Europe that can defend itself on its own without relying only on the United States'. While the ideas are there, the actual realization has not progressed much beyond political discussion. There are many reasons for that, for example, fearing to create a union undermining NATO, not having enough resources, or the US, for whom this idea is not particularly advantageous. I would like to highlight the last reason: while there is so much talk about how much Europe needs the US, people tend to forget that it is not only Europe that is getting advantages. I would like to briefly address 4 aspects of US benefits in Europe: military, political, economic, and strategic factors. The first one is military; it may seem that US troops based in Europe are here to protect Europeans, however, it also serves as a logistics hub to move their troops to other regions like the Middle East or Africa. Ramstein base in Germany, Aviano in Italy, and Rota in Spain are strategic points for Europe, the Mediterranean, and even a naval point, as the last base in Spain, which controls the Strait of Gibraltar. Politically, NATO allows the US to shape European security, coordinate allies, and influence policy, as all of it gives Washington considerable influence over alliance priorities. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that while NATO is formally an alliance of equals, in practice the US has the privilege of acting as almost a leader of the organization. As proof of that, there is, for example, a list of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), which is the second-highest military position within NATO, and since the very first appointment of General Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1951, each general has been American ever since (2026). Economically, American defense companies benefit from Europeans buying US weapons like F-35 planes, HIMARS, or Patriot rockets. In 2025, according to the EU Institute for Security Studies, Europe spent around \$38.6 billion in US Foreign Military Sales (FMS), which is a total of 37% of all the US defense exports. Finally, strategically, there is a joint statement by 16 U.S. Ambassadors to NATO and Supreme Allied Commanders in which they mention that 'NATO is not an act of American generosity. It is a strategic bargain that ensures the United States remains the world's most powerful and economically secure nation at a fraction of the cost of going it alone' (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2026).

All of these facts bring me back to the question of what Europe should do at this point. With the seemingly privileged position of the US in NATO, maybe it is worth burning this bridge and following a path of independent Europe? However, my answer is no. At this point, there is no other country or group of countries that could replace the contribution the US gives to NATO. Considering all the benefits that the US is getting from the alliance, it does not look like they could just walk away from the alliance tomorrow, no matter what President Trump writes on his social media platform, Truth Social. Regardless of how far the current US administration goes to test NATO, such as threatening to attack Greenland, the choice with which we are left is to talk. Have a conversation, even if the US President makes

it increasingly hard and unpredictable to navigate. Alongside talking, Europe should become more capable; strategic autonomy does not mean replacing NATO, but rather becoming a stronger pillar within NATO. To give some hope, I would like to bring an example from Ukraine, which faced a catastrophic situation in 2025. With Trump entering the Oval Office, the US placed direct military aid to Ukraine on hold. While it definitely influenced the frontline, it did not go to the lengths that Russia would expect. European countries significantly increased bilateral and collective military allocations, boosting spending and according to the KIEL institute for the World Economy (2025), Europe has actually surpassed the aid from the US for the first time since June 2022, giving EUR 72 billion compared to EUR 65 billion from the U.S. Looking at the support of each specific country in one of the recent interviews the former Defense Minister of Ukraine Mykhailo Fedorov (2026) was praising Germany which he described as the country which provides the biggest financial aid at the moment. This example proves that even at one of the worst moments, Europe can manage to regroup and cover the holes left by the US, even though we would rather not allow any of these holes and focus on maintaining a clear road while working with the US.

Beyond this, Europe should be able to adapt even to unforeseen challenges, and this is why one of the solutions can be building new bridges. One possible destination for the bridge could be the Indo-Pacific region, for which the European Union has already created a Strategy. With the current state of affairs, tensions between Taiwan and China keep rising, and it would be smart to have partners there to prevent any major military actions. Beyond this, Europe can gain other benefits, such as alignment with the Global Gateway project, a stronger naval presence in the region, technology exchange, and many other things. Nicholas Smith (2025) points out that 25% of total EU exports go to the Indo-Pacific, and it is roughly the same amount of two-way trade as the United States in that region. Thus, there is great economic opportunity. He also believes that the Indo-Pacific region can be 'a reliable partner in a number of important, non-traditional areas'. In this sense, building new bridges does not mean abandoning old ones. It means being less dependent and diversifying Europe's strategic relationships.

To conclude, we are living in the historic times when the strongest military alliance is also referred to as 'Schrödinger's NATO' due to its uncertainty surrounding American commitment. Times that were unimaginable a couple of years ago, yet require a quick and effective response from Europe. In my opinion, the current European focus should be on preparing to defend itself; to do that, it should close the capability gaps, create a stronger joint procurement, and learn from one of the most valuable military allies – Ukraine. Together with this, Europe should keep talking to the US and work on strategic autonomy, which does not mean replacing the United States. Both sides should keep in mind that a transatlantic relationship benefits everyone. Finally, Europe has to diversify and strengthen its initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region. Answering the question I asked in the beginning: Europe should not burn bridges; we have to focus on repairing the existing ones and build new ones. As Kamala Harris (2024) said: 'this is not a time to throw up our hands, it's time to

roll up our sleeves'. Europe must 'roll up our sleeves' and build a pillar which is militarily capable, politically united, and strategically diversified, only then we can be prepared for all the uncertainties of the twenty-first century.

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