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Accept, prepare, leverage: How Europeans can manage a changing transatlantic security partnership in the Trump era

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INTRODUCTION

The transatlantic security partnership is entering a new phase. Europeans must assume greater responsibility for their own defence as the United States under President Donald Trump no longer prioritises Europe. Trump's approach to trying to end the war in Ukraine, including attempts at direct negotiation with Russian President Vladimir Putin and ambiguous security guarantees for Kyiv, pose significant challenges that risk undermining the transatlantic security relationship.

For the foreseeable future, however, European security will continue to depend on the United States. To manage that reality, European governments face three main tasks: first, to understand and accept Trump's political calculations and interests; second, to prepare NATO's European members and the EU to take the lead on their continent's security; and third, to ensure that guarantees for Ukraine are credible enough to deter renewed or enhanced Russian aggression.

**Europe's main message for
Washington should be clear:
it is stepping up on defence.**

BACKGROUND

The presence of an unpredictable interlocutor in the White House pursuing a transactional "America First" foreign policy has provided Europe a sharp reality check. Over recent months, Europeans have come to realise that they urgently need to become more independent and self-sustaining, finally turning the slogan of European strategic autonomy into practice. However, this must be achieved without compromising functioning areas of cooperation or the transatlantic bond.

Europe also retains leverage with President Trump: The outcome of the war in Ukraine will not only determine Ukraine's future and the European security architecture, but also the perceived success or failure of a US president who has personally tied his credibility to ending the war. For now, Trump aligns with Ukraine's and Europe's interest in ending the war. Yet his willingness to end the war "at all costs" raises serious concerns for Ukraine, the EU and the liberal world order – especially if the choice is between achieving justice and sacrificing territory. The post-war division of labour between the US and Europe remains uncertain. It is essential that Europeans assert their interests early and steer US actions accordingly. For Europe, this is an existential task.

European members of NATO must step up in a partnership that increasingly resembles cohabitation rather than a stable marriage. They have pledged to lead on their own security but are still far from delivering. Still, for the first time in years, Europe is moving

towards a new chapter of transatlantic burden-sharing. The US wants Europe to lead – while keeping a firm foot in the door.

The NATO Summit in The Hague in June 2025 marked tentative progress. The US Congress welcomed Europe's commitment to significantly higher defence spending,¹ although the agreed 5% GDP target is yet to be proved realistic. Tangible results will take time. In return, Europe secured a renewed US commitment to NATO's Article 5 mutual-defence clause – a win-win outcome, at least on paper.² Its credibility will be tested – and Russia is already probing it. In the short term, higher defence spending is essential to keeping the US engaged.³

Trump will continue to use US participation in NATO and security guarantees for Ukraine as bargaining chips in wider negotiations – including on China and trade. Europeans, particularly EU members states with economic ties to China, must learn to navigate these demands strategically. The EU must advance initiatives such as European defence-industrial policy as Washington pushes for greater defence spending, ensuring that Europe ultimately develops the capacity to provide for its own security.

STATE OF PLAY

Accept: Understanding Trump's calculations

Understanding domestic dynamics in the United States is essential to assess what Europe can expect from Trump's strategic messaging. Despite months of contradictory statements and actions, some clear lines have emerged: Trump wants Russia's war in Ukraine to end; he wants to normalise relations with Russia and restore economic ties; and he expects Europeans to take the lead in dealing with Russia's security threat to Europe. He has also ruled out NATO membership as a means of guaranteeing Ukraine's security.⁴ Alternative security arrangements must still be defined.

Trump is unpredictable for both Europeans and Russians, yet his intentions are clear: he wants to end the war in Ukraine and ultimately normalise relations with Moscow. His August 2025 summit with Putin in Alaska and subsequent meetings in Washington with key European leaders demonstrated his preference for transactional deal-making over traditional alliance diplomacy.

Putin seeks a Yalta 2.0 – a division of Europe into spheres of influence, with Russia dominating all former Soviet republics and projecting power into Central Europe. Without credible, ironclad security guarantees, Ukraine will become trapped in Russia's sphere of influence.

Trump maintains dual messaging – projecting openness to Putin while expressing frustration at Moscow's lack of commitment to a ceasefire or respect for his self-imposed deadlines.⁵ Trump's personal ambition is to leave the office with the legacy of a peacemaker, even a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, meaning that almost any formula that ends the war in Ukraine could be acceptable for him. Europeans have started adapting to this personality with a new style of engagement emphasising alignment over the highly ritualised exchanges of the recent past.

Beyond Trump's personality, structural factors shape his foreign-policy choices. With US mid-term elections approaching, Trump must weigh what he can justify to voters and how to retain support. Narratives around protecting taxpayers and restoring US global prestige dominate his political messaging. Although bipartisan support for Ukraine persists, with polls indicating that 67% of US voters back continued weapons deliveries and sanctions, there are limits.⁶ For example, overseas spending fatigue is high, particularly among core MAGA voters. Trump has sought to present the deal granting US companies mineral-extraction rights in Ukraine as proof that support for Kyiv benefits American taxpayers.⁷ He will likely need more "quid-pro-quo" arrangements to keep voters on board. Europeans should recognise the value of offering tangible incentives to keep the US engaged.

Trump's likely assessment is that a full withdrawal from Ukraine would damage his image, especially ahead of the mid-terms. His approach therefore blends engagement with delegation: the US remains involved but "leads from behind," while the EU and European NATO members assume operational responsibility, including for securing a future ceasefire, potentially with European boots on the ground.

At the strategic level, Europe must acknowledge the broader shift in Washington's threat perception. While Europeans continue to view Russia as the most immediate danger, the US national-security community is primarily focused on China. This assessment runs through several strategy documents – including the National Security Strategy⁸ and Annual Threat Assessment.⁹

This perception has been building across party lines for over 15 years, from President Barack Obama's "Pivot to Asia" and his failed "Russia Reset." Yet the EU and European members of NATO have been slow to grasp its implications. Europeans must recognise that their existential security needs no longer align with those of the US. Because China is seen as the principal threat, managing Russia is increasingly seen in Washington as a task for Europe. Trump's position follows this logic: he expects Europeans to take the lead in guaranteeing peace in Ukraine. He is unwilling to justify to voters a dual confrontation in which the US leads on both fronts.¹⁰ Europeans should accept the harsh reality that Americans no longer regard Russia as its primary or existential threat.

Prepare: the EU becoming a security actor

Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy requires the EU and European members of NATO to prepare for the possibility of a more limited US role in NATO. Washington could act as a dormant partner, leaving the EU, together with potentially other NATO allies, including the UK, Norway and Türkiye, to defend Europe. Will the Treaty of European Union's Article 42.7 mutual assistance clause¹¹ replace Article 5 of NATO¹²?

The EU currently does not have the capacity to defend itself effectively. Turning the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) from wishful thinking into reality is therefore essential.¹³ Likewise, European NATO members must deliver on their pledge to raise defence spending to 5% GDP by 2035 and ensure that a growing share of equipment is European made. A stronger defence-industrial base will give Europe a stronger standing in the transatlantic partnership.

Ending the fighting without credible security guarantees would invite renewed Russian attacks – not only against Ukraine, but potentially against EU and NATO members. Recent Russian drone and warplane incursions into Polish and Estonian airspace have highlighted that risk.

The US Defence Posture Review due in autumn 2025 aims to shock Europe into action.¹⁴ While a large-scale American withdrawal is not anticipated, the review is expected to downsize the rotational presence of the American troops in Europe.¹⁵ Around 90% of US forces are already based in the US, with only 10% rotating through Europe. Most existing basis will remain, and the US will most likely retain command of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Poland given the continued threat from Russia. NATO's European members must develop the capacity to deter land grabs and grey-zone tactics with their own forces. Recent Russian incursions into European airspace show that these risks are not hypothetical: Moscow is testing both Europe's vulnerabilities and political cohesion.

Europe's main message to Washington should be clear: it is stepping up. European defence spending increased for the tenth consecutive year in 2024 – by 11.7%.¹⁶ In the long run, higher defence spending will strengthen both European security and NATO itself. The appointment of an EU Defence Commissioner signals the Union's intent to play a more active role in supporting European NATO members and defining a distinct EU contribution to European security. The White Paper on Defence is a

key element of European ambitions, though its concrete impact and deliverables remain to be seen.¹⁷

Recent EU defence initiatives indicate steady progress towards building a credible European security role. These include the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS),¹⁸ European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI), Capability Development Plan (CDP) and EU-backed Security Action for Europe (SAFE), which will provide €150 billion in EU-backed loans for joint weapons procurement.

However, building these capacities will take time. The European Defence Initiative is expected to require two years to reach operational capacity and will be subject to a complex permitting process. Rearmament plans usually take a decade, but military and intelligence chiefs warn that Europe must achieve readiness in half that time, or sooner. Simplified processes and contingency planning are crucial if Europe is to meet the challenge.¹⁹

Another element of this emerging security role is the EU's growing network of security partnerships with "like-minded" countries – including with Ukraine and the UK.²⁰ Through SAFE, Ukraine enjoys a degree of integration approaching that of a member state. Ukraine can benefit from access to military equipment, logistics and reconnaissance support in the short term²¹ and by subcontracting in military procurement and joint ventures in the longer term.²² The EU–UK Security and Defence Partnership enables structural cooperation on foreign security and defence policy, regional security and sanctions coordination.²³ The European Commission is negotiating with UK about its participation in SAFE instrument, including procurements.²⁴ Having the Security and Defence Partnership with the EU is the basis for these negotiations.²⁵ Such partnerships strengthen the EU's profile as a credible security actor.

The EU is also working to ease the financial constraints on its defence surge. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has proposed activating the escape clause from the EU's budget-deficit limits to allow member states to borrow more for defence spending.²⁶ The Commission has further encouraged the European Investment Bank (EIB) to support dual-use projects, though not yet the direct production of weapons ammunition. Going forward, the EU will need to invest strategically, focusing on areas where it is competitive within NATO's broader capabilities. Current targets for Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD), Loitering Ammunition (LM), Electronic Warfare (EW) and the Next Generation Surface Combat Vessels²⁷ should remain the core of the EU's contribution to collective defence.

The United States' nuclear arsenal continues to serve as NATO's ultimate deterrent. Although the UK and France maintain a limited number of nuclear warheads, only the US can provide deterrent volume.²⁸ Its presence in Europe will continue to provide a vital "tripwire" function, and Europeans continue to rely on US intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. However, the EU must strengthen its own intelligence capabilities

to ensure continuity should a future US Administration reduce or suspend intelligence at crucial moments. This should not be framed as mistrust or duplication, but as a complementary European contribution to intelligence exchange and verification.

Leverage: Transatlantic security guarantees for Ukraine

Putin seeks a Yalta 2.0 – a division of Europe into spheres of influence, with Russia dominating all former Soviet republics and projecting power into Central Europe. Without credible, ironclad security guarantees, Ukraine will become trapped in Russia's sphere of influence. Providing transatlantic security guarantees to Kyiv is therefore not only about Ukraine's defence, but also a geopolitical imperative for Europeans. The question is whether Europeans can convince the US president to share this view.

Europe's ability to influence the shape of a ceasefire or peace settlement will depend on how successfully it aligns its position and asserts agency within a Europe-led Coalition of the Willing supported by non-European allies. From a European perspective, Ukraine must have agency in this process and Trump cannot speak or concede on Ukraine's behalf. Ending the fighting without credible security guarantees would invite renewed Russian attacks – not only against Ukraine, but potentially against EU and NATO members. Recent Russian drone and warplane incursions into Polish and Estonian airspace have highlighted that risk.²⁹ If there is no durable end to the war in Ukraine, and grey zones remain,³⁰ Russia could engineer another frozen conflict, as it did in Georgia in 2008, to block Ukraine's path to NATO and the EU. A mere ceasefire would be insufficient: at stake are not only Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, but Russia's pursuit of imperial ambitions.

European leaders within the coalition of the willing must ask Zelenskyy what concessions Ukraine is willing to make.

Demands for a ceasefire have so far failed because Russia has faced no meaningful consequences for non-compliance. Increased pressure, tariffs and sanctions have not changed Putin's calculus. Each time Trump's frustration appears to reach a breaking point, a handful of phone calls restore a temporary sense of goodwill. Europe, for its part, is attempting to make sanctions bite, encouraged by a United States which increasingly conditions its own pressure on corresponding European action.³¹

President Trump appears to favour a simple and tangible framework that would give Ukraine security guarantees without granting it NATO membership. He continues to support Ukraine's path to EU accession and endorses

the EU's sanctions packages against Russia, but offering formal US security guarantees to a non-NATO remains politically unviable for him.

His decision to meet Putin in Alaska before consulting with European leaders and Ukraine's President Vladimir Zelenskyy, and without a solid security-guarantee plan, arguably played into Moscow's hands.³² A transatlantic agreement is now needed on the division of responsibilities – who leads on which aspects of the process and who, puts boots on the ground when necessary. The Coalition of the Willing is well-placed to map out this scenario. Most importantly, Ukraine must agree on what constitutes an acceptable security guarantee to avoid repeating the empty assurances of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.³³

European leaders within the Coalition of the Willing must ask Zelenskyy what concessions Ukraine is willing to make. This includes defining the possible zone of negotiated agreement, sequencing of the negotiations and preparing an alternative strategy should Moscow refuse to compromise. Most importantly, any deal must deliver a sustainable peace to Ukraine.

A credible settlement will require a European military presence on the ground, but the extent of Europe's willingness to invest and capacity to commit forces remains unclear even within the Coalition of the Willing. The US is unlikely to participate in such deployments. Instead, Washington's contribution is expected to focus on support: providing Ukraine with intelligence for long-range missile strikes on Russia's energy infrastructure,³⁴ as well as continued surveillance, reconnaissance and anti-missile air-defence assets. This could form part of a broader transatlantic security guarantee for Ukraine.

If Europeans and international partners within the Coalition of the Willing manage to meaningfully contribute to a ceasefire and a process leading to lasting peace in Ukraine, it would demonstrate to Washington that Europe is serious about assuming greater responsibility for its own security. In return, Europeans could hope for continued American commitment to European security while Europe works to mend its remaining vulnerabilities.

CONCLUSION

In the longer term, the EU must acknowledge the shift in US foreign policy thinking and engage the Trump Administration with a clear understanding that decisions will be based strictly on perceived US national interests and domestic calculations. The EU can no longer expect a values-based approach. This reality has far-reaching consequences for Europe's own strategic posture.

Europeans have made progress in observing and adapting to Trump's interests and calculations – notably by framing Ukraine's victory as Trump's victory, and conversely, Ukraine's defeat as Trump's defeat, one that would tarnish his credibility and legacy.

But beyond managing personalities, Europe must continue to prioritise assuming responsibility for its own defence. This requires sustained political and financial commitments to arms procurement and to Europe's own defence-industrial base. Where European-made arms cannot yet meet urgent needs, the EU should allow temporary exceptions, recognising that industrial development is a long-term process.

Ultimately, the EU must accept both its own constraints and the limits of US engagement as it evolves into a security actor and defence guarantor in its own right. The Union should expect less American leadership in transatlantic security and leverage remaining areas of cooperation, above all security guarantees for Ukraine.

Looking ahead, Ukraine's security guarantees must be Europe's top priority. The EU should continue communicating with Washington that, without an American contribution, the EU alone will not be able to provide credible security guarantees to Ukraine. How the EU shapes US perceptions about the end of the war and its consequences will impact transatlantic security guarantees, with spillover effects across the European security landscape.

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