

The Future of NATO and European Security

by Kori Schake



The heads of state of NATO pose with U.S. President Joe Biden and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the White House before a state dinner at the NATO 75th anniversary summit celebration on July 10, 2024. ROBERTO SCHMIDT/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Europe is frightened and frightening for the first time really since the 1980s, when nuclear sabers were rattling as the Soviet Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) both deployed contending intermediate range missiles along the dividing line of the military alliances. With Russia's continued barbarity in Ukraine there is no escaping that Vladimir Putin intends not to be "European" (that is, Western) and prefers to be a threat rather than a small but successful piece of the liberal economic jigsaw. Not only is Russia intending to demolish the peace of Europe and re-create a repressive sphere of influence, but it is also teaming up with China, North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela to try and overturn the international

order the U.S. and its allies have established and from which they have prospered for the past 75 years. This is occurring simultaneously with the U.S. seriously questioning whether to remain engaged in protecting Europe.

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The 31 flags of the NATO member states at the NATO headquarters building on April 27, 2023, in Brussels, Belgium OMAR HAVANA/GETTY IMAGES

The European-U.S. alliance is a triumph and a historical anomaly that has persevered for 75 years, succeeding in preventing an attack on any of its members without ever having to fire a shot. The patterns of cooperation are deeply engrained among the countries that comprise the NATO alliance. Yet, as Stanley Sloan, a senior fellow at the Scowcroft Center of the Atlantic Council and author of one of the best books on NATO, *Defense of the West*, says, “the oldest refrain in the West is ‘NATO is in crisis! Deterrence is breaking down! We need new thinking!’” The problems that have bedeviled NATO since its inception continue to be the problems that trouble it now:

- How to keep the U.S. with its manifold power and global interests committed to the defense of Europe
- How to defend Europe at a human and financial cost acceptable to the U.S.
- How to get consensus on taking military action

If the U.S. were to either formally

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withdraw from the NATO alliance or render unreliable credibility of the U.S. commitment to a common defense with our allies, European states would have four possibilities for securing themselves: camouflaging a receding U.S. by filling the gaps the U.S. leaves within the NATO alliance; building a functional European defense in the EU and folding in the non-EU countries Britain, Turkey, and Norway; creating a “rest of the West” alliance that includes Japan, Australia, and other countries; or conceding a Russian sphere of influence outside Russia’s territorial boundaries. I regretfully believe the last option, which is the worst option for both Europe and the U.S., is the likeliest outcome should the U.S. fracture the transatlantic bargain that has served us so well.

The American problem

The U.S. is a skittish ally. George Washington cautioned in his famous 1796 farewell address against permanent alliances. Thomas Jefferson warned against “entangling alliances” in his 1801 inaugural pledge. The U.S. political system was built with an especially high standard for entering into foreign agreements: it requires

the president to negotiate treaties, and then a two-thirds majority of the Senate must consent to ratification. And the Senate historically has declined to consent to treaties requiring defense obligations.

The U.S. has the luxury of considering alliances to be optional because it has won the geopolitical lottery: It has great neighbors in Canada and Mexico, which pose no threat, and it is bounded on the other two sides by oceans; it has the vast strategic depth of a continental territory and the economic advantages of plentiful agricultural land, energy, and water; its political ideology and economic opportunity are a magnet for immigration; its currency has become the international holding repository; its language is the common denominator for business transactions; and to a greater extent than most economies, it is its own market. American advantages mean it will be less affected by a corroding international security environment than most other countries.

One of the first defense agreements the U.S. entered into was the 1947 Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance. Known as the Rio Treaty, it committed most of the countries of the Americas (but notably not Mexico) to hemispheric defense with the commitment to consider an attack on any one of them an attack on them all. The Senate had been sensitized to that language before being confronted with it in Article 5 of the 1949 Washington Treaty establishing NATO because it originated in the Rio Treaty.

In almost every other way, the U.S. constrained the obligations it was entering into with the NATO alliance. The U.S. ensured the Article 5 commitment had a squishy “up to and including the use of military force” rather than any automatic response to an attack on an ally. The U.S. also delineated the territory to which the treaty would apply, in order to not be dragged into disputes over the colonial possessions of European allies. The U.S. ensured that no commitment of military forces or military stationing in Europe was included...until North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950.

The Korean War provoked a desperate anxiety in the U.S. and Europe that even the Soviet Union blockade of access to Berlin had not. NATO's integrated military command, with American officers atop the Supreme Allied Commands Europe and Atlantic, and the open-ended stationing of U.S. forces in Europe transformed the alliance from a political statement to a multilateral defense arrangement. And with that came arguments between allies and in U.S. politics about distributing the expense and risk associated with defending Europe.

Every single U.S. administration since 1950 has been dissatisfied with European financial and force structure commitments. Both the president and Congress have repeatedly threatened "agonizing reappraisal" of the U.S. commitment to European security unless certain policies were adopted by European allies. The canonical case is the 1954 refusal by the European Defense Community, comprised of Belgium, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, France, Italy, and West Germany, to rearm Germany. A lesser-known instance is that the NATO secretary-general is said to have deceived the Belgian government in 2001, claiming that the U.S. had requested the first ever invocation of NATO's Article 5 and threatened the Belgian government that unless it agreed to invoke Article 5 the U.S. wouldn't be willing to support Belgium's defense for a hundred years.

So American reticence and aggravation with allies relying so heavily on U.S. contributions to European defense is nothing new. What makes Donald Trump's threats, both in his first term as president and now, more worrying for allies, in addition to his generally erratic and unprincipled behavior, is his dismissal of alliances. He does not believe that the international order NATO contributes to provides advantages to the U.S. or that allies are a net gain for the U.S. When Trump tells the world that Russia can "do whatever the hell they want" to allies who don't pay security costs that he deems sufficient to merit U.S. involvement, not only do allies believe it, their adversaries might

also. President Trump's reckless endangerment of U.S. allies couples with his strange affinity for Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping in ways that corrode the security that NATO countries—including the U.S.—have long enjoyed. The NATO allies fear Donald Trump represents a newly transactional U.S., unsentimental about longstanding friendships and shared experiences of solving problems together.

Sticker shock

The NATO treaty provides for the costs of collective defense to "be shared equitably among the member countries." As the NATO military structure was being organized, General Dwight Eisenhower testified before Congress in support of continued stationing of troops in Europe, arguing that it was a

crucial but temporary measure "until Europe regained its strength," rebuilding its economy and reconstituting its forces. Almost from that moment, burden-sharing became one of NATO's central problems.

NATO has a defense planning process for determining the threat and defense capabilities needed to protect NATO countries, and a process for allotting those needs among the countries. All NATO allies participate, but acceptance of costs and forces, like everything else in NATO, is voluntary. There is also an agreed common budget for NATO operations, of which the U.S. currently pays 15.9% of the total, the same as Germany, but more than the other allies.

The first major argument over burden-sharing came in 1950, when the



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U.S. determined that the magnitude of Soviet threat and of Soviet armies would require enlisting Germany for the defense of NATO territory (Germany was not yet in NATO). The U.S. advanced a plan to reverse the disarmament that World War II occupying powers had imposed on Germany and rebuild its military under the supervision and command of the European Defense Community. France refused (many other allies were also unenthusiastic), and continued refusing until Germany was brought into NATO in 1955.

In 1954, NATO's Military Committee determined that the military required for forward defense (that is, defense at the eastern edge of member territory from where Soviet troops would attack) against Soviet military aggression were beyond allies' capacity and concluded that the only way to ensure the Soviets did not become confident they could overrun Europe was to make them "subjected immediately to devastating counter-attack employing atomic weapons." Rather than raise the conventional armies to fight a land war in Europe, allies shared the burden by agreeing the war would be nuclear. As the U.S. was the only allied country with nuclear weapons, effectively the burden of risking Soviet nuclear

retaliation rested on the U.S., and Soviet conventional attack principally on European allies.

Whether this division of labor would have held in conflict is unknowable. But one insight into the prospect emerged during the 1958 Berlin crisis, when U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles assured German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer that the U.S. would fight a nuclear war to defend the freedom of West Berlin, and Adenauer responded, "Good God no, not for Berlin!" The prospect of apocalyptic war made conceding Berlin conceivable for Germany's leader.

The burden-sharing problem got even dicier as battlefield nuclear weapons became a mainstay of U.S. military forces in Europe, since they were explicitly intended for use on the allied European territory the forces were defending. The struggle over allied acceptance of raising the nuclear threshold in the 1960s—the U.S. seeking to increase the burden to European allies by extending the phase of war that would occur on their soil and with their troops before escalating to nuclear use—consumed the alliance and resulted in France leaving NATO's integrated military command in 1966.

NATO's efforts to share the risk included a proposed 1950s Multilateral

Force (MLF) of allied crews and nuclear weapons under Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) command with the authority to launch, the development of independent British and French nuclear forces, the disbursement of U.S. nuclear weapons with the air forces of five NATO countries (Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Turkey, and Belgium), and the deployment in the 1980s of intermediate range nuclear missiles with a "dual track" commitment to simultaneously negotiate their removal, which was achieved by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987.

Debates over "who pays" that NATO has always had and is having now seem docile compared to the "who risks" arguments from the 1950s through the end of the Cold War. Every NATO country pocketed an economic peace dividend at the end of the Cold War. The U.S. cut its military forces by a fifth and reduced defense spending by 15%, but the magnitude of U.S. defense spending makes it the largest peace dividend in financial terms.

Germany comes under the greatest scrutiny among NATO allies for burden shirking—even after German Chancellor Olaf Scholz argued for an increase in military spending following the Russian invasion of



U.S. President Harry S. Truman (1884–1972) signing the North Atlantic Treaty, which marked the beginning of NATO, on August 29, 1949. Behind him are diplomats and cabinet secretaries. MPI/GETTY IMAGES

Ukraine—because of its economic strength, the low percentage of its gross domestic product devoted to defense since the end of the Cold War, and the starchiness with which Germany imposes fiscal discipline on the EU's poorer countries that are committing a larger share of their smaller revenue to defense. But Luxembourg and Canada are also perennial underperformers.

U.S. hectoring has rarely induced the spending increases it demanded. Only the Congressional amendments to legislation by Representative Mike Mansfield (Democrat of New York) in the 1970s that threatened removal of U.S. troops from Europe unless allied spending increased seem to have had any effect. But Russia's invasion of Ukraine spurred sustained increases in defense spending by allies beginning in 2014. It is the push of danger (not the pull of U.S. demands) that causes European allies to increase their defense spending. NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg proved himself a brilliant diplomat, forestalling President Trump's threats to the alliance in his first term by bringing the president a chart that began clocking increased spending only in Trump's tenure in office.

What are Europe's options?

In 2024, European countries once again had no influence over Americans' choice of their president (although Russia certainly tried through its malign foreign influence campaign). We are a provincial country, prickly about even well-intentioned friends seeking to guide our choices. Allied attempts to assist preferred candidates typically backfire (as the September 2024 German Foreign Ministry taunting of Donald Trump did).

Nor does foreign policy often become consequential in American national elections, including in 2024. The candidates had indistinguishable views on containing China and international economic policy, and neither were likely to commit the financial resources necessary to close the gap between strategy and U.S. military capabilities. A Trump administration



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky speaks during a press conference at the 2024 NATO Summit on July 11, 2024, in Washington, DC. KEVIN DIETSCH/GETTY IMAGES

is likely to be sloppier, and with a high chaos premium, but not substantially divergent from a Harris administration on those issues. And while support for Ukraine and even for NATO were significant distinctions between the candidates, domestic issues were much more consequential and more vociferously contested this election cycle.

Yet America's allies could well be abandoned by the choice Americans made. And there is little that allies can do to fireproof the NATO alliance. Even openly acknowledging the need to fireproof the alliance from a Trump presidency could well incur the wrath of the incoming Trump administration. Europe's options would seem to be four: increase European contributions within the NATO framework, build a solely European defense capability in the EU (including Britain), widen the aperture of cooperation from narrow Europe to a global network of democracies, or negotiate spheres of influence with adversary powers.

NATO with less U.S.

Short of withdrawing from the 1949 Washington Treaty, there is no magic threshold beneath which the U.S. commitment to common defense of the NATO allies becomes defunct. The

credibility of the U.S. extending deterrence across the Atlantic has always been a source of anxiety. And while a Trump administration will undoubtedly increase that anxiety, President Trump insists privately that his threats to allies are just a means of "getting a better deal" for the U.S. Accepting Trumpian framing of U.S. protection as an insurance company (that if allies don't pay his premium, the U.S. won't deliver) would certainly be humiliating and difficult for allied leaders to sustain domestically. But given the shortfalls of European confidence and European military and defense industry capability in the near term, it may be worth accepting.

The U.S. provides the alliance with both the hardware and software that undergirds military operations. Removing the U.S. from the military commands would not only take away high-value military capabilities that do not exist in allied forces (such as geosynchronous satellite imagery and the ability to orchestrate military activities across domains) but also commanders who have utilized those capabilities at scale. NATO would probably also need a new concept of operations that show how the alliance would operate without the specific military elements the U.S. provides.



The French Navy's first-generation nuclear attack submarine Saphir on the surface during training exercises on March 1, 2009, off Toulon, France, in the Mediterranean Sea. ALEXIS ROSENFELD/GETTY IMAGES

But the American way of war isn't the only way to fight, as the war Russia imposed on Ukraine in 2022 is demonstrating. The Russian model involves a costly expenditure of soldiers for tasks that Western militaries would use technology for, but it's not ineffective. And while the Russians are slow to innovate, once they determine an improved tactic (such as strike packages that exhaust air defenses with swarms of drones sequenced before missiles), they perk it throughout their operations. The Ukrainian model is nimbler, fusing civilian technologies and experimental tactics quickly into military operations, but struggling to standardize operations across their force.

NATO militaries often suffer by comparison to that of the U.S., but Europe won't be fighting against the U.S. They'll be fighting Russia, a Russia that can barely hold its own against the Ukrainian military, and that Ukraine has done European security the enormous benefit of significantly degrading.

The limitations of Russian conventional forces raise the prospect of increased Russian reliance on nuclear use, which is already prominent in Russian doctrinal thinking about war with the West. NATO ultimately relies

on its nuclear deterrent, which is comprised of 100–200 dedicated U.S. nuclear weapons assigned to U.S. and allied air forces across the five countries sharing the mission (Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey), and the independent nuclear forces of the United Kingdom (UK) and France. The UK could conceivably expand NATO oversight of and participation in its nuclear force, making that its main contribution to the alliance as its conventional forces are apparently continuing to shrink. France guards the independence of its nuclear force jealously, but the extreme conditions of the U.S. pulling up the drawbridges of extended deterrence might tempt the French government to accept the role as ultimate guarantor of Europe's freedom.

Allies could camouflage reduced U.S. commitment by selling changes as increasing European contributions in response to U.S. concerns. They would need to replace the U.S. personnel in key positions, such as the SACEUR. The U.S. already two decades ago ceded leadership of what used to be the Atlantic Command (now Allied Command Transformation) to France, so it could be described as a continuation of recognition that Europeans are

contributing more to allied defenses and therefore merit the top operational jobs. Commands will need to be restructured anyway to incorporate the militaries of Sweden and Finland, two new NATO members with very capable forces. Moreover, the command structure should probably be rebalanced to reflect the political weight of countries that are now NATO's frontline states: the Baltic countries, Poland, and Finland. Changes could seem to occur organically.

Negotiations over the assignments and the balancing among European states would likely be protracted, and the slow-motion changes would provide time for governments, including the U.S., to minimize the deleterious effects of U.S. reductions. If the U.S. government did not intend harm its long-time allies, it would provide political cover for the changes, affirming them as a natural development of Europe taking more responsibility rather than the U.S. shedding it. Even if the U.S. did formally withdraw from NATO, organizing Europe's defense through the existing structures would project some possibility that the U.S. might contribute in extremis.

A European defense community

A more visible defense posture, acknowledging the declining reliability of the U.S. commitment, would be to strengthen Europe's ability to organize and conduct its defense through the EU. Defense cooperation in the EU has mostly been declarations and unfulfilled commitments, but that is partly due to the neuralgia the U.S. injects at the prospect of a strong EU undercutting NATO. From the American perspective, it has often seemed like the EU was seeking credit in the present for actions it proposed to take in the future, as was most recently seen in the EU failing by a very wide margin in its commitment to provide ammunition to Ukraine. Nor is the complaint without a broader basis, as evidenced by pro-EU European politicians frequently advancing the unsubstantiated claim that European taxpayers will increase defense spending for the EU but not NATO.

But if the U.S. ceases to be a reliable partner in NATO, France may get its wish for European strategic autonomy. The problem immediately presented will be who leads among the middle powers of Europe. Britain is out, as it is no longer an EU member. France will want to assume the mantle, and if (as it is currently hinting) it might offer its nuclear deterrent for the defense of EU states, France would deserve it. Germany will shy away from the dominant role, but EU allies may want to shove it forward into leading positions, because of both the resources it could bring as Europe's largest economy and the risk it poses of opting out (as it did during the 2011 military campaign in Libya).

Arranging defenses through the EU has the disadvantage of not including the UK, Turkey, and Norway, but the severity of the circumstance might overcome the formalities of membership and incorporate their contributions. It might actually resolve the problem of variable geometry and speeds in the EU to have nonmembers participate in the crucial activity of defense, leaving the Schengen travel zone and common currency core with Venn diagram overlays, illustrating logical relationships for defense and other policies.

Critics of European contributions to defense often cite that Europe's economy is five times the size of Russia's, so surely it can fund its own protection. And it does smart for an American to see the resplendent public infrastructure and generous social benefits Europeans enjoy that would not be possible if the U.S. were not contributing so much to Europe's defense. But the EU is not Europe, it is a supranational organization that does not erase the national interests of its 27 member states.

The \$19 trillion gross domestic product of the EU masks the different levels of development and structures of economy across the union. The EU has nearly 2 million troops under arms and spends more than \$258 billion on defense. But that is supporting 27 different militaries of 27 governments that would be on very shaky ground to give up control of their forces to defend their own country, or allow the EU

Variable geometry—The idea that groups of actors from different European countries can cooperate on various levels through differentiated integration. For example, many states are members of the EU yet are not part of the Eurozone or the Schengen area.

Schengen travel zone—Established in 1995 as a border-free travel zone in Europe, which allows members of the 29 countries involved to live, work, study, and retire anywhere in the EU.

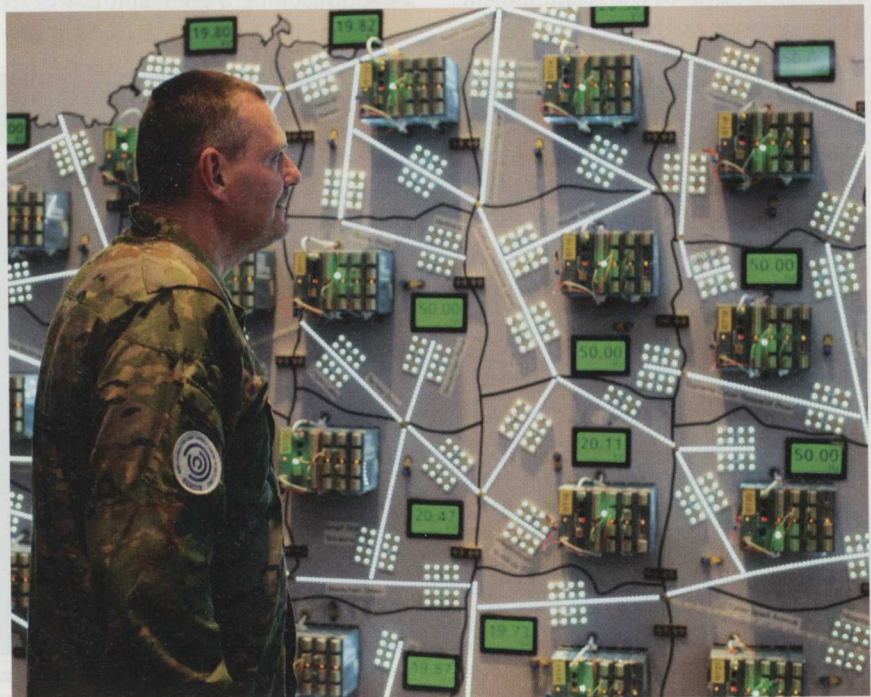
"Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." —Samuel Johnson

superstructure to commit their country to war. And the problems NATO has reaching consensus for the solemn obligation of war are likely to be exacerbated without the dominant role of U.S. power to tip the scales.

Where the EU could substantially improve its defenses would be taking advantage of boring economies of scale. Countries don't particularly need unique basic military training or national schools of artillery proficiency. Aggregating the basic functions at the EU level makes enormous sense. But these ideas have been around for decades with little genuine progress toward their adoption, although U.S.

abandonment might approximate Samuel Johnson's comment about hanging focusing the mind. Europe would be substantially less capable militarily, and less likely to deter aggression, without the U.S.

Alternatively, the EU could move toward specialization, particularly in the defense industry. Giving each state a responsibility without which the defense of all is impossible might create the political pressure for cooperation that has been lacking. Putting Estonia in charge of cybersecurity and giving Italy command of an EU coast guard could match both interests and expertise with obligation.



An attendee in military uniform observing a board showing a fictitious country being targeted during the Locked Shields exercise in Tallinn, Estonia, on April 23, 2024. PETER KOLLANYI/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

Advocates of reducing the U.S. commitment to Europe, especially those who fashion themselves “realists,” blithely suggest Germany ascended to leadership of European defense by becoming a nuclear weapon state itself. This suggestion indicates innocence of understanding about modern Germany (which won’t even utilize nuclear power), innocence of understanding how that would unsettle Germany’s EU allies, and innocence about how that would further stimulate revanchism by a Russia consumed with World War II. A German nuclear program would be a tempting target for preemption as well as a propaganda victory for Russia, even if that program were embedded in NATO. Germany armed with nuclear weapons would more likely increase the threat to Europe as well as reduce cooperation among the EU states.

Concert of democracies

Small- and middle-sized states are the main beneficiaries of the current international order. These states lack the power to set rules or protect their interests when acting on their own. But they are many, their values are largely common, and they are all likely to suffer from the drought of U.S. commitment.

NATO has already routinely included Japan and Australia in alliance summit meetings, and the 2024 75th anniversary NATO summit also included New Zealand, South Korea, and Ukraine. These and other countries could be folded into NATO, where the habits of military cooperation are already well-established, into the EU, or into a new alliance structure.

There have been some promising starts in this direction. The government of Japan, in particular, has been active in fostering middle-power cooperation. It has cascaded coast guard vessels and training to countries seeking to protect their fishing grounds from Chinese incursions, invested in rare earth mining and processing in Australia, created an infrastructure investment fund with India, made overtures for better relations with South Korea, and signed a defense agreement with the Philippines. These activities constitute an incredibly creative and assertive set of policies to prevent sole reliance on the U.S., which had long been Japan’s only defense cooperation partner.

But the same problems of representation and reaching consensus that trouble the EU, or any consensual organization lacking a dominant power to

drive agreement, would apply. There are other practical military problems, in particular the challenge of bringing military forces across great distances with speed. Typically, the U.S. provides both the quick arriving forces and assists with transportation for allies. There is also the problem that these countries need security in the present, whereas organizing an alliance of small and middle powers will take considerable time.

Spheres of influence

Opponents of continued U.S. commitment to Europe’s security confidently assert that if the U.S. does less, Europe will do more—it will be forced to do more, because its security will be at stake. The problem with that argument is that it fails the Shinseki test. Former U.S. Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki, who commanded NATO operations in the Balkans in the 1990s, said that the most important contribution the U.S. makes to the defense of Europe is to give allies confidence that they can defend their countries and their interests. When the U.S. steps back, our allies step back further, because they lack confidence that they can succeed.

The fatal assumption of the step



Group portrait of international politicians whose nations are NATO signators in Bonn, Germany, in 1957. Pictured are, from left (front row), NATO Secretary General Belgian politician Paul-Henri Spaak, British politician Selwyn Lloyd, Luxembourgian politician Joseph Bech, U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, German President Dr. Theodor Heuss, Greek Foreign Minister Evangelos Averoff-Tositsas, Dutch politician Joseph Luns, Italian politician Gaetano Martino, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, and Portuguese Foreign Minister Paulo Cunha. PHOTOQUEST/GETTY IMAGES

back argument is believing that allies feeling abandoned will make the choices we would want them to make. They will be frightened and likely to make damaging compromises because they do not believe they have better options. That is the story of the Minsk Agreements after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine: The U.S. telegraphed disinterest, Europe took the negotiating lead but could not persuade Russia to compromise, and Ukraine had no better choice than to accept a bad deal because it wasn't yet able to defend itself. And those Ukrainian concessions didn't stop the fighting. It was a bad outcome for Europe and a bad outcome for the U.S.

If the U.S. were truly indifferent to whether Europe remains free, Russia would be greatly incentivized to reclaim Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. The same argument Russia makes about its predations in Ukraine could apply also to those former Soviet states. Those states lack strategic depth to retreat into while continuing to fight to reclaim their territory. But Germany and Britain have troops stationed in the Baltic states; Poland would also surely join the fight, and possibly Finland as well. Given the performance of Russia's military in Ukraine, Russia is no match for even that subset of NATO armies.

But confidence really matters as states choose whether to accept unreasonable demands. Russia might not have to invade to compromise the security of exposed countries like the Baltic states. It could repeat the 2022 Ukraine playbook of staging exercises involving hundreds of thousands of troops on the border while making demands for political recognition. Russia could also stoke Russian-speaking minorities in those countries to political violence, continue the campaign of sabotage to extract concessions, or threaten nuclear strikes on cities in countries that resist or assist those under attack. That could leave Europe under the shadow of Russian intimidation, even though together Europeans are strong enough to overpower Russia.

And that is even before factoring in the increasing collusion between



A JAS 39 Gripen C/D fighter aircraft of the Swedish Armed Forces taxis past a US KC-135 Stratotanker military tanker aircraft at Lulea-Kallax Airport in Sweden on March 4, 2024, during the NATO Nordic Response 24 military exercise. In order to increase the armed forces' military capability, Swedish units participated in the exercise, which is an integral part of the NATO exercise series "Steadfast Defender," NATO's biggest since the Cold War. ANDERS WIKLUND/GETTY IMAGES

Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, the countries seeking to overturn the liberal international order Europe was so central to creating.

Why should the U.S. care?

Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz, who was in charge of the U.S. fleet in eastern Asia and the Pacific and Indian Oceans during World War II, said, "It is the function of the Navy to carry the war to the enemy so that it is not fought on U.S. soil." That same perspective applies to the strategic depth that allies provide for the U.S. We have the good fortune of being able to fight on the ground of allied countries rather than on our own. Dangers that would befall our allies would eventually also threaten us. America's alliance system is an early warning network that alerts the government to emerging direct threats before they loom large enough to be a threat to the U.S. George Shultz, who served as secretary of state during Ronald Reagan's administration, compared successful U.S. foreign policy to gardening, pulling weeds before they overwhelm cultivated plantings.

Europe is not just a security interest for the U.S. It's also a major economic

interest. We are each other's largest investors and main trading partners. It's folly to think the U.S. could remain prosperous if security in Europe collapses. If that were to happen, it would give China even more leverage in the global economic order.

Also, our European allies are the countries most likely to consider their interests congruent with our interests beyond Europe. China has 371 ships in its navy; the U.S. has 290. We will need allies to get the military forces of scale sufficient to continue deterring China, and America's European allies have some of the world's most capable militaries. We will need them, and they have a proven record of showing up for us. They fought alongside us for 20 years in Afghanistan, and most of the allies fought with us for 10 years in Iraq.

And lastly, we share transcendent values with Europe. The European nations are America's closest allies in the world, countries with which we have a shared history and a shared set of beliefs about human dignity and political accountability, countries that have bled alongside us when freedom was at stake, and who will in the future. Having allies is a strategy for safety in a dangerous world.

Discussion questions

1. Can Europe be made secure without U.S. involvement?
2. Can the U.S. remain secure and prosperous if Europe is not?
3. How would China assisting Russia change the balance of power in a post-NATO Europe?
4. Should NATO continue to welcome outside states into their alliance?
5. What is the value of European states having their own strategic autonomy without any reliance on the U.S.?
6. How would the current implementation of defense and aid to Ukraine from the U.S. and European states change if Ukraine were a part of NATO?

Suggested readings

Hal Brands, "Trump's Return Would Transform NATO," *Foreign Policy* (June 27, 2024).

Seth A. Johnston, *How NATO Adapts: Organization in the Atlantic Alliance since 1950* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

Sarwar Kashmeri, "NATO's Future," *Great Decisions* (2024).

Timothy Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Post-War Global Order* (Cornell University Press, 2019).

Stanley R. Sloan, *Defense of the West: NATO, the European Union, and the Transatlantic Bargain* (Manchester University Press, 2016).

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