

EUROPEANS MUST FORGE THEIR OWN WAY OF WAR

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The old transatlantic bond is dying, European defence is slow to emerge and in this strategic twilight, monsters may arise. Indeed, what happened in Ukraine could happen again in the Baltic States: a territorial fait accompli backed by nuclear blackmail.

Can we therefore hope that Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty - that "paper tiger" - will deter a cornered Vladimir Putin from seizing this last opportunity while Donald Trump is still in power? What US president would send American soldiers to die for Zilupe, Narva or Riga?

And what will the other Europeans do? Unable to defend themselves as the Americans do - which is neither financially realistic nor strategically desirable - they will not want to fight as the Ukrainians have fought, at the cost of tens of thousands of lives. Better to "take change by the hand before it takes us by the throat," as Winston Churchill might have said.

In theory, there is no obstacle preventing Europeans from building a defence capable of containing Russia. In 2025, the combined defence spending of EU countries amounted to €393 billion, or €523 billion including the United Kingdom, Norway and Türkiye. That is well above the €145 billion Russia spent in 2024, even when measured in purchasing-power parity. The requirements are measurable and the Kiel Institute has estimated the cost at €500 billion over ten years - that is, €50 billion a year - for Europe as a whole. But do we still have time?

For money, though necessary, is not in itself sufficient to produce military effectiveness. History is full of examples of apparently overwhelming military powers that ended in political defeat and humiliating retreat.

More than budget increases and capability enhancements, what is needed is a deep reform in the way Europeans think. European states must forge their own way of war - a war that will not be the same as the one being fought in Ukraine.

No European defence without European nuclear deterrence

The credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrent has been eroded in the face of a strengthened Russian nuclear threat

The only way to prevent nuclear blackmail is to counter one nuclear threat with another. Yet Russia's hybrid war against European countries since at least 2016 has highlighted the failure of both American and, even more so, European leaders to deter it.

Putin is confident that he can carry out hybrid actions with impunity because he believes he can manage escalation - nuclear or conventional - better than NATO. That confidence has been reinforced by Russia's 2024 revision of its nuclear doctrine, designed to restore the offensive potential of its "aggressive sanctuarisation".

Under these conditions, if a Russian attack were to occur in one of the Baltic states, it would be hazardous to assume that the American president would agree to a nuclear escalation. He would most likely confine himself to symbolic support and launch into the kind of strategic pirouettes he has made his trademark. He could even use the crisis to weaken Europeans further, demanding financial concessions while negotiating one-to-one with Putin.

The real question, in any case, is not so much what Trump would do within NATO, but what Putin thinks he would do. As Thomas Schelling, the theorist of the "diplomacy of violence", argued: deterrence rests on what the other side believes you will do, not on what you will actually do.

The evolution of French nuclear doctrine offers an initial answer to this problem

Starting from the observation that "our competitors have evolved, as have our partners", the French president announced in his speech of 2 March 2026 that France must "strengthen our nuclear deterrent in the face of the combination of threats" and "think of our deterrence strategy in the depth of European territory", thereby setting out two lines of effort.

The first is for France to reinforce the credibility of its own deterrent. This is the "enhancement of the posture", to be carried out in three stages.

In the short term, the aim is to increase the "conventional support" for deterrent forces - in other words, their ability to penetrate Russian air defences and protect European territory. Three types of weapons systems are involved: deep strike, early warning and air defence/anti-drone capabilities. As the president noted, "the last few years have clearly shown the glaring lack of supporting capabilities in Europe".

This conventional backing would be provided to France by its European partners, in the same way that they support American nuclear deterrence within NATO, in exchange for no financial contribution to France's nuclear deterrent, which would remain under the authority of the French president, just as NATO's nuclear deterrent remains under the authority of the American president and the British prime minister.

The value of this step is that it strengthens the only

autonomous component of European nuclear deterrence through greater conventional capability, built in synergy among European partners and at controlled cost. France would thus pay little or nothing for the increase in conventional capability, while Europeans would not have to pay for France's deterrent.

In the medium term, France would increase the number of nuclear warheads so as to create new capabilities, such as an additional squadron for the strategic air forces. This increase would be kept opaque in order to avoid speculation.

In the long term, the upgrading of France's nuclear posture would come through new delivery systems such as third-generation ballistic-missile submarines and the Future Combat Air System, as well as new warheads and missiles such as the M51.4 for submarines and the future ASN4G manoeuvring hypersonic missile.

The second strand of France's doctrine is what the president called "advanced deterrence". This is a gradual approach offering partners the possibility of taking part in deterrence exercises, which may "also involve signalling, including beyond our strict borders, or the conventional participation of allied forces in our nuclear activities".

This may include the "deployment, as circumstances require, of strategic forces elements among our allies." In practical terms, French strategic air forces will be able to spread out across the European continent "like an archipelago of forces", thus "complicating our adversaries' calculations".

This evolution in French doctrine is in addition to, not a replacement for, NATO's nuclear mission. However, it does represent a step towards a pan-European nuclear component. The active participation of Europeans in supporting France will give them the assurance that they are no longer merely spectators of a guarantee that, until now, was merely theoretical, but that they can, in practice, become indispensable actors.

A group of eight countries has already expressed interest in discussions with France: Sweden and Denmark, Germany and Poland, Belgium and the Netherlands, Greece and, of course, the United Kingdom. A genuine 'strategic partnership' is thus taking shape among Europeans, a sort of nine-nation defence Eurogroup that could be called the Nuclear Nine (NN).

Improving Europe's conventional defences necessarily requires greater integration

European conventional defence remains too weak

Operating within a purely national framework, even the best-equipped European armed forces have proved dependent on American support for critical functions such as intelligence and strategic airlift. As a result, they now confine themselves to low-risk missions, or missions with limited risk.

As for the Common Security and Defence Policy, established in an intergovernmental framework within the European Union in 1992, it must be acknowledged that it has failed. It has not enabled Europeans to intervene in major crises such as Syria, Libya, and now Lebanon, all of which directly affect them and in which the Americans do not want to intervene. At best, one can cite the success of European naval operations against piracy or in the Red Sea. Even when reduced to its narrowest meaning as a crisis-

management operational capacity, "European strategic autonomy" remains incomplete, and the 5,000-strong Rapid Deployment Capacity declared operational in 2025 will not change that.

As for collective defence, one must sadly admit that without American forces, their command-and-control capability within NATO through SACEUR and all the American officers at SHAPE and, above all, their intelligence and communications capabilities, the armed forces of European states would struggle to resist a Russian armed attack in a Baltic state.

This is because Europe's military weaknesses are numerous and significant.

The first stems from the fact that, with a few rare exceptions, these are peacetime armies that have not seen any major deployment since Afghanistan. This is why large-scale manoeuvres, such as the ORION exercise that has just taken place in France in the spring of 2026, are essential.

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The second weakness is qualitative and lies in the lack of strategic enablers. At the top of the list are operational command and control centres. Europe also lacks satellites of all kinds, in-flight refuelling, deep-strike capabilities as well as air and anti-drone defence, among other things.

The third weakness is quantitative. European armies lack mass, in other words ammunition and equipment. This is why the European Commission has proposed programmes to encourage Member States to buy munitions and equipment jointly. Rebuilding strength is under way, but in a scattered way, with each country favouring its own force model, its own industries and, above all, its own financial constraints.

The fourth weakness is the failure to absorb the changes in the art of war since 2022. These include drones, of course, but also long-range missiles, which call into question the relevance of aerial combat and, crucially, the arrival of new technologies such as massive data use combined with artificial intelligence. Europeans have no equivalent of the American software such as Maven Smart from Anthropic, which plays a critical role both in the war in Ukraine and in Iran. This is more than a simple capability gap. European forces are lagging behind a strategic rupture, as if they were fighting with bows against cannons.

Finally, any inventory of Europe's military weaknesses would be incomplete without the necessary reform of procurement processes: "new defence". To manage the different timeframes between major programmes and the production of consumable equipment - the so-called "hi-low mix" - acquisition methods must evolve. Today, a full planning cycle within NATO takes four years to produce capability targets. It then takes many more years for member states to acquire them, if they do so at all. Yet, as Admiral Pierre Vandier, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, puts it, "speed has become the very essence of war" and the transatlantic alliance must "transform or perish". It is imperative to shorten the learning loop, but also to test and deploy military capabilities before its enemy.

Awareness of this situation explains the anguish of many European leaders who are clinging desperately to a fading American guarantee and who have agreed to double their defence spending, regardless of their public finances.

The only way to rapidly strengthen Europe's conventional defence is to continue the integration of forces

Apart from the fact that they no longer have experience of war, European militaries follow incomplete and inconsistent models because they were built with and around US forces.

For years, European leaders were strongly encouraged not to "duplicate" American strategic enablers. One recalls that, at the turn of the 2000s, the administration of George W Bush tried to oppose the deployment of the Galileo satellite constellation. That is precisely why vast capability gaps appear as soon as American forces are removed from the European defence equation.

Moreover, on the basis of policies driven by strictly national logics, Europeans have duplicated capabilities among themselves instead of buying strategic enablers jointly - something that could have been avoided through specialisation, as foreseen in the Permanent Structured Cooperation mechanism included in the Treaty on European Union.

By addressing the issue of the inadequacy of conventional forces solely from a financial and capability perspective, we are missing the point. As Robert-Henri Berger, a senior French officer, puts it: "This is not merely a quantitative change - investing more to replace US forces - but a qualitative, ontological, comprehensive change at every level of the defence apparatus: replacing a mental and material framework, an American framework of coherence, into which we were accustomed to fitting ourselves."

The question now is under which framework this European force coherence should be achieved.

On paper, NATO is the most attractive framework, because it is the crucible of interoperability and the centre of planning, whether defence planning through the NDPP (NATO Defence Planning Process) or operational planning. In an ideal scenario, the Americans would therefore organise an orderly and rapid withdrawal of their forces, since they are now asking not merely for "burden sharing" but for "burden shifting". That withdrawal would of course include the transfer of supreme command and all command posts to European officers. In a transactional logic dear to the American president, it should also include the withdrawal of American forces from the bases they occupy in Europe, or at the very least their rental for a fee. That would give full meaning to the expression "European pillar of NATO", which, if words have any

meaning, implies two distinct pillars rather than one and a half under American control. NATO could quite happily survive in its current form: a mutual defence Treaty. But its Organisation would be left to each group's discretion. The Americans would thus be spared any financial contribution and the Europeans would be faced with their responsibilities.

Unfortunately, such a withdrawal, although easy to sketch, is unlikely. The Americans find in NATO both a captive customer base, a means of dominating and containing their industrial rivals and, finally, a network of forward bases essential to their operations. So far, the terms of this exchange were more or less balanced, because in return for their sacrifices Europeans benefited from American protection. Since Donald Trump, however, NATO has been weaponised. In order to maintain that protection, the American president has demanded exorbitant commercial advantages, such as those conceded in the agreement signed by the president of the European Commission on the Turnberry golf course. Europeans are now being asked to pay for a protection guarantee which, by the admission of the man who gives it, is no more than a piece of paper. That is what one calls a rigged deal.

The other option for structuring European forces would have been to give full meaning to the provisions of the Treaty on European Union concerning Permanent Structured Cooperation. Yet this mechanism, activated in 2017, now bears little resemblance to its original intent. And even if it did, it would still remain within the Common Security and Defence Policy, that is to say in a framework distinct from collective defence and limited to crisis management.

There would also be the possibility for the European Council to declare "common defence" in accordance with Article 42.2 of the Treaty on European Union. But this would require unanimity among the Member States, which is unlikely ever to happen.

Finally, there is the third option: coalitions of the willing, whether for Ukraine or for maritime security in the Persian Gulf. Unfortunately, these coalitions are neither structured – and therefore produce no structural effect – nor permanent, since they can be broken at any time. More promising seems the path sketched out by the French and German governments at the Meseberg summit in 2018: a European Security and Defence Council taking decisions by qualified majority. That idea has regained force in recent years thanks to the impetus of the European

Commissioner for Defence, Andrius Kubilius. But for the moment it remains only an idea, to which the Member States have given no substance.

That brings us back to the most structurally significant proposal so far: the Nuclear Nine, mentioned in the context of the evolution of the advanced nuclear deterrence doctrine.

Conclusion: towards a European defence, the European way

For Europe to be protected from nuclear blackmail, it must necessarily include an autonomous nuclear component, even if final decision-making remains in the hands of a single country. But at the same time, European States must strengthen their conventional defence. That cannot be done in isolation. If European defence is to be effective, some degree of specialisation, pooling and therefore integration is indispensable. What remains to be found is the forum in which this integration can be achieved: NATO, the EU, or a Defence Eurogroup?

Beyond these requirements, we must recognise that the problem is no longer merely one of capability. The confrontation spills far beyond the military sphere. It targets systems and infrastructure: factories, refineries, communications, industry, finance and hospitals, all of which are both levers and targets. And beyond systems and infrastructure, it targets the very coherence of our societies, everywhere, all the time. There is no longer war or peace, no front or rear, but "a permanent state of alert". This is the "war without limits" referred to as early as 1999 by two Chinese colonels in a book that left a lasting impression.

In fact, the systematic destruction of enemy infrastructure by overwhelming force has shown its limits against a resilient society, both in Ukraine and in Iran. What predominates is total, constant conflict, and at its core the most insidious component of all: cognitive warfare, where the mind is the battlefield, perceptions are the target, and the national narrative becomes a weapon of mass destruction. Yet it is the very idea Europeans have of their own powerlessness that condemns them to powerlessness.

That is why a rupture is needed – a quantum leap towards a Europe that is a power in its own right. To that end, more important than weapons is the strategy that defines ends, ways and means. It is high time to put it into practice. ●