THE 2025 US NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY AND THE STRATEGIC REPOSITIONING OF EUROPE

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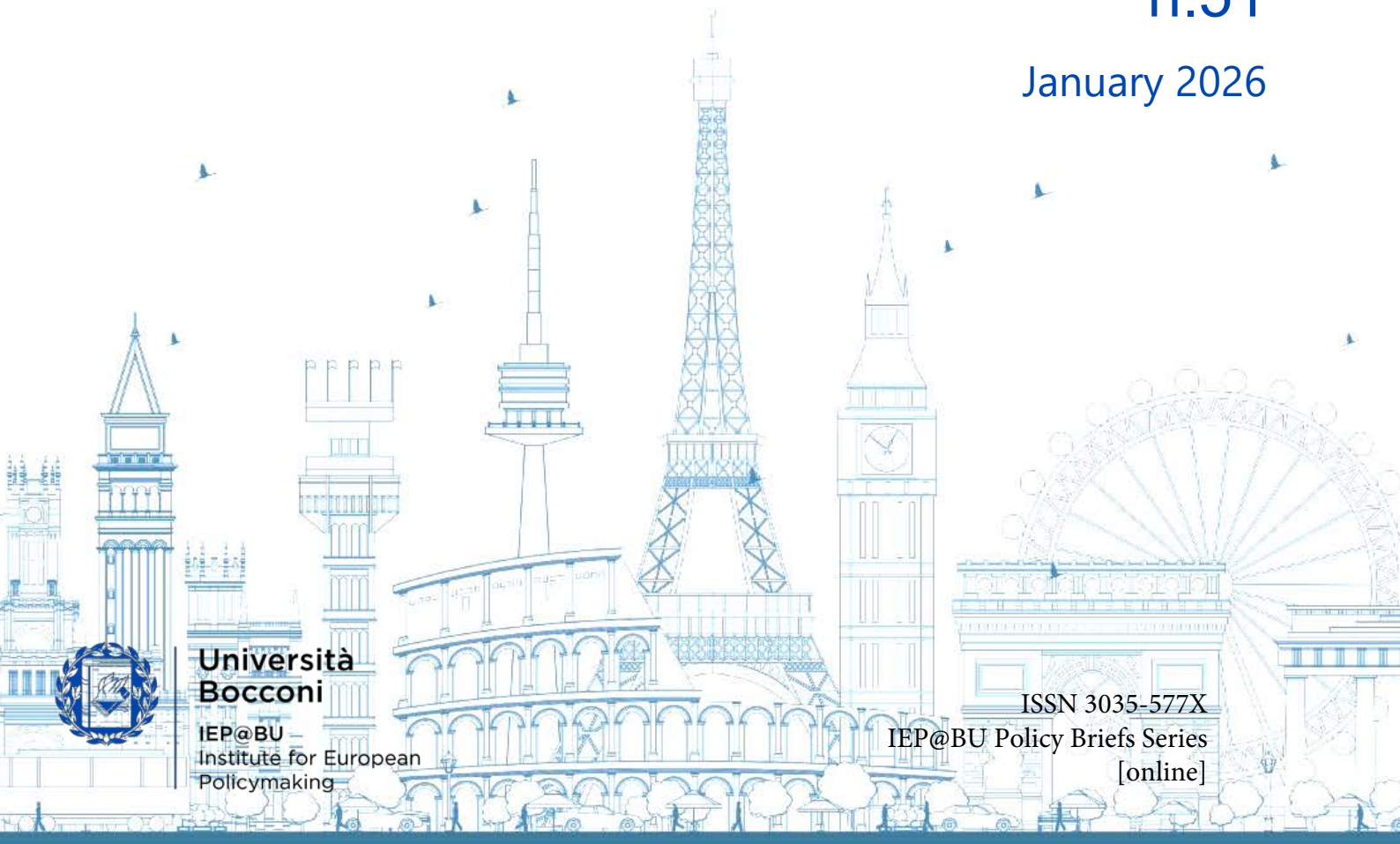

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The 2025 US National Security Strategy and the Strategic Repositioning of Europe

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Executive Summary

The 2025 United States National Security Strategy (NSS) marks a significant turning point in American global strategy and, therefore, in the architecture of the transatlantic relationships. This paper presents the core principles outlined in the Strategy and examines the ensuing consequences if the Strategy is implemented, with respect to the redefinition of NATO's role, and the strategic implications for Europe. The central objective of the Strategy is to reduce American global overextension and reallocate diplomatic, industrial and military resources toward the long-term structural competition with China. Within this framework, the United States expects Europe to become a provider of stability, rather than a consumer of security.

The US NSS clearly states that Europe remains vital for the US strategic interests, but not unconditionally. To that extent, it presents an assessment of Europe's internal vulnerabilities. It does so with two approaches: an ideological, ethnonationalist approach, echoing arguments of the MAGA movement, that comments on European 'civilizational erosion' and hints at meddling in the European values and the internal political process. This amounts to external interference in the EU democracies, and as such it cannot be accepted by the EU political system, potentially leading to an increased divide between the two areas.

Another interpretation however reads the NSS through the lens of a more hard-headed, power-based approach by the US. The latter starkly identifies economic stagnation, demographic decline, political fragmentation and institutional rigidity as structural weaknesses that undermine the Old Continent's articulation of policies. These weaknesses, according to the Strategy, prevent Europe to contribute to stability in the Eurasian continent, and therefore do not serve the US interest. For this reason, the NSS challenges Europe to undertake a profound transformation, so as to be able to contribute to global security within the Western alliance.

In the paper we posit that a similar pragmatic approach has to be adopted by the European Union, as there are no short-term alternatives to the alliance with the United States. We therefore discuss the conditions under which, in ways consistent with the new NSS, increased defence spending, technological alignment, industrial consolidation and strategic responsibility can, if governed effectively, generate a virtuous cycle of innovation, competitiveness and renewed political cohesion for Europe.

1. Introduction: a new phase in American strategy

The 2025 United States National Security Strategy (NSS) represents a decisive transition in the evolution of American grand strategy, marking a departure from the assumptions that dominated the post–Cold War era. For more than three decades, the United States operated under the conviction that its economic and military preeminence would remain essentially unchallenged. This belief sustained a model of global engagement characterised by extensive alliance commitments, expansive security guarantees, and an expectation that American leadership could maintain international order with relatively low political and economic costs. The new Strategy signals that such a model is no longer viable. It reflects a sober reassessment of structural shifts in the international system and of the changing balance between America's global ambitions and its domestic capacities.

The first fundamental change concerns the recognition that American power, while still unrivalled in aggregate terms, is now confronted by structural competitors. The rise of China is presented as the central organising fact of contemporary geopolitics. China's growing technological capabilities, industrial scale, diplomatic reach, and military modernisation have created a peer competitor able to challenge American influence across multiple domains.[2] The Strategy identifies this rivalry not as temporary divergence but as a long-term systemic competition. For the United States to preserve strategic advantage, it must reallocate resources toward the Indo-Pacific, strengthen industrial capacity at home, and adjust international commitments to reduce the strain on its capabilities. The Strategy also commits the US to a "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine, denying hostile extra-hemispheric powers influence, protecting strategic assets, and countering instability, mass migration, and transnational criminal networks in the Americas, an area considered under the traditional sphere of influence of the United States.[3]

The second structural change concerns the transformation of the international order itself. The relatively stable hierarchy that followed the Cold War has been affected by the uneven economic developments brought about by globalization, and thus has fragmented into a more complex, multipolar landscape[4]. Middle powers have gained market shares and hence agency, regional institutions have multiplied, and technological interdependence has undermined traditional models of deterrence and influence[5]. Within this environment, the American capacity to manage multiple theatres simultaneously has diminished. The US Strategy acknowledges that the United States cannot indefinitely sustain open-ended commitments in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia while simultaneously rebuilding its domestic technological base[6].

This recognition leads to a third change: the redefinition of alliances. The NSS moves beyond the traditional emphasis on shared values and principles that characterised earlier documents and

[2] Friedberg, A.L. 2011, A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia, W.W. Norton, New York; Allison, G. 2017, Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston.
[3] The recent, controversial intervention of the US in Venezuela can be read under this lens.
[4] Goldin, I. & Mariathasan, M. 2014, The Butterfly Defect: How Globalization Creates Systemic Risks and What to Do About It, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
[5] Kupchan, C.A. 2012, No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn, Oxford University Press, New York.
[6] Posen, B.R. 2014, Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

presents alliances purely as functional and performance-based arrangements, in line with the transactional character of the current US presidency. Allies are not viewed primarily as members of a political community, but as partners that can contribute to common strategic outcomes.

This implies that the value of an ally is not determined by its historical affinity or shared values, but by the capacity to deliver meaningful security, technological, or economic support. Europe, in particular, is not considered anymore by the US as an unconditional strategic asset, but as an asset that remains strategic as long as it is willing to assume responsibility for its own defence and internal resilience.

The repositioning of alliances, and the inability of the US to sustain global commitments, in turn lead to a broader reinterpretation of American interests.

The Strategy asserts that the United States must concentrate national power in areas where strategic advantage is contested. These include advanced manufacturing, semiconductors, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, space capabilities, cyber resilience, and critical infrastructure protection.

The prioritisation of these domains reflects a shift from traditional military predominance toward integrated national power, where economic, technological, and industrial strength are as important as military capacity. The concentration of resources in these sectors requires the reduction of military commitments elsewhere, especially in regions where allies are capable of assuming greater responsibility.

To that extent, Europe occupies a central place in the US NSS.[7] The Strategy does not advocate American withdrawal from the continent. Rather, it frames continued engagement as conditional on Europe's performance. The US is prepared to remain the leading strategic partner, but this partnership must evolve into a more symmetrical distribution of burdens.

The implication is clear: Europe must act as a stabilised region within the general Eurasia context, capable of ensuring its own security and stability with respect to Russia, reducing internal vulnerabilities as well as external dependencies on China, and supporting American strategic priorities without requiring disproportionate US investment. As American strategy must adapt to the realities of competition with a technologically capable peer, the latter requires allies to assume greater responsibilities, not as a favour to the United States but as a collective necessity for maintaining the stability of the Western system.

Looking at the Strategy in historical perspectives, it is not the first time that the US redefines its relation with respect to its allies. In fact, the evolution of American strategy over the past fifty years offers important analogies that help clarify both the meaning and the magnitude of the present change.

One of the clearest historical parallels is the strategic reorientation initiated under the Nixon administration. In the early 1970s, the United States recognised that it could no longer sustain unlimited commitments without imposing severe costs on its own economy and political stability. The

[7] "Europe remains strategically and culturally vital to the United States. […] we can not afford to write Europe off—doing so would be self-defeating for what this strategy aims to achieve.", US NSS; p. 26.

Nixon Doctrine sought to rebalance these commitments by requiring regional allies to assume greater responsibility for their own security. The intention was not withdrawal but redistribution of burdens.

Today's strategic shift reflects a similar logic, though applied in a radically different geopolitical environment. Where the Nixon administration sought to stabilise Cold War regions to allow the United States to recover strategically, the current transformation seeks to stabilise Europe so that the United States may concentrate on competition with China, while, at the same time, avoiding that Europe itself, out of its own weakness, does not increase its dependencies on China.

Another important analogy concerns the Reagan era. During the 1980s, American strategy combined renewed investments in military capability with pressure on allies to strengthen their own defence posture. The logic was that Western security required not only American leadership but also allied capacity, and in fact in those years European spending on defence increased to almost 3% of GDP. The current strategy echoes this idea, but with a crucial difference. Whereas in the 1980s American engagement was expanding, today the United States seeks to avoid overextension. The expectation that allies pay more is no longer about strengthening a common offensive posture, but about sustaining a distributed defensive arrangement in which regional actors play a larger role.

A third historical reference comes from the post-Cold War period. After 1989, Europe was viewed as a potential pole of stability capable of assuming greater responsibility for its own region. The hope was that economic integration, democratic consolidation and institutional cooperation would create a European actor capable of contributing to global governance. However, while the European Union along with the US amply fulfilled its role in economic governance, it never fully developed the instruments that would have been necessary for a structural contribution to global security.

The current situation can thus be interpreted as a return to the unfinished historical project of a common security and defence capability for the continent: Europe is once again encouraged (someone could say forced) to act as a credible and consistent stabilising force in the Eurasian context.

Such a role entrusted to Europe is essential for the United States to concentrate resources elsewhere; yet, European current vulnerabilities risk diverting American attention and resources. The 2025 Strategy therefore frames Europe not only as a partner, but also as a strategic challenge. It must evolve from a region dependent on American security guarantees into a self-sufficient pillar of Western stability. This is the conceptual foundation upon which the European section of the Strategy is built.

2. Europe as a Vulnerable Strategic Space

The 2025 United States National Security Strategy presents a comprehensive assessment of Europe's internal condition and concludes that the continent's primary strategic vulnerabilities stem not from external threats but from internal fragilities. This diagnosis represents a major departure from earlier American strategies, which tended to view Europe primarily through the lens of external security challenges.

The new Strategy argues that Europe's internal weaknesses undermine its ability to act as a coherent strategic actor, and thus limit its capacity to support the broader goals of the Western

alliance. In particular the NSS foresees a prospect of 'civilizational erasure' in Europe, due to the role of the EU and other transnational bodies 'that undermine political liberty and sovereignty, migration policies that are transforming the continent and creating strife, censorship of free speech and suppression of political opposition' (NSS, p. 25).

While this is certainly not the first time that the US explicitly advocates some interference in the internal affairs of a country (and the very recent case of Venezuela is testimony of this attitude), it is remarkable that the US Government seems considering, in the case of Europe, a potential political-value meddling in the internal democratic processes of European allies, through a civilizational narrative (immigration, free speech, "cultural erosion") that is not limited to a geopolitical logic of spheres of influence, but introduces a dimension of judgment and legitimacy of internal political actors. Such an attitude has been spelled out by Vice-President Vance during the Munich Security Conference last February, introducing in the US Security Strategy an ideological and ethnonationalist component, typical of the MAGA movement's narrative. Also remarkable is the fact that, in the US document, Europe is the only area in the world for which such a direct political influence is considered, something that is now excluded for other countries that in the past have traditionally received pressures in the name of democracy and freedom.[8] The latter makes the European case qualitatively different from traditional US claims of influence in other regions: interference among formally sovereign but democratically consolidated allies undermines the very premise of alliance cohesion, which rests on mutual recognition of domestic political legitimacy rather than on hierarchical control.

As a result, one potential interpretation of the US strategy is that the blatant interference in the European political process, with the view of encouraging the emergence of nationalist States run by conservative or radical right Governments, is the tool that could better serve the US interests in the area, when compared to the inefficiencies attributed to the process of European integration.

Under this reading, this section of the US Security Strategy is clearly unacceptable by European democracies, and has led many to consider the US-EU alliance a memory of the past, as the two countries do not seem to share any more the same democratic values. Moreover, on top of being politically unpalatable as European values are non-negotiable, such a strategy risks of being very short sighted: if a sort of 'autonomous' stability in the region is the final US goal, contributing to dissolve the European Union favouring the re-emergence of nationalist European States hardly falls in the category of smart ideas.

Hence, we prefer to lean toward an alternative reading of the US strategy, stemming from a more down- to-earth, power-based view. In this sense, the reference to 'civilizational erasure' should not be considered in cultural or ideological terms, but rather as the pragmatic risk that the EU societies, over time, experience a deterioration of their political process and thus become not capable of preserving their values, defending their interests, and shaping their future.

The loss of such enforcement power, according to the Strategy, inhibits in Europe the political willingness to accept risks, invest in defence, and confront geopolitical scenarios with clear and transparent messages. As a result, Europe is unable to autonomously ensure stability in the region,

[8] The Strategy, for examples, states that 'The key to successful relations with the Middle East is accepting the region, its leaders, and its nations as they are, while working together on areas of common interest.' (p. 28).

let alone to project security in its neighborhood, in particular Eastern Europe and the South Mediterranean. But this situation ultimately undermines American interests, which should concentrate resources in other areas. Hence the raw power-based view on Europe.

It is indeed likely that the NSS incorporates, as in other policy dossiers, both views of the current US administration, one more entrenched in the ideology of the MAGA movement, the other stemming from a utilitarian approach of the US traditional conservatives.

For these reasons we argue that Europe should react differently to the two messages. On the one hand, there has to be (and there has been) a strong European reaction to the idea of the US institutions and platforms meddling into the EU democratic process, flirting with ideas of European far-right parties, potentially aligning US interests with Russia, and undermining core values on which the European social model has been built. On the other hand, the legitimate European reaction to the US strategy should not obscure the substance of the critique that the Security Strategy moves to the Old Continent in terms of its ability (or inability) to autonomously guarantee stability and security in the area.

It then follows that, while acknowledging the ideological distance with the current US administration, a pragmatic approach should be adopted by the European Union, reckoning that there are no short-term alternatives to the alliance with the United States in terms of security. In what follows we investigate the implications of this latter reading.

A central theme of the NSS' assessment is indeed related to the European economic decline, and the negative spillovers this generates for the US strategic interests. Over the past fifteen years, Europe has experienced slower productivity growth than the US and a persistent inability to scale high-technology industries.[9]

Key sectors such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and advanced manufacturing remain fragmented and under-capitalised. These weaknesses are attributed to structural regulations, high energy costs, fragmented capital markets, and the absence of a unified industrial strategy.

Current demographic trends, with Europe's population ageing rapidly and a shrinking labour force in many member States, complicate the situation further. An ageing population reduces economic dynamism, strains welfare systems, and therefore complicates long-term planning and expenditure for defence and national security.

The combination of all these factors contributes to the erosion of Europe's economic resilience, limiting its ability to sustain high levels of domestic investment, including defence (a large chunk of European savings in the range of hundreds of billions of euros is invested every year in the US). As a result, Europe contributes to a growing balance of payment imbalance between the two shores of the Atlantic, while undermining its ability to guarantee security in the Continent, again at the detriment of US strategic interests.

Fragmented political governance represents another dimension of European vulnerability. The continent has witnessed increasing polarisation, the rise of anti-establishment parties, and recurring

[9] Eichengreen, B. 2007, The European Economy Since 1945: Coordinated Capitalism and Beyond, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ and Draghi, M. (2024), The future of European competitiveness, Brussels.

tensions between national governments and supranational institutions (and lately also within supranational institutions). The difficulty of coordinating policy across twenty-seven EU member states, with the unanimity rule in key areas related to defence and security, limits Europe's ability to respond effectively to crises or to pursue long-term strategic planning. The resulting institutional rigidity is seen by the US NSS as a barrier to adaptation in an era that demands flexibility and rapid decision making if Western security has to be preserved.

These internal vulnerabilities interact with one another and create a cumulative negative effect. Economic stagnation weakens political cohesion, political fragmentation undermines institutional authority, and demographic pressures intensify social tensions. Together, these dynamics reduce Europe's ability to guarantee stability at its borders and to influence global events, thereby increasing dependence on the United States at a moment when Washington seeks to reduce such commitments.

The NSS does not deny that Europe maintains significant strengths. The continent remains one of the largest economic areas in the world, possesses advanced educational systems, hosts world-class research institutions, and benefits from a long tradition of innovation in sectors such as aerospace, automotive, and renewable energy. However, these strengths are insufficiently mobilised in support of geopolitical objectives. The Strategy argues that Europe's challenge is not a lack of capacity, but the inability to translate existing resources into strategic capability.

For the United States, the implications of Europe's internal vulnerabilities are twofold. The first is the risk that Europe will remain dependent on American security guarantees, forcing the United States to divert resources from the Indo Pacific. The second is the concern that internal fragmentation will limit Europe's ability to act coherently, increasing its dependencies with China, and thus weakening the Western alliance as a whole. In this sense, Europe's stability is a prerequisite for American strategic flexibility.

The 2025 Strategy therefore frames Europe as a vulnerable strategic space. This vulnerability is not necessarily presented only as a (deplorable) judgment on Europe's historical trajectory, but as a pragmatic reality that must be addressed if the continent is to remain a credible partner in the years ahead.

Europe must confront internal fragilities, rebuild economic and technological strength, restore institutional legitimacy, and cultivate a renewed sense of collective purpose. Only through such a transformation Europe can fulfil the concrete, value-adding role now expected by the US for all its partners.

3. From Burden Sharing to Burden Shifting

Beyond the internal judgement on Europe, the 2025 National Security Strategy also points at a conceptual transformation in the way the United States now understands its international relations, particularly as far as Europe is concerned. For decades, the transatlantic security framework rested on the idea of burden sharing. According to this principle, although the United States would remain the primary provider of security, European states were expected to contribute proportionally to common defence efforts.

In particular, the United States provided extended deterrence, strategic depth, nuclear guarantees, intelligence, and rapid deployment capabilities.[10] European allies in turn were to maintain land forces and territorial surveillance, offering military bases and support to US armed forces, under American leadership. After the end of the Cold War, European states further reduced defence spending, relying on what many scholars have termed a security dividend. Washington tolerated this tendency for many years, partly because American capabilities remained unmatched, and partly because European integration was viewed as a political project that was functional to the required regional stability. This delicate balance was not so easy to implement, with some clashes over time within the NATO headquarters, but the logic of burden sharing ultimately was always reinstated, and with that the idea that American engagement was structurally indispensable.

The Strategy now seems to depart from this assumption, and advances a new paradigm, i.e. burden shifting. This shift is not semantic, as it redefines the strategic foundations of the European security order. In this sense, burden shifting should not be interpreted as a binary alternative to burden sharing, nor as a formal abandonment of NATO commitments. Rather, it describes a gradual redefinition of operational baselines, whereby Europe is expected to act as the primary guarantor and first responder in its own theatre, while US engagement becomes increasingly conditional and strategically selective.

Burden shifting assumes that Europe must develop the capability to defend itself independently of the United States.[11] The United States does not withdraw its commitment, but it no longer treats European underperformance as acceptable. Burden shifting therefore places responsibility on Europe, not for fairness or symbolism, but because American strategic priorities have changed. The long-term challenge posed by China requires the United States to concentrate diplomatic, military, and industrial capacities. A European theatre that remains dependent on American resources would impede this strategic reallocation.

This shift in paradigm implies a transformation of the transatlantic contract. Under the new paradigm, Europe is no longer insulated from hard power considerations. Defence becomes central to its political identity, economic planning, and international posture. As a result, a significantly higher level of sustained investment is no longer considered a flexible political choice but an essential condition for European strategic credibility, with an emphasis on long-term security commitment, similar to the period of the Cold War, rather than temporary increases in security spending as a response to crises.

A second transformation concerns capability generation. The emphasis is not merely on spending more, but on spending effectively. European states should address long-standing capability gaps in areas such as air defence, long-range strike, cyber resilience, and strategic mobility. These gaps limit Europe's ability to respond to crises autonomously and force the United States to fill operational deficits.

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[10] Schelling, T.C. 1966, Arms and Influence, Yale University Press, New Haven.
[11] Reuters recently reported that, according to sources in the Pentagon, the US is pressuring allies in Europe to take over the bulk of NATO defence responsibilities on the Continent no later than 2027. https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/us-sets-2027-deadline-europe-led-nato-defense-officials-say-2025-12-05/

A third transformation concerns industrial capacity. Burden shifting requires Europe to rebuild its defence industrial base, increasing production capacity, investing in innovation, and strengthening supply chains. This includes expanding munitions manufacturing, increasing stockpiles, and integrating industrial planning across borders. The goal is not simply to equip European forces but to create a resilient industrial ecosystem capable of sustaining prolonged operations.

A fourth transformation concerns political responsibility. Burden shifting implies that Europe must articulate a coherent strategic vision. Fragmentation among European states undermines the credibility of the continent as a security actor. Europe should therefore enhance political cohesion, improve decision making structures, and assume leadership in regional crises.

Some observers have already interpreted the new burden shifting approach depicted in the US NSS as a sign of American disengagement. This interpretation is not accurate. As already quoted, within the new Strategy 'Europe remains strategically and culturally vital to the United States' (NSS, p. 26), but the US commitment is now conditional. American engagement depends on Europe's willingness to invest in its own defence and to act as a stabilising force.

From a theoretical perspective, one could say that burden shifting reflects a return to the classical logic of balance of power politics. According to this logic, regions should be stabilised by local actors, while great powers (the US and China, by reading the NSS) should concentrate their resources on systemic challenges. By encouraging Europe to assume responsibility for its own stability, the United States aligns the transatlantic relationship with this principle.

The result is a more sustainable distribution of burdens, one that acknowledges the limits of American power while strengthening Western resilience. In the eyes of the United States, burden shifting therefore represents neither disengagement nor abandonment. Rather, it is a strategic recalibration designed to preserve American global leadership in an era of systemic rivalry.

The changed US framework presents Europe, and the EU in particular, with three options. The first is to miss (voluntarily or due to political disagreements) the level of engagement required by the new US Strategy, either as a region or by individual member States, as the US is now seen as a country which pursues different interests and values from the EU. At that stage the US might announce a formal disengagement from the NATO alliance or, worse, commit to protect only those European countries that have acted in line with their requests, or that they consider more politically aligned. This scenario is conducive to a dissolution of the European Union over the next years, with all the economic, social and political consequences this entails for the continent.

The second option is for the EU to progress decisively and quickly in its level of political integration, including defence and security, well beyond what is portrayed in the US Security Strategy, i.e. turning the Continent into a third autonomous world power, beside China and the US. A new global actor based on democracy, freedom and respect for the multilateral rule of law, able not only to ensure stability within its region (that is, the US request), but also with the capability to project security in its neighborhood, and thus a player to which other countries in the world could look with interest, potentially forging new alliances. This is certainly a desirable outcome, but it is not too realistic in the short term, also given the likely opposition of the US.

The third option for Europe is to transform the recalibration of the US strategy into an opportunity for renewal. If Europe succeeds in investing in defence, rebuilding industrial capacity, and cultivating political cohesion, it will emerge as a stronger and more autonomous partner, capable of contributing meaningfully to the preservation of stability, within a reframed NATO alliance. Interestingly, this

amounts to enforcing selected parts of the Draghi and Letta agendas, through a roadmap that has been largely spelled out within the political debate. In what follows we explore this last option in details, starting with the implications for the NATO alliance.

4. NATO's Transformation: From Expansion to Functional Consolidation

The change in the US strategy, from burden sharing to burden shifting, has profound implications for the NATO alliance. The latter traditionally has symbolised not only military cooperation but also a shared political identity. For decades, NATO enlargement was seen as an instrument of stability and a means of integrating post Cold War Europe into a democratic and cooperative security framework. The 2025 US NSS introduces a significant shift in this understanding. It suggests that continuous enlargement is no longer the most effective mechanism for ensuring stability. Instead, it emphasises functional consolidation, operational coherence, and capability development.

This transformation begins with a reassessment of the strategic environment. The post Cold War assumption that expanding NATO would automatically generate stability clearly no longer holds. Enlargement brings benefits, including increased political alignment and geographical depth. However, if the alliance has to be considered credible, enlargement also creates obligations. Each new member requires defence planning, logistics, intelligence coordination, and, in some cases, reassurance measures. These obligations demand resources and attention, which the US can no longer guarantee, especially in a context in which the alliance faces multiple threats, including hybrid warfare, cyber-attacks, terrorism, and destabilisation attempts by state and non-state actors.[12] In this context, a further enlargement is likely to outpace the US capability development, and thus the alliance risks becoming overstretched. Hence NATO must evolve in response to this reality.

In other words, NATO remains a key component of Western security for the US, but its role must adapt to the new strategic requirement in which the US resources have become constrained and focused on the Indo Pacific. The United States is likely to continue to view NATO as essential for deterring aggression in Europe, at least as long as European allies are able to assume a greater share of this responsibility. American forces will remain present, but Europe must be the principal guarantor of its own defence. Hence the priority is no longer to extend membership, but to strengthen cohesion, so that existing European members are autonomously capable to preserve security in the Continent. This involves improving operational readiness, integrated planning, and the interoperability of the systems, through functional consolidation. The latter has several dimensions.

A first dimension concerns military coherence. NATO remains a diverse alliance with differing threat perceptions, capabilities, and political cultures. Functional consolidation requires harmonising these differences through common planning, shared procurement, and integrated command structures. The goal is to create a force posture that is flexible, adaptive, and capable of responding to complex threats.

[12] Lanoszka, A. 2022, Military Alliances in the Twenty-First Century, Polity Press, Cambridge.

A second dimension concerns capability development. NATO's ability to deter aggression depends on specific capabilities, including air and missile defence, cyber operations, long-range strike, and robust logistics networks. Many of these capabilities are unevenly distributed across member states. Functional consolidation requires targeted investment in these areas, as well as coordinated industrial strategies.

A third dimension concerns political cohesion. NATO decisions require consensus. In recent years, divisions among allies have complicated the alliance's decision-making process. Functional consolidation seeks to strengthen political unity by aligning strategic priorities, clarifying responsibilities, and establishing more efficient mechanisms for consultation.

The change in the US attitude is likely to reflect also a shift in the logic of deterrence. During the Cold War, the United States maintained substantial forces in Europe to signal its commitment to the defence of the Continent. Today, deterrence relies less on permanent deployments and more on the ability to mobilise rapidly, integrate forces, and sustain operations.

This shift places greater emphasis on European logistical capabilities (which is an historical weak point) and reinforces the logic of burden shifting. The latter brings along the importance of technological interoperability. NATO's ability to operate as a unified military instrument depends on compatible systems, communications platforms, and standards. Technological fragmentation undermines operational effectiveness. Functional consolidation requires investment in shared technologies, joint development programmes, and integrated digital systems. This is particularly important in areas such as cyber defence, artificial intelligence, space operations, and advanced surveillance.

Another important area affected by the new NSS is the approach to partnerships. NATO has developed extensive networks of partnerships with countries outside the alliance. These partnerships provide political support, intelligence cooperation, and regional engagement. It is likely that partnerships will remain important, as long as they are aligned with the priorities of functional consolidation. Partnerships that enhance capability development and regional stability are encouraged. Partnerships without strategic value will likely be de-prioritised.

Given the above, it follows that the relationship between NATO and the European Union needs to be revisited. While the two institutions have distinct mandates, their security responsibilities would increasingly overlap if Europe follows along the goals set out by the US NSS. At the same time in the new scenario the European Union is likely to request an autonomous decision capability if security must be co-produced. Hence a deeper coordination is required between NATO as such, and an EU arm of NATO, with a new division of responsibilities particularly in areas such as capability development, cyber security, and military mobility, with the related changes in the governance of the alliance.

In summary, NATO's transformation from expansion to functional consolidation represents a major evolution in the alliance's identity and purpose. It reflects the need to adapt to new strategic realities and to create a more balanced distribution of responsibilities within the Western security architecture, starting with a new, strengthened role for the European Union within the alliance, to which we not turn.

5. Technology, Industrial Policy and Defence: Europe Inside NATO

Discussing an enhanced role of Europe within the Western security architecture, starting with NATO, implies not only improving European military capabilities, but also the ability to control critical technologies, shape industrial ecosystems and secure supply chains.

To understand this shift, it is important to consider how technology has become a central domain of geopolitical competition. Advances in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, semiconductor design, space systems and cyber capabilities have transformed the nature of power. States that control these technologies gain strategic advantages that extend beyond traditional military domains. The US NSS recognises that technological leadership underpins national security, economic prosperity and diplomatic influence. Consequently, the United States seeks to consolidate a technological alliance system capable of countering rivals, while strategic disengagement from critical dependencies vs. rivals, in particular in the field of energy and critical materials.

Europe is acknowledged by the US Strategy to be an essential component of this system. Despite its internal challenges, Europe possesses advanced scientific institutions, innovative companies and a sophisticated industrial base. At the same time, the Strategy argues that these strengths are undermined by fragmentation, slow decision making and vulnerability to external dependencies. Hence the United States encourages Europe to overcome these obstacles and integrate more deeply into a coordinated Western technological framework.

A key element of this framework is supply chain security. The US is already acting to reduce reliance on geopolitical competitors for critical inputs such as rare earth minerals, semiconductors, pharmaceuticals and energy technologies (e.g. the Defence Production Act), while Europe's dependence on external suppliers creates vulnerabilities that could be exploited during crises. In this area the EU has started to move along similar directions, through the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) and the new RESourceEU Action Plan, aiming to boost domestic extraction, processing, and recycling, diversify supply chains via partnerships, and fast-track strategic projects with €3 billion funding.[13]

Another component of strategically resilient value chains is export control coordination. The United States views export controls as a tool for preventing strategic technologies from flowing to rivals.[14] These controls encompass semiconductors, advanced manufacturing equipment, AI systems and dual use technologies, and have been heavily used with respect to China. Under many occasions the US government has clarified that it expects Europe to adopt similar controls, in order to ensure cohesion within the Western technological bloc. This alignment is not merely regulatory but strategic as, in the US views, it creates a unified approach to managing global technology flows and prevents fragmentation among Western allies.

Here the position of Europe is more nuanced, also given the high level of interconnections it has with third countries, and China.[15] The risk is that the imposition of export restrictions by the EU, currently

[13] Fiott, D. 2024, Beyond Strategy? Industrial Strategy and the Future of European Defence, Real Instituto Elcano, Madrid.
[14] Brands, H. 2018, American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC.
[15] In particular, Germany, not by chance singled out in the NSS as a problematic case: 'The Ukraine War has had the perverse effect of increasing Europe's, especially Germany's, external dependencies. Today, German chemical companies are building some of the world's largest processing plants in China, using Russian gas that they cannot obtain at home.'

the largest trading partner in the world, might generate a series of protectionist reactions in a large part of the international trading system, ultimately creating serious consequences to the very same working of value chains, and in general the global economy. It then follows that on these issues the US and the EU should carefully coordinate their actions.

Another key element for an integrated security strategy in Europe is related to industrial policy. In order to reduce dependencies from third countries, Europe has to adopt industrial strategies that support technological leadership. This includes investing in research and development, promoting public private partnerships, reforming regulatory systems and fostering innovation ecosystems. Industrial policy must be forward looking, adaptive and capable of responding to technological shifts. And realistically, in order to be successful, in the short to medium term the policy has to be carried out in cooperation with the United States, at least as far as access to advanced digital technologies is concerned.

The latter immediately raises the issue of European technological sovereignty. For years, Europe has debated how to reduce dependence on the United States (in particular with respect to digital platforms) and China (for critical raw materials). The new US NSS reframes this debate. It suggests that factual sovereignty requires integration into a secure Western technological bloc, rather than fragmentation into isolated national or regional systems. This reflects yet another shift in the nature of alliances, which are no longer defined solely by security guarantees but also by shared technological and industrial systems. This interconnectedness deepens interdependence and strengthens collective resilience, and Europe's participation in these systems is essential, in the US view, for maintaining the competitiveness of the Western world.

In other words, according to this view, strategic autonomy is possible only if Europe develops the capabilities necessary to act independently when required. But the latter does not mean distancing from the United States. Rather, in the eyes of the US, it implies becoming a more credible partner capable of contributing meaningfully to collective security.

This is clearly a potentially controversial issue within European Member States. Europe must balance the desire for autonomy with the practical need for security. It must navigate internal political debates regarding regulation, industrial policy and data governance. It must confront the tension between open markets and strategic protectionism. These challenges require careful political management and long-term strategic planning, especially at the time in which the funding of defence-related technologies is going to increase.

At the heart of the new role envisaged by the US NSS for Europe, there is also a sustained investment in defence, a request that has already resonated very clearly in the interactions between the Trump administration and European leaders over the recent months. The challenge here is to set up a new defence cycle that could serve as a catalyst for Europe's long delayed economic and industrial transformation, strengthening both European sovereignty and the transatlantic partnership.

Europe has developed over the last months a wider set of instruments to sustain long-term investment in security and resilience, including flexible fiscal mechanisms, coordinated procurement

(NSS, p. 26)

frameworks and programmes that integrate defence policy with research, innovation and industrial development. These developments create conditions in which increased defence spending can advance not only military capability but also Europe's technological and economic modernisation.

Fiscal rules constitute a first area of adaptation. The revised Stability and Growth Pact provides Member States with greater room for medium-term adjustment and retains escape clauses for exceptional circumstances. Defence spending, which requires multiannual stability and predictable investment cycles, is better accommodated within this framework. This supports the integration of defence expenditure into broader strategies for industrial capacity-building and technological innovation.

A second area concerns the emergence of common financial and operational platforms at the European level. Initiatives inspired by the Safety Actions for Europe (SAFE) approach, originally developed in EU research and resilience policy, now inform several domains of security and defence cooperation. These include programmes that support cross-border procurement, joint development of capabilities and integrated planning for crisis preparedness. Recent decisions (Council of the EU 2025[16]) by the Council to finance large-scale joint procurement packages, along with the Commission's use of structured financing instruments, illustrate how the SAFE logic has gradually evolved into a set of European-level tools designed to improve interoperability, strengthen supply security and generate economies of scale.

A third area of action relates to the restructuring of Europe's defence-industrial value chains following the war in Ukraine. The conflict exposed structural constraints in ammunition production, surge capacity, component availability and access to critical materials. This has led to renewed efforts to diversify inputs, reinforce production nodes, selectively relocate sensitive manufacturing processes and harmonise procurement standards. Such measures do not merely address immediate shortages but contribute to the establishment of a more resilient and technologically advanced industrial ecosystem in fields such as aerospace, robotics, cyber security and advanced materials. In particular, the European Union has already adopted a EU's defence industrial strategy (EDIS) in March 2024, with the aim to boost Europe's defence production, reduce foreign reliance, and enhance security through common procurement and increased investment by 2035. The strategy has led to the implementation of the EDIP (European Defence Industry Programme) in late 2025, a €1.5 billion fund for joint projects.

Within this environment, defence investment becomes a driver of innovation. Historically, defence procurement has stimulated advances in materials science, electronics, communications technologies and cyber capabilities. Increased investment also promotes the expansion of specialised training, engineering skills and applied research, thereby contributing to a stronger European knowledge base. These effects extend beyond the defence sector, supporting competitiveness in strategic civilian industries and reducing Europe's dependence on external suppliers.

16 https://www.consilium.europa.eu/it/press/press-releases/2025/05/27/safe-council-adopts-150-billion-boost-for-joint-procurement-on-european-security-and-defence/

The strategic and political implications are significant. Joint procurement initiatives, integrated research programmes and cross-border production clusters foster institutional convergence among Member States and strengthen the Union's capacity to act collectively. They also contribute to a more coherent European defence posture, provided that governance structures are effective. Without harmonised standards, streamlined procedures and sustained commitments, increased spending may perpetuate fragmentation rather than enhancing collective capability.

Finally, and related to the area of security at large, digital infrastructure is another critical domain for Europe. Secure communication networks, data protection, cloud computing and artificial intelligence require robust technological foundations. Here Europe has to work in order to strengthen cyber resilience, protect critical infrastructure and adopt standards that enhance security. This is particularly important given the increasing sophistication of cyber threats and the expansion of digital warfare. Connected to that, research and education also play a central role. The United States views scientific collaboration as an asset, but it encourages Europe to invest more heavily in advanced degrees, research laboratories and innovation clusters. Attracting global talent, retaining researchers and fostering innovation ecosystems are essential for competing with technologically advanced rivals.[17]

In conclusion, the Strategy's vision for technology and industrial policy places Europe within a coordinated Western framework. It challenges Europe to overcome internal fragmentation, reduce dependencies and invest in innovation. It presents an opportunity for Europe to revitalise its industrial base, enhance technological sovereignty and strengthen its role in the global security environment, once sustained cooperation with the US can be trusted by European countries.

6. Implications for European Integration

In light of the above, it is clear that the new Security Strategy of the US has profound implications for the process of European integration, starting with the greater responsibility placed on Europe for its own security and stability. This shift challenges existing assumptions within the European Union and forces a reconsideration of the relationship between national sovereignty, supranational institutions and collective strategic capacity.

European integration has historically been driven by economic objectives, regulatory harmonisation and the desire to prevent conflict within the continent. Defence and security have remained secondary domains, largely delegated to NATO and dependent on American leadership, deterrence and resources. The new strategic environment, however, demands that Europe reconsider this division of labour. Defence, technology and industrial policy are no longer peripheral issues. They are central to Europe's political identity and its capacity to act in the world. But as a former British Chancellor of the Exchequer put it during a debate on financing European defence back in the early 2000s, 'common financing of defence amounts to nation building'.

[17] Gilli, A., Gilli, M. and Petrelli, N. (2024) Vegetius: Critical Questions for European Defense. Policy Brief No. 31, Institute for European Policymaking (IEP), Bocconi University. https://iep.unibocconi.eu/publications/policy-briefs/policy-brief-n-31-vegetius-critical-questions-european-defense

Hence, a first implication concerns the balance between national sovereignty and supranational authority. The Strategy encourages European states to assume responsibility for their own defence, which reinforces national sovereignty. At the same time, effective defence requires coordination, scale and interoperability that can only be achieved through some form of collective governance. This creates a potential tension between national autonomy and European integration. Member states must navigate this tension by developing a model of integrated sovereignty in which responsibilities are shared without undermining democratic legitimacy. The current revamping of the debate on the unanimity principle within the EU is a direct product of this underlying tension. From a US perspective, a 'European', rather than national, strategic autonomy is not rejected per se, but tolerated only insofar as it remains functionally compatible with American primacy in key technological, industrial and regulatory domains. Autonomy is encouraged in the provision of regional security, but constrained when it risks producing a fully independent pole of power.

A second implication concerns institutional capacity. The European Union has gradually expanded its competences, but defence remains primarily in the hands of member states. The NSS's expectations force the Union to confront the limits of its institutional architecture. Europe must develop mechanisms to coordinate defence spending, harmonise capability development and integrate industrial planning. These tasks require new governance structures, greater political will and more flexible decision-making processes.

A third implication concerns political cohesion. The Strategy exposes divisions within Europe regarding threat perceptions, strategic priorities and relations with global powers. Eastern European states tend to prioritise deterrence against Russia, while Western states often emphasise diplomacy and economic engagement. Southern states, facing migration and instability in the Mediterranean, have different priorities. The relation with China is also approached with different nuances by different Member States. All these divergences complicate collective action. It then follows that in order to meet the expectations of the Strategy, Europe must develop a common strategic narrative that bridges these divides.

A fourth implication involves industrial integration. Europe's defence-industrial base is fragmented across national borders. Companies compete for limited domestic markets, and procurement decisions are often influenced by national political considerations. As already described by the Draghi report, the ecosystem of the defence industry in Europe, fragmented across a multitude of relatively small players, is similar to the one of the US at the end of the 80s, before a wave of mergers and acquisitions created five large industrial contractors operating in the defence sector (Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, General Dynamics, Boeing, and Northrop Grumman).[18] Industrial integration in Europe thus require overcoming national borders. Joint procurement, shared research programmes and multinational production lines are essential for achieving scale and competitiveness. They are also the key to unlocking private capitals invested into European security platforms, developing dual-use technologies. The European Union can facilitate this process by providing financing mechanisms, guarantees, regulatory frameworks and strategic guidance, and the new EU budget project already takes some step in this direction.

[18] Gholz, E. & Sapolsky, H. 1999, 'Restructuring the U.S. Defence Industry', International Security, 24(3), 5-51.

A fifth implication concerns Europe's global role. The Strategy suggests that Europe must assume greater responsibility for regional stability. This includes managing crises in the Balkans, the Mediterranean, the Black Sea region and the broader neighbourhood. To fulfil this role, Europe must develop diplomatic capacities, deployable forces and crisis response mechanisms. These requirements represent both challenges and opportunities for European integration. They demand a more coherent foreign policy, which is something different than the sum of foreign policies of the most important European players, with much improved coordination among national governments and greater investment in external action.

A further implication concerns public opinion. Defence and security have traditionally been low salience issues for many European citizens. The Strategy's expectations require governments to engage in public dialogue about the importance of defence investment, technological innovation and strategic responsibility. Without public support, security-related reforms may face resistance, and a tension between expenditure in defence vs. financing the welfare state might arise. The latter can be exploited by populist parties, further complicating the implementation of the security agenda in the EU.[19]

Political leaders must thus articulate a compelling narrative that connects defence to prosperity, sovereignty and stability. In particular, one should openly reckon that the new strategic environment presents opportunities for European integration. Defence and security investments, of a scale similar to those already undertaken during the Cold War, have the potential to become a unifying force that strengthens the European project. Joint capability development can foster solidarity among member states. Industrial cooperation can reinforce the single market. Strategic alignment can enhance Europe's credibility on the world stage. By embracing a shared sense of purpose, Europe can transform external pressures into internal cohesion.

In conclusion, the 2025 Strategy presents both challenges and opportunities for European integration. It forces Europe to confront fundamental questions about sovereignty, identity and capability. It encourages institutional reform, industrial cooperation and political cohesion. It also offers a path toward greater strategic autonomy. As already stated, Europe now faces a decisive moment. It must choose whether to adapt to the new strategic environment, and hence progress on its economic and political integration, or remain constrained by its internal divisions, which risks generating an equilibrium that, failing to deliver on both growth and security, risks a dissolution of the European Union.

7. Conclusion: a test for Europe

The 2025 United States National Security Strategy marks a decisive turning point in global security, with the demise of the model of unipolar global hegemon that has carachterised the post-Cold War period. To cope with the latter fact, Europe should react to the brutal, power-based message

[19] Dickson, Z.P., Hobolt, S.B., De Vries, C.E. and Cremaschi, S. , 2024[19]) Public Service Decline and Support for the Populist Right: Evidence from England's National Health Service. Working Paper. Available at: https://catherinedevries.eu/NHS.pdf

embedded in the Strategy. In this sense, the Strategy functions as a mirror of the European soul, reflecting its strengths and weaknesses. It makes explicit what had been implicit for years: Europe has relied on an international system underwritten by American power while gradually losing some of the strategic capabilities that once defined it. The new framework challenges Europe to rediscover these capabilities and to reposition itself as a genuine producer of security, technological innovation and geopolitical stability.

From an institutional point of view, this is not a novelty. Europe has always redefined itself with the change of global governance. It did so in the early 1950s, when the Iron Curtain emerged in Europe, by unifying the arch-enemies of France and Germany under a common governance system. It did it so again when the Cold War ended in 1989, by creating the single currency and enlarging to Eastern Europe. Nowadays the time has come for yet another run of the continental institution-building machine, this time realizing that the new global governance defines the European position without the certainty of American engagement. That certainty has allowed Europe to pursue ambitious social, economic and regulatory policies without placing defence at the centre of its political agenda. The new strategic environment makes this approach untenable. Defence must return to the core of Europe's identity as a political community. Investments in defence are not merely about military capability. They underpin technological competitiveness, industrial development and social resilience. As such, these challenges demand a level of coordination, investment and political will that Europe has not mobilised since the early 1990s. The Strategy therefore represents not only an American recalibration but also a European test. Europe must decide whether it wants to remain a geopolitical space shaped by external actors or become an actor capable of shaping its own destiny. To that extent, some positive signals have arrived from the European Council of December 2025. EU leaders in fact agreed to a €90 billion financial support package for Ukraine for 2026-27 financed through EU-level borrowing on the capital markets, effectively creating a form of common European debt backed by the EU budget's headroom. This decision was taken using enhanced cooperation so that Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia are excluded from the financial obligations, meaning 24 member states will participate and their shares cover those opting out, while the loan will be repayable by Ukraine once it receives reparations from Russia. The Council's conclusions underscore continued unwavering political, military and economic support for Ukraine's sovereignty and defence, and mark a significant step toward deeper EU fiscal integration in support of European security.

More in general, apart from specific decisions, the tone of Europe's response over the next months will also determine the future of the Western system. If Europe embraces the opportunity to invest in defence and innovation, it can strengthen its position within the global order. Defence spending can stimulate technological research, industrial projects, and advanced manufacturing.

Military modernisation can serve as a platform for political cohesion, reducing fragmentation among member states. Industrial integration can support broader economic objectives and reinforce Europe's role in global supply chains. A Europe that successfully seizes this opportunity would not only stabilise its region but also enhance its influence abroad.

Conversely, failure to respond would carry significant risks. Europe could find itself increasingly marginalised in global affairs, unable to shape outcomes or defend its interests. Its dependence on external actors would deepen at precisely the moment when those actors are recalibrating their commitments. The erosion of internal cohesion could increase vulnerability to external pressures and reduce Europe's relevance in an era defined by technological competition and strategic

realignment. At that moment, the very same functional role of the European Union, unable to guarantee security and prosperity to its members, will be at stake.

The current strategic transformation can also be seen as an opportunity to complete Europe's unfinished historical trajectory. Since the end of the Cold War, Europe has aspired to develop a more unified political identity and a more coherent strategic posture.

Defence integration, industrial coordination and technological investment offer pathways through which these aspirations can be realised. The new American Strategy provides external pressure, but it also provides a framework within which Europe can advance its own long-term interests.

In conclusion, the 2025 Strategy represents a pivotal moment in the future of the transatlantic relationship. It serves not only as a policy document but as a historical challenge. In answering, Europe will decide the role it intends to play in the twenty-first century, if any.

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