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TOWARDS A EUROPEAN SECURITY COUNCIL

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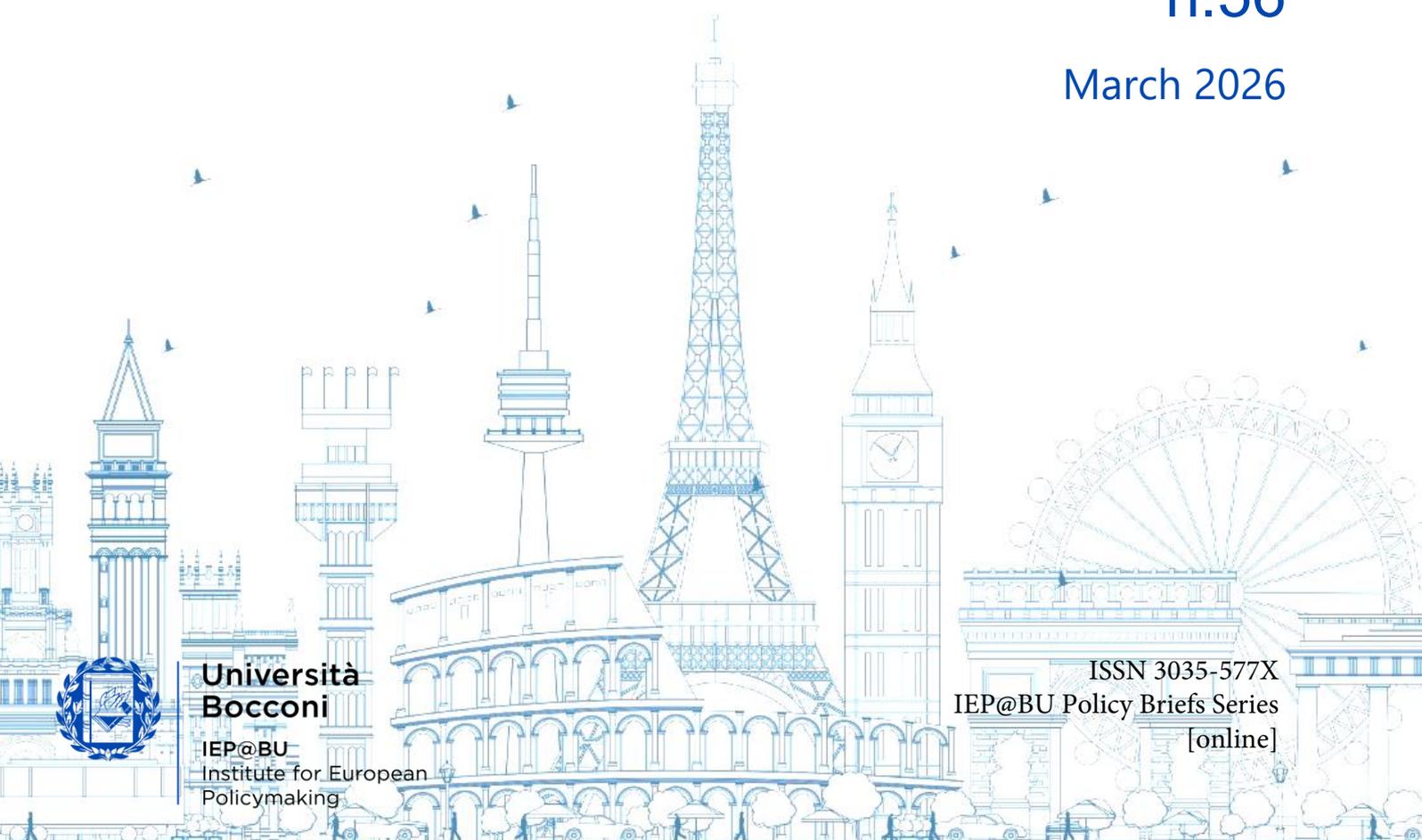
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Executive summary

Talk about Europe building its strategic autonomy has existed for the last quarter of a century. To date, existing institutions, including the EU and NATO, have not lived up to the promise despite the growing threat from Russia and the US disengagement from European security. Neither a European pillar in NATO nor EU defence have contributed significantly to a more autonomous Europe able to confront the threat from Russia with much less, or perhaps even without, America.

Reason for hope and signs of courage and collective action exist. On some occasions, these stem from existing institutions, more often, they arise from outside. Individual European countries and groups have acted collectively and more autonomously on issues like Ukraine and Greenland, but they have often done so outside existing institutional structures.

Both the EU and NATO may still find the scope and strength for renewal, and this should certainly be encouraged. Developing a European pillar within NATO and strengthening EU defence—especially in the areas of defence industry and hybrid threats—is both possible and desirable. Yet the fact that European collective action on security and defence has often taken place outside rather than within these organizations is revealing.

The problem with coalitions of the willing and able, however, is that they are ad hoc, focused on specific issues at specific times. When political attention is high—as was the case when the US's betrayal of Ukraine first became apparent in February 2025—heads of government meet at intervals of a few days. However, between one meeting and the next, attention wanes and the pace of work slows. Multilateralism and European integration have taught us that the essential work of institutions occurs between summits and not simply during these.

It is likely with this intuition in mind that several European leaders have called for the institutionalization of such groups. In particular, the idea of a European Security Council, first emerged in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, has regained currency.

Based on the mobilization and dynamism seen over Ukraine, Greenland, and defence cooperation between Nordic-Baltic countries, the core of such a European Security Council would likely include large and medium-sized countries such as Germany, France, the UK, and Poland, as well as smaller ones like Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Romania, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Other countries, such as Italy and Spain, would be involved mainly due to their size and relative capabilities. Presumably, larger and therefore more capable countries would hold permanent seats, as would EU institutions such as the Commission, the European Council president, and the member state holding the presidency of the EU Council. Smaller countries would participate on a rotational basis.

But whether permanent or rotational, all would be united by a shared commitment to building European strategic autonomy, solidarity, and mutual assistance in the face of internal and external threats. Participation would require a convergent threat assessment and a shared goal of defending Europe against Russia with much less America. Given this strategic underpinning, the work of such a Council towards European autonomy would not be hampered from within—whether by the likes of Hungary and Slovakia in the EU or, indeed, the US in NATO.

A European Security Council is no panacea. Consensus would presumably still be necessary, but compared to the European Council, a shared threat perception would presumably instil a greater sense of trust and shared destiny amongst its members. Its work would be linked to the strategic moment Europe is living through, but would not be exclusively connected to individual. Given that the threat from Russia and the disengagement of the US are structural phenomena, the European



Security Council would presumably outlast the Ukraine war and Donald Trump.

A European Security Council would also not, in itself, drive European defence integration, which would continue to require the EU. It would be a mechanism for stronger cooperation on defence industrial matters between groups of countries, and of greater coordination between them on security and defence policy. It would meet regularly, but also as and when need arises. And while it would retain a light institutional touch, it would require a secretariat because its very purpose is to maintain the momentum, capitalise on and make more long-lasting the work undertaken by ad hoc coalitions of the willing.

Talk about Europe building its strategic autonomy has existed for the last quarter of a century. To date, existing institutions, including the EU and NATO, have not lived up to the promise. Reason for hope and signs of courage and collective action exist. On some occasions, these stem from existing institutions, more often, they arise from outside. This policy brief explores the European reactions to the deteriorating security environment in Europe, drawing from these ideas for the path ahead.

The rocky road to European strategic autonomy

For over a decade, Europeans began talking of the need to acquire greater responsibilities in security and defence and build European strategic autonomy. Starting with Russia's annexation of Crimea, the wave of terrorist attacks in Europe, and US insistence on defence burden-sharing under US presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, European strategic autonomy became the chatter of the day in Brussels. Some believed that the kernel of Europe's defence should be the EU;¹ others flaunted the idea of a European pillar in NATO.² All agreed that Europeans should privilege acting with partners – foremost the US – when possible, but had to equip themselves to standing alone when necessary.

The notion of strategic autonomy arose in those years from the defence domain. But especially during the apparent return to transatlantic normalcy under President Joe Biden, attention was redirected to trade, technology, and energy, amongst others.³ Qualifying the quest as one of “open” strategic autonomy, Europeans concurred they needed a new equilibrium.⁴ The goal was that of balancing the dilution of dangerous dependencies – be it Russian fossil fuels, Chinese technology, minerals and manufacturing, or American weapons – with the diversification of partnerships, and the strengthening of internal production of defence capacities, green energy, and digital technologies.

Some action followed. On some counts, the quest for strategic autonomy has been successful. The EU and member states have undertaken a hitherto unthinkable energy decoupling from Russia since

¹ Tocci, N. (2018). Towards a European security and defence union: Was 2017 a watershed. *J. Common Mkt. Stud.*, 56, 131.

² Ruggie, J. G. (1997). Consolidating the European pillar: The key to NATO's future. *Washington Quarterly*, 20(1), 109-124.

³ Tocci, N. (2021). The Quest for European Autonomy. *Europe's Transformations: Essays in Honour of Loukas Tsoukalis*, 107.

⁴ Schmitz, L., & Seidl, T. (2023). As open as possible, as autonomous as necessary: Understanding the rise of open strategic autonomy in EU trade policy. *JCMS: journal of common market studies*, 61(3), 834-852.



its largescale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.⁵ They navigated the peak of energy prices in 2022-23 by compensating consumers, stayed the course of sanctions on Russia, planned and executed the weaning off from Russian gas, and diversified energy sources, both by forging new fossil partnerships with countries in Africa, the Caucasus and the US, and by accelerating investments in homegrown renewable technologies.⁶ Given many of these new partnerships revolve around liquified natural gas, which operates in a global market, the increased share of gas coming from countries like the US or Qatar has not implied the same potential for weaponization as European dependence on Russian gas once did.

On other counts, including relations with China, the EU has tried but fumbled. Its catchphrase has been that of viewing China as a partner, competitor, and strategic rival all at the same time.⁷ Behind the slogan there has been the difficult search for a balance between contrasting interests, although the outcome, to date, has been suboptimal. The EU knows that China represents an economic powerhouse it cannot do without. It neither wants nor thinks it can decouple from China. The EU also knows that it cannot reach net zero emissions without cooperating with China, which represents the undisputed leader in key green technologies such as photovoltaic, batteries and electric vehicles, while also representing a dominant, if not hegemonic, force in many critical mineral supply chains that are crucial in green and digital supply chains. At the same time, the EU knows it must derisk from China.⁸ China's overcapacity, its ballooning trade surplus, and its readiness to use economic statecraft and weaponize interdependencies point a new form of mercantilism. This problem is exacerbated by US-China trade tensions, which have caught the EU into a web of Chinese rare earth export restrictions designed to retaliate against US tariffs, while also adding to the EU's trade deficit with China. The EU also knows that without some level of protection of some of its green industries, these will be washed away. The history of the solar sector, born in Europe and now entirely dominated by China, is fresh in policymakers minds. So far, the EU's balancing act, for instance by moderately increasing tariffs on Chinese EV's without closing off the European market, or weaving critical minerals into trade ties with other countries, has been slow, suboptimal, and is not guaranteed to work. But Brussels cannot be accused of inaction, nor is there a silver bullet solution out there to be seized.

Where instead the quest for European strategic autonomy has languished most is defence. The last decade, has seen a proliferation of EU defence initiatives, ranging from the early steps to establish a European Defence Fund, a Permanent Structured Cooperation on defence, a command for EU military missions (the Military Planning and Conduct Capability) and a Coordinated Annual Review on Defence.⁹ When Russia escalated into a full-blown invasion of Ukraine, the EU upped the ante by activating a European Peace Facility to channel weapons to Kyiv, approving the Act in Support of Ammunition Production to fill Ukraine's shortage, and developing a European Defence Industrial Policy. With Trump's return to the White House, the EU went further, agreeing on a joint borrowing plan (SAFE) worth 150 billion aimed at financing collaborative defence projects. That loan

⁵ Tocci, N. (2022). *Putin vs Monnet: European resilience, energy and the Ukraine war*. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

⁶ McWilliams, B., Sgaravatti, G., Tagliapietra, S., & Zachmann, G. (2024). The European Union-Russia energy divorce: state of play. *Bruegel Analysis, February, 22*.

⁷ Berkofsky, A. (2019). China and the EU: "Strategic Partners" No More. *Institute for Security & Development Policy*.

⁸ Matthijs, M., & Meunier, S. (2023). Europe's Geoeconomic Revolution: How the EU Learned to Wield Its Real Power. *Foreign Aff.*, 102, 168.

⁹ Tocci (2018) Ibid.



programme has been fully subscribed, with around two thirds of the proposed capability projects featuring two or more European countries working together to address the continent's major capability shortfalls.¹⁰ The EU has also loosened its fiscal rules, enabling member states, especially those unburdened by high debt levels, to invest massively in defence. And this is happening above all in Germany. Berlin's defence expenditure is expected to exceed that of France and the UK combined by 2030, reaching third place worldwide according to current estimates.¹¹ Finally, the EU has agreed to common borrowing worth 90 billion euros to support Ukraine economically and militarily in 2026-2027.¹²

Over the last two decades, the European journey has no doubt been one towards strengthened defence capabilities. But compared to the declared goal of becoming more autonomous, and to the progress made in other areas, like energy or trade, the results are underwhelming. During the pandemic, the EU mobilized 800 billion euros in grants and loans. To confront Russia's military threat and the US's disengagement if not betrayal of Europe, the Union cobbled together 150 billion in loans. When compared to where the EU was coming from – doing nothing at all on defence – the results are impressive. But mapped against the sheer gravity of the moment, the outcome pales.

Moreover, looked at through the lens of autonomy, Europe has been moving in reverse gear. Today European countries are more capable on defence and have reduced their vulnerabilities vis-à-vis Russia. However, they have also become more dependent on the US, with the share of US weapons in European defence spending having increased over the last four years.¹³ This is true regarding national defence efforts and military support for Ukraine. As far as Ukraine is concerned, while Europeans by now shoulder most of the cost, they do so also by buying US weapons under NATO's Prioritized Ukraine Requirements List (PURL) programme. While PURL has served to fill the gap that would have otherwise emerged from the cut of US military support for Kyiv, it has done nothing to address – if not disincentivized further – the search for long-standing problems in European defence procurement, including speed and fragmentation. The Kiel Institute reports that in the second half of 2025, military allocations to Ukraine from European countries fell by 57% even considering their PURL contributions.¹⁴ If strategic autonomy means the ability to act alone when necessary, there is little evidence to suggest that Europe, via the EU, has reduced its defence dependence on the US.

When it comes to NATO the situation is even starker. Here too, some steps have been made on the defence of Europe by Europeans. The Alliance has expanded to include two new European members, Sweden and Finland, with significant capabilities that contribute to NATO's deterrence and defence, including in eastern Europe and the high north. And in 2026 the US stepped back from NATO's joint operational commands in Norfolk and Naples, handing these to the UK and Italy respectively. In addition, Germany and Poland will share the command of the Joint Force Command in Brunssum on a rotational basis. This implies that all three joint force commands at operational

¹⁰ <https://www.eunews.it/en/2025/08/29/von-der-leyen-150-billion-safe-plan-has-been-fully-subscribed/>

¹¹ <https://meta-defense.fr/en/2025/05/22/Germany-European-Armament-Market-2030/>

¹² <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/12/19/european-council-18-december-2025-ukraine/>

¹³ Mejino-López, J., & Wolff, G. B. (2025). *Europe's dependence on US foreign military sales and what to do about it* (No. 27/2025). Bruegel Policy Brief, <https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/europes-dependence-us-foreign-military-sales-and-what-do-about-it>

¹⁴ <https://www.kielinstitut.de/publications/news/ukraine-support-tracker-military-aid-falls-sharply-despite-new-nato-initiative/>



level in NATO will be led by Europeans, while the US will lead in the three theatre commands, taking over the maritime one while retaining the land and air allied commands.

Some believe this represents the first concrete steps towards a European pillar in NATO. And it is indeed very plausible that by 2030, NATO will be far more European, possibly going as far as seeing its almost all its conventional force package being European. However, while NATO is preparing for a more European Alliance, largely as a consequence of the US's clearly indicated will to step back from European security, the belief is that the US will continue to provide strategic enablers, command and control and the nuclear umbrella.¹⁵ In short, NATO's backbone is expected to remain American.

EU and NATO weakness and vulnerability

In private conversations, most European leaders and officials I have spoken over the last year recognize that the fiction of the US-led rules based international order which Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney referenced in 2026 Davos speech is over.¹⁶ In the first weeks of the Trump administration, many believed that buying time through flattery and good arguments would suffice. They thought that a suboptimal trade deal was better than no deal at all, and that it would help stabilize markets. They accepted that the price to be paid for US security, notably the US's enduring commitment to Ukraine, were concessions on the economy, and ultimately it was a price worth paying.¹⁷ And they hoped that playing along with Trump in his various "peace" endeavours in Ukraine and Gaza, while refraining to object to his military attacks on Iran or Venezuela, would keep the US on side. However, by early 2026, as became clear in the public pronouncements by many European leaders, from French President Emmanuel Macron to Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, very few, if any, genuinely latched on to this pipedream.¹⁸ The US under Trump has consistently sided with Russia, while seeking subjugate Ukraine into capitulation. The US no longer provides military support for Kyiv and has refused to exert pressure on Moscow to stop the war. Washington does still provide intelligence to Ukrainians, but no longer supports them economically or militarily. The US only sells weapons to Europeans, which they then pass on to Kyiv. And many European officials fear that even this could come to an end. Furthermore, the Trump administration has shamelessly backed far-right forces in Europe and explicitly threatened to annex Greenland. All this adds up to an imperial or "neo-royal" vision and course of action, in which Europe finds itself on the colonial menu.¹⁹

However, the collective response by the EU and NATO has been underwhelming. Flattery has rapidly morphed into self-humiliation, with Secretary General Mark Rutte's referring to President Donald Trump as NATO's "daddy", or Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's smiling uneasily

¹⁵ Tardy, T. (2025). 'The narrow but inescapable path of the European pillar of NATO, *Policy Paper, Jacques Delors Institute*, November.

¹⁶ <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/>

¹⁷ Matthijs, M., & Tocci, N. (2026). Can the Contingent Escape Its Trump Trap?. *Foreign Affairs*, 105, 154.

¹⁸ <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-emmanuel-macron-president-of-france/>; <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-ursula-von-der-leyen/>

¹⁹ Goddard, S. E., & Newman, A. (2025). Further Back to the Future: Neo-Royalism, the Trump Administration, and the Emerging International System. *International Organization*, 79(S1), S12-S25.



as she posed with her thumb up next to a smirking Trump at his golf resort in Turnberry, Scotland. The personal theatrics reflected an unimpressive policy performance.

The content of the agreements reached by these institutions with the US has been met by widespread criticism. Some have applauded NATO's commitment reached in The Hague summit to spend 5% GDP on defence and security – with 3.5% on defence and 1.5% on looser security related expenditures.²⁰

However, while defence spending is and should increase given the Russian threat and the US intention to pull back from European security, this does not automatically mean that European allies in NATO are gearing up to become autonomous.²¹ In many cases, countries will not reach the 5% mark. This is true especially in large members like France, UK and Italy, which do not have the fiscal space for such a significant defence ramp-up. Committing to a goal that will not be met can only open the way to frustration. Furthermore, there are inevitable differences between NATO allies. East and north Europeans need no persuading by Trump and in fact already spend around 5% on defence as they feel the heat from Russia. But other European countries further to the west and south, while considering Russia a threat and standing with Ukraine, do not feel the danger as imminently or gravely. The guns versus butter debate in these countries lands in a very different spot with public opinion. Shoving defence spending down their throats only runs the risk of blowing wind in the sails of nationalist populism, which would favour MAGA America and Vladimir Putin's Russia, but certainly not the security of Europe.

Moreover, while NATO is at least well equipped to deal with an external threat like Russia, it is defenceless when it comes an internal threat. As regards Greenland, and therefore the threat by one ally – the US – towards another – Denmark –, NATO has its hands tied. The Atlantic Alliance simply cannot confront a threat coming from its most important member. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen put it candidly when she stated that a US military attack on Greenland would instantly kill NATO.²² But the gravity of her words are not and cannot be voiced by NATO officials, notably the Secretary General, who at most can lend a friendly ear to Washington and seek dialogue on broader Arctic security. If the transatlantic alliance were to flounder, NATO's secretary general would be, by definition, the last man playing in the Titanic's orchestra.

The EU, without the US amongst its members, has fared better than NATO in terms of working towards autonomy, but only marginally. On the positives, it has continued to stand by Ukraine, despite Washington's U-turn and pressure to back down. And it has done so not just by retaining and even increasing sanctions on Russia, but also by shifting decision-making on the renewal of sanctions to majority rule. While shying away from the use of almost 200 billion euros worth of Russian assets frozen primarily in Europe, notably Belgium, the EU also accepted to issue 90 billion euros worth of common debt backed by the EU budget to support Ukraine. Finally, the EU has reanimated the enlargement policy, making important steps both in the Balkans – notably Albania and Montenegro – and exploring avenues for Ukraine's expedited membership in the Union. None of this is a given, but it signals that on some matters the EU has demonstrated the capacity to react

²⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2p4vw595jo>

²¹ Gilli, A. (2025). NATO's 5% Pledge: Political Symbol or Strategic Shift?, IEP @Bocconi, 26 June, <https://iep.unibocconi.eu/natos-5-pledge-political-symbol-or-strategic-shift>

²² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/05/trump-must-give-up-fantasies-about-annexation-says-greenland-pm>



autonomously.

However, the EU has also exuded weakness. On Ukraine and enlargement, it has been constantly slowed and watered down by Hungary's obstructionism. On each occasion, the EU eventually found a way around Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's threatened vetoes, from inviting him to leave the room during European Council meetings, to changing the legal basis for decision-making. However, this has come at a cost.

First, decisions have often been delayed, diluted and eventually approved through the unedifying buying out of Budapest's demands. Second, it has generated incentives by other member states to act as spoilers too. So far, this holds especially true for Robert Fico's Slovakia and Andrej Babiš's Czech Republic, which also opposed the 90 billion loan for Ukraine guaranteed by headroom in the EU budget. But if the nationalist populist wave in Europe does not subside, other countries may be added to the list, making existing EU mitigating tactics no longer workable.

On trade, the EU acquiesced to a 15% tariff rate despite having previously stated it would secure a much better deal with Washington. The EU spent over a year preparing for a transatlantic trade war. It devised a list of carrots through the acquisition of billions worth of liquified natural gas and weapons. And it also worked on sticks, with retaliatory tariffs and the anti-coercion instrument, which would severely restrict access of US firms to the single market.²³ But when Washington arm-twisted the EU, Brussels bent without retaliation, essentially greenlighting US economic coercion. It also only meekly pushed back against US lobbying aimed at diluting EU digital and climate legislation in light of the growing opposition to it by an emerging new majority in the European Parliament between the centre and the far-right.²⁴ The EU did signal greater resolve over US threats to shred the Turnberry trade deal by imposing a new wave of tariffs, with the European Parliament suspending ratification of the EU-US trade deal. But at the time of writing, President Trump has backed away from that threat. It therefore remains unknown whether the EU would have followed suit with decisive action this time.

Proponents of economic acquiescence argued that retaliation would have cost the EU more than acceptance of a 15% tariff and that the EU got the best deal possible.²⁵ The Turnberry agreement was at least a deal, which would return calm to the markets. And to an extent this was correct. But while the first argument is right, when coupled with the fallacy of the second it becomes shakier. No deal with Trump is a long-lasting deal. In fact, since that agreement was signed Washington has sought to push the coercion envelope further. It has bullied Brussels to row back on climate and digital legislation, reaping some success with the passing of the first omnibus law in the European Parliament and the suspension of the AI Act. And it has been on the verge of throwing the 15% tariff deal out of the window twice. Trump threatened to increase tariffs further first towards those European countries that had the audacity to stand by Denmark by participating in a joint military exercise in Greenland, and then after the US Supreme Court struck down US "reciprocal" tariffs on

²³ Laya, A. G., Grand, C., Pisarska, K., Tocci, N., & Wolff, G. (2024). Trump-Proofing Europe. *Foreign Affairs*, 2; Gonzales Laya, A., Grand, C., Pisarska, K., Tocci, N., & Wolff, G. Can American abandonment help Europe?: the continent has a chance to address its own weaknesses. *Foreign affairs*.

²⁴ <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/11/21/how-centrist-party-pact-enables-european-parliaments-new-venezuela-majority>

²⁵ Gros, D. (2025). 'On Trump's Tariffs, Europe got the best deal available', *IEP Commentary*, <https://iep.unibocconi.eu/trumps-tariffs-europe-got-best-deal-available>



the grounds of the international emergency economic powers act. One year into the second Trump administration, evidence suggests that under his rule, norms, laws and contracts have little value.

While Europeans recognize the threats they face, neither NATO nor the EU have fully lived up to the quest of securing Europe. As argued above, this is not to say that no action has happened by these organizations. NATO's deterrence and defence towards Russia have strengthened significantly. The EU has gained strategic autonomy as regards its dependence on Russian energy, it is striving for a new balance to manage relations with China, and has taken defence initiatives once unthinkable. But when all is added up, the bottom line is that while Europeans are more capable on defence, they have not reduced their dependence on the US, if anything increased it. And that dependence has revealed to be a major, possibly existential, vulnerability that existing European and Euro-Atlantic organizations have been unable to address.

For the first time in the history of European integration, Jean Monnet's predicament is not delivering as one of Europe's founding hoped and expected. The EU is being confronted by crises, which are indeed giving rise to responses as Monnet had foreseen. But when added up, these reactions fall well short of solutions to the crises at hand. The absence of such solutions constitutes an unprecedented threat to an independent, free, democratic, secure and prosperous Europe.

European dynamism elsewhere

Individual European countries and groups have acted collectively and more autonomously, but they have often done so outside existing institutional structures. On Ukraine, since Trump took office, most European action has occurred within the framework of a coalition of the willing, co-led by France and the UK. This coalition revolves around a core group—Germany, Poland, and the Nordic and Baltic countries—but includes around thirty countries across Europe and beyond. Through these meetings, Europeans have developed plans to deploy a reassurance force to Ukraine, should a ceasefire be reached.

At face value, the agreements reached in this format appear underwhelming. The hypothetical deployment of approximately 20,000 troops in a post-ceasefire Ukraine can, at best, be considered a tripwire force. However, a headquarters has been established in Paris, and the chiefs of defence from coalition countries have achieved a level of coordination, intimacy and mutual understanding previously lacking. While their plans may be unambitious, they were agreed upon in this format because it proved impossible to do so within existing institutional frameworks, including NATO and the EU.

Moreover, it is within this coalition that European countries have addressed the far more pressing question of how to ensure Ukraine's defence as the US has withdrawn its support. The group has also developed diplomatic tactics to restrain Trump's most damaging impulses to align with Moscow. While maintaining open diplomatic and political channels, these countries have neither capitulated nor shied away from taking a firm stand. Notably, EU institutions—particularly the Commission—have also participated in these meetings. In this context, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen declared that, regardless of any US decision to lift sanctions on Russia, the EU would not do



so unless a just peace is achieved.²⁶

A similar pattern emerged in response to Trump's threats toward Greenland. While institutional reactions were either muted in NATO's case or diluted in the EU's, some European countries spoke more clearly—both individually and collectively—and mobilized in solidarity with Denmark. NATO, particularly Secretary General Mark Rutte, went to great lengths to keep Trump on side, supposedly mediating, without any formal request, an unspecified framework agreement on Greenland to appease him. The EU, by contrast, has been more explicit in its support for Greenland, proposing expanded fishing rights and investments in connectivity, education, skills, and the clean energy transition. The European Parliament also suspended ratification of the EU-US trade deal if Trump moved to impose further tariffs on a group of European countries. Yet when it comes to hard security, it has been a group of European countries that took a stand. At Denmark's request, soldiers from France, Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, and Norway participated in the joint exercise "Arctic Endurance" in Greenland. The military participation was minimal and could not be interpreted as an intent to deter, much less confront, the US militarily. Nevertheless, it signalled a willingness to act collectively to protect European interests, even at the risk of angering the US. Such an exercise would have been impossible within NATO due to US participation, nor would it have been realistic within the EU.

Similarly, collective action on defence is gaining momentum among groups of European countries. While Franco-German defence cooperation has faltered on major projects such as the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) and the EU-UK security partnership has yet to agree on London's access to SAFE, cooperation on both capability development and operational capacities within the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) has gathered pace. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the group—which includes Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden—has aligned strategic assessments and intensified defence cooperation through regular meetings of defence ministers, joint training, and a commitment to equip and train a Ukrainian brigade.

The NB8 has also collaborated on countering Russian cyberattacks and attacks on critical infrastructure, including telecommunications, power cables, and pipelines. The format now encompasses deepened parliamentary cooperation, heads of state summits, and joint visits to third countries, reflecting a more integrated approach to regional security. All eight countries have signed long-term security agreements with Ukraine.

In the defence industry, the group has coordinated investments in cyber defence, unmanned systems, and underwater surveillance, though joint production or large-scale co-development remains limited. Much of this cooperation occurs within NATO, facilitated by the accession of Sweden and Finland to the Alliance. In this case, NATO has acted as an enabler rather than an obstacle to deeper sub-regional cooperation.

Beyond defence, momentum is building for reinforced cooperation among groups of EU member states. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has been a leading advocate for a savings and investment coalition of the willing, as well as one focused on digital regulation. France has also emphasized the need for enhanced cooperation among groups of member states, and even Germany has become more receptive to the idea. Confronted with mounting security threats—

²⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/27/european-chiefs-agree-not-the-time-lift-sanctions-against-russia>



particularly the weaponization of economic and technological dependencies by both China and the US—and the immovable barrier of unanimity rules, the push for cooperation in smaller groups is growing.

Towards a European Security Council

The die is not yet cast, as Europe stands at a historic turning point. Both the EU and NATO may still find the scope and strength for renewal, and this should certainly be encouraged. Developing a European pillar within NATO and strengthening EU defence—especially in the areas of defence industry and hybrid threats—is both possible and desirable. Yet the fact that European collective action on security and defence has often taken place outside rather than within these organizations is revealing and demands further reflection and action.

The problem with coalitions of the willing and able is that they are often ad hoc, focused on specific issues at specific times. When political attention is high—as was the case when the US's betrayal of Ukraine first became apparent in February 2025—heads of government meet at intervals of a few days. However, between one meeting and the next, attention wanes and the pace of work slows. Multilateralism and European integration have taught us that the essential work of institutions occurs between summits and not simply during these.

It is likely with this intuition in mind that several European leaders have called for the institutionalization of such groups. French President Macron, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, and Commission President von der Leyen all referenced the need to formalize coalitions of the willing in their addresses at the 2026 Munich Security Conference. Meanwhile, European Defence Commissioner Andrius Kubilius has advocated for the creation of a European Security Council. The fact that a European commissioner and former Lithuanian prime minister would champion an institution beyond the one he currently represents—and in which his own country would presumably not hold a permanent seat—underscores implicitly the urgency of such a construct.

The idea of a European Security Council first emerged in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. For decades, the UK, alongside France and Germany, had been at the core of European foreign policy. All major security questions involving Europe—from the Balkans to the Middle East and Africa—were led by some combination of member states, almost always including the UK. When the UK voted to leave the EU, many hoped to retain its strategic and political capital through a European Security Council. German Chancellor Angela Merkel was keen to retain a link to London. One year later, when Emmanuel Macron was elected President of France, he took up the idea. In his view, the aim was not only that of retaining security ties with post-Brexit Britain, but also, or rather mainly, to develop a more independent European security voice and defence capacity, with respect to NATO, in light of an increasingly unreliable US, back then led by the first Trump administration.

But while key European leaders concurred, although not exactly for the same reasons, counterintuitively, post-Brexit Britain showed little appetite for binding itself to the continent through new institutional arrangements. That moment has passed, and Brussels and London have now initialled a security and defence partnership. While an agreement on the UK's participation in the SAFE programme has not yet been reached, strategic alignment across the Channel has grown under the Labour government, driven most poignantly by the shared risks posed by Trump's second presidency and the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Based on the mobilization and dynamism seen over Ukraine, Greenland, and defence cooperation,



the core of such a European Security Council would likely include large and medium-sized countries such as Germany, France, the UK, and Poland, as well as smaller ones like Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Romania, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Other countries, such as Italy and Spain, would be involved mainly due to their size and relative capabilities. Presumably, larger and therefore more capable countries would hold permanent seats, as would EU institutions such as the Commission, the European Council president, and the member state holding the presidency of the EU Council. Smaller countries would participate on a rotational basis.

But whether permanent or rotational, all would be united by a shared commitment to building European strategic autonomy, solidarity, and mutual assistance in the face of internal and external threats. Participation would require a convergent threat assessment regarding Russia and the US in particular, and a shared goal of defending Europe against Russia with less (or perhaps even without) America were Washington to veer in this direction.

Given this strategic underpinning, the work of such a Council towards European autonomy would not be hampered from within—whether by the likes of Hungary and Slovakia in the EU or, indeed, the US in NATO.

A European Security Council is no panacea. Although ideally it would decide on the basis of majority vote, realistically it would be governed by consensus. The value added and the presumed greater agency of a European Security Council, compared for instance to the European Council, would therefore be limited to a greater level of trust and a more convergent threat assessment amongst its members – as manifested over Ukraine or Greenland –, and to the ability to bring in voices like that of the UK and Norway. Its work would be linked to the strategic moment Europe is living through, but would not be exclusively connected to individual crises. Given that the threat from Russia and the disengagement of the United States are structural phenomena, the European Security Council would presumably outlast the Ukraine war, while being principally invested in it as long as it lasts.

A European Security Council would also not, in itself, drive European defence integration. It would be a mechanism for stronger cooperation on defence industrial matters between groups of countries, and of greater coordination between them on security and defence policy. But it would not replace the need for the EU to continue pursuing instruments and incentives aimed at reducing the fragmentation of the European defence market and its overreliance on the US. It would meet regularly, but also as and when need arises. And while it would retain a light institutional touch, it would require a secretariat because its very purpose is to maintain the momentum, capitalise on and make more long-lasting the work undertaken by ad hoc coalitions of the willing.

Delving further into the possible institutional details of a European Security Council and the specifics of what it could address would end up being too abstract and hypothetical. The purpose of this paper has been, more modestly, to highlight why such an idea is worth pursuing if Europe is to remain free, prosperous, and secure.

