

The Breaking Point: The Rebuilding of European Security Architecture

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Abstract:

This thesis investigates the future of European security in light of growing transatlantic uncertainty, catalyzed by the re-election of Donald Trump and persistent internal fragmentation within the European Union. Through a scenario sketching methodology based on a 2x2 matrix, it develops four scenarios exploring how varying levels of US engagement and European unity could shape the continent's strategic trajectory over the next 10–15 years. The analysis is grounded in a dual theoretical framework combining structural realism and constructivism. The thesis argues that Europe's security architecture stands at a crossroads, and thus it finds that the decisive factor in shaping Europe's strategic future is not the presence or absence of US leadership, but the degree of European political and ideational unity. Without it, even strong US backing cannot compensate for European fragmentation. Conversely, a united Europe may be able to sustain credible autonomous defense even amid American retrenchment.

Key concepts: arms race; constructivism; conventional deterrence; defense; European security; European Union; Euroscepticism; liberal world order; NATO; nuclear deterrence; realism; Russia; scenario sketching; transatlantic relations; USA

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List of Abbreviations:

ACO – Allied Command Operations

AfD – Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany)

AI - Artificial intelligence

DoD – Department of Defense

C4ISR – Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance

CFSD – Common Foreign and Security Policy

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

EDA – European Defense Agency

EDC – European Defense Community

EDF – European Defense Fund

EDIS – European Defence Industrial Strategy

EDU – European Defense Union

EU – European Union

FPÖ – Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party Austria)

GDP – Gross domestic product

IMF – International Monetary Fund

ISIS – Islamic State

LNG – Liquefied natural gas

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NRF – NATO Response Force

OEC – Organization for Economic Complexity

OSCE – Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

PESCO – Permanent Structured Cooperation

PiS – Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice)

PVV – Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom)

R&D – Research and Development

SD – Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats)

SIPRI – Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

SMER-SD – Smer-sociálna demokracia (Direction-Social Democracy)

S.H.A.P.E. – Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe

UK – United Kingdom

UN – United Nations

US/USA – United States of America

Maps

Map 1 - Political map of Europe



Source: (CIA) Central Intelligence Agency (2015). "Europe", *The Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g5700.ct001356/?r=-0.347>.

Map 2 – Physical map of Europe



Source: Mapsland, <https://www.mapsland.com/europe/large-detailed-physical-map-of-europe>.

Map 3 – US forces in Europe



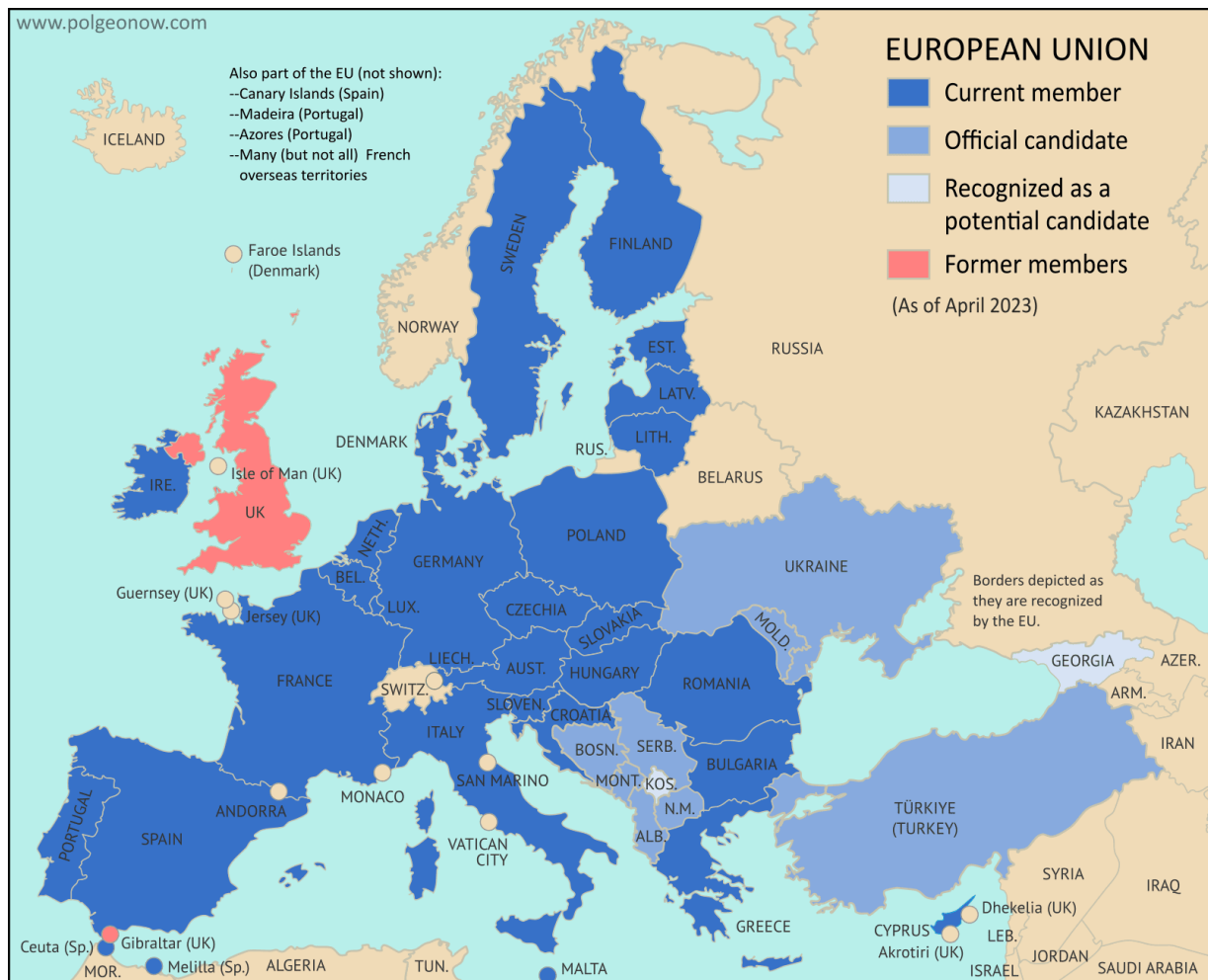
Source: Spatafora, G. (2025). “The Trump Card: What could US abandonment of Europe look like?”, *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/trump-card-what-could-us-abandonment-europe-look>. Consulted on May 30 2025.

Map 4 – NATO members with years of accession



Source: North-West European Geography, <https://nwegeo.com/europe-map-nato-member-states-with-years-of-accession/>.

Map 5 – European Union



Source: Centanni, E. (2023). "Map: Which Countries are in the European Union in 2023, Which Aren't, and Which Want to Join?", *Political Geography Now*, <https://www.polgeonow.com/2016/06/map-which-countries-are-in-the-eu.html>.

1. Introduction

In a leaked exchange with Vice President J.D. Vance, the US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth described European allies as “pathetic” (Barlow 2025). While provocative, the remark reflects a deeper rupture in transatlantic relations catalyzed by the re-election of Donald Trump as the 47th President of the United States. Having built all three of his campaigns (2016, 2020, 2024) on the “America First” slogan, Trump has repeatedly signaled a departure from Washington’s traditional commitment to European security (Spatafora 2025; Tracy 2016). In his 2024 campaign, he declared he would not defend NATO members that fall short on defense spending; on the contrary, he would “encourage the Russians to do whatever the hell they want” (Sullivan 2024). Since returning to office, Trump has threatened to annex Greenland, a territory of NATO ally Denmark (Weizman 2025), imposed and then retracted tariffs on the EU (Rankin and Jones 2025), initiated Ukraine peace negotiations without consulting European allies (Baker 2025), and allowed his vice president to publicly accuse the EU of “censoring free speech” at the Munich Security Conference (Lu 2025).

These events signify a profound transformation in the United States’ posture toward Europe and a direct challenge to the normative and institutional foundations of European security established after World War II. For the first time in the postwar era, the continuity of the US security guarantee, a central pillar of NATO and European defense, is no longer assured. The resulting uncertainty is not merely strategic but existential. The geopolitical order that has long underpinned European peace and stability is now in question.

Yet the erosion of Europe’s security foundations predates Trump’s return to power. The past decade has exposed deep and persistent fractures within the EU itself. The 2016 Brexit referendum marked a dramatic turning point, with the UK’s exit from the Union crystallizing rising nationalist sentiment and challenging the legitimacy of supranational governance (de Búrca 2018; Scott 2023). A series of cascading crises, ranging from contested migration policy, disunity during the COVID-19 pandemic, to energy insecurity and external aggression, have compounded these internal divisions and revealed the EU’s structural limits in crisis response (Bayrakli 2021; Dekeyrel 2024; Roehse and Varma 2024).

Most notably, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reignited large-scale war on the continent and exposed critical vulnerabilities in European defense and energy planning (International Crisis Group 2025). NATO’s and the EU’s responses, while ultimately unified in

support for Ukraine, were delayed, fragmented, and constrained by domestic politics and fear of Russian escalation (Majcin 2025). The war also underscored Europe's chronic underinvestment in its own defense, a problem long recognized but insufficiently addressed, while exacerbating an energy crisis already worsened by the EU's Green Deal¹ energy transition (Dekeyrel 2024; International Crisis Group 2025; Sun et al. 2024).

The EU's repeated inability over the past decade to address arising challenges adequately and quickly has fueled skepticism about the bloc's functionality, desirability, and even its necessity, leading to a surge in Euroscepticism, manifested in the electoral rise of nationalist and far-right parties across the continent. Movements such as AfD (Germany), National Rally (France), Brothers of Italy, PVV (Netherlands), Fidesz (Hungary), PiS (Poland), and SMER-SD (Slovakia) have capitalized on public anxieties, often advocating an "anti-EU, national-first" agenda (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2024). Their momentum was confirmed in the 2024 European Parliament elections (Hublet 2024; Marshall 2024) and reinforced by the 2025 German federal elections, where AfD achieved over 20%, the best result of a far-right party in Germany since 1933 (Zeier and Grün 2025). The symbolic depth of this fragmentation is further evident in Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico's controversial attendance at the Russian Victory Day military parade in Moscow, a gesture strongly condemned by Brussels (Armstrong 2025).

Against this background of the uncertain future of transatlantic relations and the unity of European countries, this thesis aims to explore the following research question:

“What are the possible implications of a lower level of US engagement and an unclear level of European unity for the future of European security?”

This thesis will engage in scenario sketching, a method that provides a structured way to explore multiple possible trajectories for the future of European security architecture. The debate is rapidly evolving as of writing this thesis, with, for example, negotiations about the end of the Ukrainian war taking place. Therefore, a single predictive approach would be insufficient. Scenario sketching accounts for key uncertainties, in this case, EU unity and US commitments to Europe, offering a comprehensive framework for analyzing potential security outcomes. This method avoids deterministic conclusions and allows for a more flexible, strategic assessment of how Europe might navigate its security challenges in an era of instability, providing

¹ Green Deal is the European Union's comprehensive strategy to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, aiming to transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economy with no net greenhouse gas emissions. It encompasses initiatives across energy, transport, agriculture, and industry sectors, with interim goals. (European Commission 2019)

policymakers, scholars, and the public with insights into the risks and challenges ahead. This thesis will contribute to the academic and political discussion about deterrence, EU integration, transatlantic relations, and the future of the world order. Furthermore, by developing a theoretical framework grounded in structural realism and constructivism, the thesis shows how these theories complement each other, rather than being in opposition, contributing to the academic debate about state behavior. The analysis is essential not only for academic discourse but also for informing strategic decision-making at both national and European levels, ensuring that Europeans remain prepared for an increasingly volatile future.

The next section reviews the history of key developments that shaped European security since the end of World War II. Then it dives into the evolving debate about the future of European security. Section three develops a theoretical foundation for the scenario sketching, grounded in the theories of structural realism and constructivism. Section four explains the scenario methodology, typology, choices, assumptions, and limitations. Section five develops four scenarios based on the theoretical input of chapter three and methodological input of chapter four. Finally, section six concludes the findings and implications drawn from the scenarios.

2. Literature Review

This section examines the historical evolution and contemporary debates surrounding European security architecture from 1945 to 2025. It begins by tracing the development of NATO and the United States' role as Europe's primary security guarantor during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, highlighting how strategic leadership, institutional integration, and evolving threat perceptions shaped the transatlantic order. The review then turns to the theoretical interpretations that explain these developments, drawing primarily (but not only) on realist and constructivist perspectives² to analyze NATO enlargement, the shifting post-Cold War balance, and Russia's antagonistic turn. Finally, the section explores the intensifying debate about Europe's strategic future in light of US disengagement and internal EU divisions, including competing visions for NATO reform, EU-led defense autonomy, and alternative hybrid arrangements. By integrating historical developments with key theoretical insights, this literature review provides the necessary foundation for constructing future-oriented scenarios and evaluating the structural and ideational forces that continue to shape Europe's defense trajectory.

2.1. How did we get here: History of European Defense Architecture since 1945

2.1.1. The Cold War

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Europe was devastated, divided, and uncertain about its future. Security concerns became dominated by the ideological and strategic divide between the American-led West and Soviet-led East. To contain Soviet expansion and institutionalize collective defense, the United States spearheaded the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 (Anghel and Damen 2025; Palmer et al. 2020: 907). The main building block of NATO is Article 5 of the treaty, obliging NATO members to defend each other in times of attack (NATO 1949). Scholars, such as Weber (1992) and Leffler (1988), interpreted NATO's creation as a classical balance-of-power move: a hegemonic United States offered protection to weaker allies to preserve a favorable status quo. Through the Marshall Plan and transatlantic military integration, US leadership ensured that Western Europe remained under a liberal democratic umbrella (Anghel and Damen 2025; Leffler 1988; Palmer et al. 2020: 911-913). Simultaneously, this consolidation prevented the emergence of a rival

² Since these theories are further developed in Section 3 and used for the scenario sketching.

Western European military power center, thereby entrenching US primacy in the region's security architecture (Anghel and Damen 2025; Weber 1992; Leffler 1988).

Yet there was an attempt to establish a European-led military structure. The European Defence Community (EDC) was proposed in 1950 to integrate the military forces of key Western European nations (Anghel and Damen 2025). However, it failed in 1954 when France rejected the treaty, fearing the loss of national sovereignty (Anghel and Damen 2025). As a result, European defense remained largely dependent on NATO, with the United States providing security guarantees to Western Europe, particularly through its military presence in West Germany. In 1966, France, under Charles de Gaulle, withdrew from NATO's unified military command (Anghel and Damen 2025). While formally remaining in the alliance, France sought to maintain strategic autonomy (Anghel and Damen 2025), a doctrine still evident in today's French security thinking, although France rejoined NATO's command structures in 2009 (Anghel and Damen 2025; Vohra 2023).

In response to NATO, the Warsaw Pact was created by the Soviets in 1955, solidifying the creation of a bipolar security order in Europe (Anghel and Damen 2025). This division into two opposing blocks defined Europe's security structure for the rest of the Cold War, with both alliances heavily fortifying their borders (Anghel and Damen 2025; Palmer et al. 2020: 907-937). The arms race between the two sides led to the deployment of nuclear weapons in Europe, with the US stationing them in West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey, and the UK, while the Soviet Union did the same in Eastern Europe (Anghel and Damen 2025; Spatafora 2025). By the late 1980s, NATO had earned recognition not only as a military alliance but also as a political community (Schimmelfennig 1998). Schimmelfennig (1998) and Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein (1996) credit NATO with fostering a transatlantic identity grounded in liberal values, helping to defuse potential intra-Western conflicts, and reinforcing solidarity among members. NATO's central role in the promotion of "common western values" set the stage for post-Cold War transformations.

2.1.2. After the Cold War

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to a dramatic transformation of Europe's security landscape. Gorbachev's idea of a "common European home" envisioned pan-European cooperation³ (Anghel and Damen 2025; Palmer et al. 2020: 1013-1017). However, these efforts failed to develop into binding security structures. Instead, NATO not only persisted but

³ as seen by the creation of the OSCE

redefined itself. With the Soviet threat gone, European nations reduced military spending and focused on economic integration (Dorn 2024). The 1990s saw NATO expanding its focus on crisis management operations, such as in Iraq (1991), Bosnia (1995), and Kosovo (1999) (Anghel and Damen 2025; NATO 2023a). These conflicts demonstrated Europe's continued reliance on the US military capabilities, as European forces struggled to conduct large-scale operations without American support. They also demonstrated the relevance of NATO even without the Soviet counterforce (Anghel and Damen 2025). During this period, there was also a greater push for European integration, culminating in the establishment of the EU in 1993 through the Maastricht Treaty (Anghel and Damen 2025; Palmer et al. 2020: 1033-1039). The treaty also established the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the EU (Anghel and Damen 2025). The 9/11 attacks in 2001 led NATO to invoke Article 5 for the first and only time, demonstrating transatlantic solidarity (NATO 2023b). European forces participated in the Afghanistan War under NATO command (NATO 2023a). The Lisbon Treaty (2009) established the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), an extension of the CFSP, and the European Defence Agency (EDA) for cooperation between EU militaries (Anghel and Damen 2025; European Parliament 2024). It also introduced Article 42.7, the EU's collective defense clause (European Parliament 2024).

Russian leaders have long asserted that Western officials assured Gorbachev that NATO would not expand eastward, a claim lacking formal documentation, yet the transcripts from 1990 discussions⁴ suggest that the topic was indeed discussed (Anghel and Damen 2025; Neal 2022; Reynolds 2022). NATO absorbed former Eastern bloc states eager to anchor their sovereignty in Western institutions. Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joined in 1999, followed by the Baltic States, Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia in 2004 (Anghel and Damen 2025; NATO 2024a; Map 4). Realist scholars such as Kennan (1997), Mearsheimer (2014; 2022), and Walt (2022) argue that this expansion was a strategic encroachment into Russia's historical sphere of influence, an action that was likely to provoke a response from a weakened but resentful Moscow. They further argue that the expansion inflamed Russian insecurity, undermining the fragile post-Cold War order (Kennan 1997; Mearsheimer 2014; Mearsheimer 2022; Walt 2022).

These warnings appear prophetic. Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the 2022 full-scale war in Ukraine have been interpreted by realists as balancing

⁴ about the leaving of Soviet armies from Eastern Europe

against NATO encroachment⁵. Mearsheimer (2014; 2022) and Walt (2015) contend that the West's miscalculation in pressing NATO enlargement was central to destabilizing European security.

Other scholars, namely, Ikenberry (2001; 2011), Jung (2023), Risse (1996), Sakwa (2015), and Schimmelfennig (1998), provide a different interpretation of NATO's post-Cold War expansion. Rather than understanding enlargement as a power-driven move provoking Russia, they argue it reflected the normative and institutional pull of the liberal international order. Schimmelfennig (1998) contends that NATO leaders were normatively committed to including liberal democracies that expressed alignment with liberal values, even when strategic concerns were ambiguous. Ikenberry (2001; 2011) emphasizes that institutions like NATO and the EU served as tools for "strategic restraint," binding states into a rules-based order and reducing the uncertainty of international politics. Risse (1996) further underscores the importance of shared democratic identity and communicative action in fostering security communities. From these perspectives, Eastern European states pursued NATO membership not merely for protection, but as a civilizational⁶ (and cultural) choice to join a liberal democratic community (Ikenberry 2011; Risse 1996; Schimmelfennig 1998). Thus, the failure does not lie in NATO's expansion per se but in the inability to include Russia in these structures, reinforcing Russia's sense of exclusion and deepening its revisionist trajectory. Russia's own identity struggles intensified in the 1990s and early 2000s (Sakwa 2015). While President Yeltsin initially supported the NATO partnership, this stance eroded as nationalist rhetoric gained ground (Jung 2023; Mearsheimer 2014; Sakwa 2015). A key turning point came with NATO's 1999 bombing of Serbia during the Kosovo conflict, conducted without UN Security Council authorization and over Moscow's objection (Sakwa 2015). The NATO-Russia Council, established in 2002 to foster dialogue, failed to rebuild trust, especially after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which many in Moscow saw as further evidence of Western disregard for international norms and Russian interests (Sakwa 2015; Jung 2023). Sakwa (2015) and Jung (2023) argue that this reinforced a Russian narrative of Western betrayal, fostering antagonism and revisionist ambitions.

⁵ one of the reasons cited by Russia for why it invaded Ukraine was NATO expansion to Ukraine, which is seen as a red line for Moscow (Midttun 2023)

⁶ joining the Western civilization

2.2. The Current Debates about the Future of European Defense Architecture

Figure 1 – Selected military capabilities

	Troops	Reserves	Tanks	Artillery pieces	Large naval vessels (Aircraft Carriers)
USA	1 328 000	799 500	3 480	1893	440 (20)
NATO without the USA ⁷	2 111 197	2 645 499	4 970	7 124	296 (10)
EU	1 506 702	2 341 165	3 115	4 675	185 (7)
Russia	1 320 000	2 000 000	4 025	11 676	169 (1) ⁸

Notes: Numbers represent the estimated amount of equipment in active service, e.g., the numbers do not represent the full amount of all the equipment listed countries possess; In ‘Large Naval Vessels’, patrol boats and minesweepers are excluded from the count, submarines are included; ‘aircraft carriers’ also includes helicopter carriers
 Source: Global Firepower (2025); IISS (2025)

2.2.1. Growing Split between the US and Europe

As described above, NATO is the cornerstone of European defense, with the US playing a crucial role in deterrence and military support. Figures 1, 2, and 6 (see Additional Figures) demonstrate that the US is the strongest and most capable member of NATO, especially in airpower, strategic enablers, and military investment. At least since Obama’s administration, the US has publicly and privately urged NATO allies to increase their defense spending to at least 2% of GDP and to develop capabilities independently of the US (NBC 2014; Niblett 2016). This push gained urgency during Donald Trump’s first presidency (2017–2021), which triggered profound anxiety across the continent, and has only intensified under his second administration. Trump’s transactional view of alliances, repeated criticisms of NATO as “obsolete,” and flirtations with US withdrawal fundamentally unsettled European assumptions about transatlantic security guarantees and undermined confidence in US leadership (Cook, L. 2025; Spatafora 2025; Ischinger 2025).

⁷ A significant amount of these capabilities is held by one member alone: Turkey, with 355,000 troops; 378,000 reserves; 1,679 tanks; 2,281 artillery pieces; 40 large vessels; 1 aircraft carrier.

⁸ Since 2018, the only Russian aircraft carrier, Admiral Kuznetsov, has been undergoing repairs. (Tiwari 2025)

Figure 2 – Airpower, strategic enablers⁹, and nuclear weapons

	Combat Aircraft and helicopters	Transport aircraft and helicopters	Special-mission aircraft ¹⁰	Tanker aircraft	Satellites	Nuclear warheads
USA	2 762	4 319	485	454	171	5 224
NATO without the USA ¹¹	1 327	2 533	184	40	44	515
EU	1 012	1 868	116	24	36	515
Russia	1351	1007	92	12	93	5 889

Notes: Numbers represent the estimated amount of equipment in active service, e.g., equipment in storage is not listed.
 Source: Global Firepower (2025); IISS (2025); ICAN (2025)

This ambiguity, where US leaders demand increased European military spending while simultaneously playing with the idea of withdrawal from Europe, has amplified distrust and fragmented alliance cohesion. Ischinger (2025) describes a significant ‘trust gap’ emerging within the transatlantic alliance. European leaders increasingly question the US’s willingness and reliability in upholding NATO’s security commitments, fueling concerns about alliance instability, exacerbated by Trump’s proposals for acquiring Greenland or discussions about leaving NATO entirely (Aitken 2025; Griffiths 2025; Weizman 2025).

2.2.2. European response

The European Union has made progress in strengthening defense cooperation, but its role remains secondary to NATO (Korniienko 2023). Recent initiatives, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), have aimed to coordinate defense projects among EU members, while the European Defence Fund (EDF) has provided financing for joint military research and arms production (Anghel and Damen 2025; Korniienko 2023). The EU has also

⁹ Anghel et al. (2025) - Critical military and technological capabilities that allow for the effective deployment, coordination, and sustainability of advanced defense operations. These include airlift capacity, air defense systems, surveillance, and communication infrastructure (such as satellites), and intelligence capabilities—elements without which large-scale or high-tech military actions cannot be effectively carried out.

¹⁰ refers to a variety of aircraft types, including: aerial reconnaissance (AEW), anti-submarine warfare (ASW), maritime patrol (MEP), and electronic warfare (EW)

¹¹ Tukey alone: 234 combat aircraft; 361 transport aircraft; 21 special mission aircraft; 5 tankers; 2 satellites; 0 nuclear weapons

played a central role in coordinating military aid to Ukraine, demonstrating its growing influence in security affairs (International Crisis Group 2025).

However, disunity of the union in fundamental questions about security continues to limit the EU's effectiveness as a defense actor (Herbelot 2024). The relative disunity can be seen in different responses to Trump's call for increased military spending. For example, the Estonian and Latvian foreign ministers are positive about Trump's rhetoric towards NATO allies, arguing it is something that was supposed to be done 10 years ago, and it will only strengthen the alliance (Aitken 2025). Others, such as the former German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, were less enthusiastic about "dancing to Donald Trump's tune", expressing irritation over the idea of sending troops to Ukraine (Adler 2025). Another example can be the responses to von der Leyen's 'ReArm Europe' proposal, which seeks €150 billion in joint borrowing for defense (Pugnet 2025a). Although EU members agree on the need to address defensive shortcomings, some oppose collective financing, particularly nations skeptical of deeper defense integration on the European level (such as Hungary, Sweden, or the Netherlands) (Deconinck 2025; Pugnet 2025b; Schultz 2025). Stewart (2025) predicts that the EU's effectiveness will remain limited because of the limited role of the EU in foreign policy and the need for all member states to be on board for major changes to happen.

Yet, there is a growing consensus among European leaders that there is a need for foreign policy strategy independent of the US, demonstrated by the recent meetings of European leaders in London and Paris, resulting in talks about the "coalition of willing", which would be a group of countries willing to send troops to Ukraine if a ceasefire is achieved between Ukraine and Russia (Fornousek and Cadier 2025). This event is also notable because it took place outside of any formal EU or NATO structures, highlighting the sense of urgency and the fact that nation-state leaders still mainly shape defense.

2.2.3. The Next Step

Mölling and Schütz (2025) argue that before Europe can replace US military contributions, it must first replace something much more difficult: US political and military leadership. They argue that Europe first needs to define its own "way of war", i.e., a political and military strategy suitable to the available European posture, political coherence (or lack thereof), resources, and geo-strategic realities (Mölling and Schütz 2025). This implies a different approach to warfighting (including doctrine and concepts), industrial bases, and military cooperation that constitutes a profound change and requires significant resources (Mölling and Schütz 2025).

Kriton-Darling (2025) further states that Europe's collective defense will depend on its economic and social stability. These points resonate with the constructivist perspective (see Section 3.2.).

Furthermore, Herbelot (2024) identifies fragmented European defense procurement as a key obstacle to achieving strategic autonomy from the US. Despite a combined EU defense budget of €326 billion in 2024 (EU 2025), inefficiencies prevent the effective use of these resources. Herbelot (2024) highlights three issues: lack of interoperability, causing logistical problems; limited defense-industrial capacity, slowing production; and a high dependence on non-European suppliers for 78% of military procurement, with 64% from the US alone (Kayali 2025). Draghi (2024: 54-58) also emphasizes Europe's vulnerability due to its dependency on imports of critical raw materials from non-aligned countries. To address some of these concerns, the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) aims to increase European-made defense production to 50% by 2030 and 60% by 2035 (Wolff 2024), yet the question of unity remains unanswered. Burilkov and Wolff (2025) estimate that Europe needs an additional 300,000 troops, 1,400 tanks, and 700 artillery pieces to meet its security needs.

Connected to this debate is the renewed debate about European nuclear capabilities. If the US plans to move out of Europe, Europe could be exposed to nuclear blackmail by Russia. That is why we currently see Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk and newly elected German Chancellor Friedrich Merz talking about acquiring nuclear weapons for their respective countries (Benner 2025; Cienski and Kość 2025), and France and UK talking about the possibility of replacing the US nuclear umbrella with their own (Chevreuil and Horschig 2025).

Yet, the main focus of the current debate is whether the future of European security will be shaped through NATO or a different structure. Anghel and Damen (2025), Polyakova et al. (2023), Johnson (2025), and Mölling and Schütz (2025) advocate maintaining and reinforcing NATO, arguing for modernization and increased European contributions to reduce dependence on the US. Contrariwise, Herbelot (2024), Möller (2025), Schultz (2025), Ischinger (2025), and the International Crisis Group (2025) suggest moving toward strategic autonomy through a separate European-led security structure or a fully independent European Defense Union (EDU). Another possibility is the creation of a European Army, something President Zelensky called for in his speech at the Munich Security Conference (Jordan 2025). Outside of these two main approaches is Karsten Jung (2023), who proposes a dual-track approach that combines NATO deterrence with a new Concert of Europe framework designed to institutionalize diplomacy among major European powers, including Russia. Jung (2023) argues that this could

offer Europe a balanced structure that both strengthens security guarantees and mitigates long-term geopolitical tensions.

Scenario analyses capture this uncertainty. Spatafora (2025) outlines two potential paths for US disengagement: the “Tit for Tat” scenario, in which NATO becomes a bargaining chip for US commercial gain, and “So Long, Europe,” where Washington pivots decisively to the Indo-Pacific. Anghel and Damen (2025) present several scenarios for the future. These are 1) the continuation of the current NATO-centered structure, 2) a strengthened European pillar within NATO, 3) full EU-led defense autonomy, 4) fragmented regional alliances, and 5) a cooperative pan-European architecture with improved EU-Russia relations. Both analyses stress that Europe's future security will significantly depend on its ability to enhance its strategic autonomy and defense capabilities amid these varying scenarios.

2.3. Conclusion of the Current Debates

It is clear that Europe's security architecture stands at a crossroads defined by strategic uncertainty, shifting geopolitical alliances, and newly emerged questions regarding its reliance on US security guarantees. The historical evolution of Europe's defense framework, from NATO's Cold War origins through the expansion and post-Cold War integration of Eastern Europe, has been deeply shaped by persistent American leadership, which now faces an unprecedented challenge due to the US strategic realignment toward the Indo-Pacific and internal political uncertainties. As European nations grapple with significant capability gaps in critical areas like logistics, nuclear deterrence, and C4ISR¹², the continent faces difficult choices between strengthening the existing NATO structure, pursuing greater EU autonomy through an independent European Defense Union, or potentially adopting a hybrid approach reminiscent of the Concert of Europe model. Moreover, internal political divisions, varying threat perceptions, and economic constraints within Europe itself complicate consensus-building, potentially hindering rapid adaptation to the evolving strategic landscape. Amidst these complexities and uncertainties, one thing is clear. European security architecture is at a breaking point, with the current format no longer sustainable. Therefore, Europeans will have to do no less than rebuild the political and security architecture of their continent.

¹² these capabilities are mainly achieved through the strategic enablers listed in Figure 2

3. Theoretical Framework

Given this multilayered complexity, employing a robust theoretical framework is essential. It provides analytical clarity, reduces bias, and enhances the explanatory and strategic value of each scenario, thereby offering valuable insights into the uncertain future of Europe's defense landscape. Against this background, two theories have been chosen: structural realism and constructivism.

Structural realism, grounded in positivism and rational choice, seeks to explain and predict state behavior through generalizable patterns. Its strength lies in showing how systemic constraints shape strategic outcomes. By contrast, constructivism adopts an interpretivist stance, emphasizing how identities, norms, and culture shape political behavior and interests. It focuses on how social meanings evolve historically, helping to explain ideational shifts and the legitimation of certain practices.

Together, the two theories offer a comprehensive lens. Structural realism provides a clear analytical framework focused on systemic pressures: power, survival, and security. Constructivism enriches this perspective by highlighting how ideas, identities, collective memory, and perceptions influence how states interpret and respond to those pressures. Integrating both theories thus provides a comprehensive analytical lens; structural realism clarifies the systemic structure, while constructivism interprets the meanings and perceptions that states attribute to that structure.

3.1. Structural Realism (Neorealism)

Realist theory emerged in response to the interwar idealistic¹³ paradigm, which failed to explain the aggression leading to World War II. Scholars such as Edward H. Carr (1939) and Hans J. Morgenthau (1948) formed an alternative positivist theory to the idealist approach. They are referred to as 'Classical Realists' (Waltz 1979). Their theory starts with the ontological premise of an imperfect world driven by power-seeking human nature (Morgenthau 1948). For realists, the state is the main unit of analysis, which is composed of power-seeking agents. Power is the main explanatory variable for behavior. Classical realists were successful in explaining the rise

¹³ The idealist paradigm of international relations, dominant after World War I and before World War II, emphasized the potential for international cooperation, the rule of law, and institutions like the League of Nations to prevent war and promote peace. It was grounded in a belief in human rationality, moral progress, and the power of diplomacy over military force (Fernandes 2016).

of Nazi Germany, yet they failed to predict the relative stability which emerged with the bipolar world order of the Cold War.

In response, Kenneth Waltz (1979) in *Theory of International Politics* criticized classical realism's focus on individuals, arguing it leaves too much variation to explain a single recurring phenomenon: war (Waltz 1979: 67-68). He argues that the unit-level and the systemic-level interact, with the system serving as a constraint for the units (Waltz 1979). Each system has a structure, which has three components: the ordering principle¹⁴; the specification of different units, and the distribution of capabilities¹⁵ (Waltz 1979: 82). Structural realism thus shifts the cause of power-seeking from individual ambition to systemic pressure, explaining international outcomes through a simplified set of assumptions and variables. However, this emphasis has prompted debate over the balance between agency and structure. In this thesis, the tension is central: while systemic forces like the US disengagement and Russian revisionism shape the strategic context, the varied responses of European states reflect agency. The scenario methodology thus operationalizes both dimensions (see Section 4), acknowledging that Europe's future security architecture will be co-determined by material constraints and the strategic choices of actors within them.

3.1.1. Structure, Power, and Survival

For structural realists, the structure of the international system is the opposite of hierarchical domestic structure (Waltz 1979: 82-88). Therefore, the international system is anarchic, meaning there is no central authority that can subordinate states to its will (Waltz 1979: 82-88; Mearsheimer 2001: 30).

Like classical realists, structural realists treat states as the main unit of analysis. States are seen as sovereign entities that face similar tasks and function but differ in size, form, and capacity (Waltz 1979: 96). These differences are based on states' structural position, determined by geography and power distribution (Waltz 1979: 97). For realists, power is determined by the material factors that can be measured, essential for a positivist approach (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). Mearsheimer (2001: 60-80) distinguishes between direct (military assets) and latent power (socio-economic capacity to generate military strength).¹⁶

¹⁴ which state(s) is/are (not) at the top

¹⁵ measured in material resources

¹⁶ e.g., size of population, wealth, technology, natural resources, energy sources, etc.

In an anarchic world with limited resources, survival becomes the main goal, driving states' security concerns (Mearsheimer 2001: 31). As a result, states perceive other states as potential threats since each state is uncertain about intentions of others (Mearsheimer 2001: 31). Therefore, states act solely out of self-interest, creating a self-help system where each provides for themselves (Mearsheimer 2001: 31). States are seen as rational actors that base decisions on cost-benefit analysis, yet they operate with imperfect information (Mearsheimer 2001: 32-36). This can lead states to misrepresent their strengths and weaknesses or conceal their true aims. They can also miscalculate the costs and benefits, leading to unfavorable outcomes such as unnecessary war¹⁷ (Mearsheimer 2001: 32-36). Therefore, building collective defense requires overcoming these structural constraints.

In a self-help system with no supreme authority, states quickly understand that to survive they need to acquire power, since power is the best provider of security (territorial integrity, sovereignty, etc.) and survival, since it serves as the best deterrent to potential aggressor (Mearsheimer 2001: 33). Power politics is therefore the focus of analysis for structural realists. States can have other goals, such as ideological or environmental goals, but they are of secondary importance, since once the state is conquered, it cannot pursue other goals (Mearsheimer 2001: 33).

The distribution of power among states also determines the polarity of the system. Structural realists distinguish between three types of distribution of power: multipolar,¹⁸ bipolar,¹⁹ and unipolar/hegemonic²⁰ (Mearsheimer 337-343; Waltz 1979: 129-130). This distribution of power can be applied to the system (e.g., the whole world) or to a particular region within the system (Europe, Northeast Asia, etc.) (Mearsheimer 2001: 40). Applied to Europe, there are three great powers (the UK, France, and Germany), and at least four other regional powers (Poland, Italy, Spain, and Turkey) (see Section 5.1.2.), each with different interests, capabilities, and varying levels of urgency in countering Europe's greatest power, Russia (see Section 5.1.2. and Figure 1 and 2). This underscores a key structural weakness of European NATO; without the US, there is no dominant European pole, weakening Europe's ability to act cohesively.

Within structural realism, there is disagreement on how much power states need for security purposes. Therefore, structural realists are split into two subfields: defensive and offensive.

¹⁷ e.g., the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, or the US invasion of Iraq in 2003

¹⁸ multiple states possess roughly similar power – the 19th-century Concert of Europe

¹⁹ two states possess similar capabilities – Cold War distribution of power

²⁰ one state possesses overwhelming capabilities over all others – the US after the Cold War till ~2010s

3.1.2. Defensive Realism

Defensive realists (including Waltz) argue that in an anarchic international system, states' efforts to increase their security, such as military buildup, often reduce the security of others, triggering a security dilemma and potentially an arms race (Jervis 1978: 49). Therefore, states²¹ are willing to balance other states since they are interested in maintaining the status quo to prevent unnecessary conflict (Walt 1987: 18). In an anarchic self-help system, states can engage in internal (economic and military buildup) or external (alliances) balancing (Waltz 1979: 118). Powerful states can take advantage of weaker states, therefore, weaker states form alliances, to balance the power of powerful states. Powerful states also engage in balancing, but they do so vis-à-vis other great powers to maintain their relative geopolitical position. Waltz (1979: 119) further writes that balancing behavior follows from "uncoordinated actions of states", implying that this is an observable result of combined action, even when it is not the intent. When balancing is dominant in the system, power-seeking states have less room to obtain their goals, as alliances of the threatened will obstruct aggressive behavior, and since each state is acting out of self-interest, the risk of defection is low (Walt 1987: 27-31). This gives less incentive for aggressive behavior and thus makes it more likely for the status quo to be maintained (Walt 1987: 27-33). This implies that if European states opt for balancing against Russia, the risk of conflict is low.

States can also choose to bandwagon, which is to align with the powerful and aggressive states (Walt 1987: 19-20). This can lead to situations where power-seeking emerging powers are rewarded for their behavior (they gain allies). When this strategy is dominant, competitive rivalries emerge which are prone to conflict, since emerging power sees its chances of gaining more power are high, while the dominant/status quo power fears further gain by the emerging power and restores to military action to maintain the status quo (Walt 1987: 21-22). Therefore, if European states choose to defect from the 'NATO camp' closer to Russia, the risk of conflict increases because Russia will gain the incentive to continue with its aggressive policies, prompting it to test NATO's unity further. Thus, the more defectors, the higher the chance of conflict.

²¹ not always, since some may still have aggressive intentions

Another central argument of defensive realists is built around the offense-defense imbalance, which favors defense²² (Jervis 1978). This influences the security dilemma and cooperation (Jervis 1978). Because of this imbalance, defensive realists argue that in most cases, it is rational for states to prefer defensive strategies and prevent (major) wars because the costs usually outweigh the benefits, and the risk of miscalculation is too high (Glaser 1994). Defensive realists view the pursuit of offensive strategies, such as the pursuit of hegemony, as irrational and ascribe such behavior to misunderstandings and overreaction when states face security dilemmas; or to domestic factors (Glaser 1994; Jervis 1978; Taliaferro 2001; Walt 1987; Waltz 1979). This strengthens the defensive realist argument since it implies a focus on various levels of analysis (domestic and structural). However, it also weakens the argument since not all empirical observations can be explained by the structure of the system, which may require additional theories to explain a certain phenomenon. Defensive realists thus risk falling within the paradigm of classical realism when they use domestic variables to explain international phenomena (Taliaferro 2001).

3.1.3. Offensive Realism

Offensive realists, most famously represented by John J. Mearsheimer, address these limitations by explaining state behavior purely through the structure of the system. In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer (2001: 30-33) adds to the already mentioned assumptions (1. Anarchy is the ordering principle of the international system; 2. States are rational actors; 3. States cannot be certain about others' intentions; 4. Power is the main feature of politics; 5. Survival is the primary goal of states) one more assumption: 6) states possess some offensive military capability.²³ This leads to 'patterns of behavior' (Mearsheimer 2001: 32-40). First is the already mentioned system of self-help. Second, states fear each other as they might both have the capacity and intention to attack one another; thus, to survive, no one can be trusted (Mearsheimer 2001: 32-40). This pattern leads to the process of power maximization, meaning that states opt to increase their share of world power by all means (diplomatic, economic, military), at the expense of others, leading to aggressive behavior to turn the balance of power in one's favor (Mearsheimer 2001: 32-40). This can explain the dynamic between Russia and NATO after the Cold War. The Eastern European states felt threatened by Russia; thus, they

²² sometimes more than in other instances; it changes as technologies progress (during WW1, the imbalance was in favor of defense much more than in WW2, it changed because of advances in technologies such as tanks and airplanes)

²³ i.e., any military technology or personnel, even seemingly purely defensive, such as air defense missiles, can be used for some offensive purpose as well

opted to align with NATO to increase their security, which in turn increased Russian insecurity about NATO closing in on its borders, leading to counterbalancing and aggressive behavior (e.g., war in Georgia and Ukraine, and hybrid operations in NATO countries). Which again leads to European states feeling threatened and thus increasing their power.

Therefore, relative gains are of crucial importance for offensive realists, since “one state’s gains are another’s loss”, which leads to a “zero-sum mentality” where opportunities for cooperation are scarce (Mearsheimer 2001: 32-40). Alliances may form (either by balancing or bandwagoning), but it is difficult because of states’ consideration for relative gains²⁴ and concerns about cheating²⁵ (Mearsheimer 2001: 51-52). Thus, offensive realists reject the logic of balancing power. They argue instead that states seek survival by increasing their power as much as possible, leading to security competition, which is difficult to overcome.

Offensive realism offers a set of prescriptions for states on how to survive. First, major powers have either regional or hegemonic ambitions, which is important for their survival since only at the top can states feel relatively secure²⁶ (Mearsheimer 2001: 140). Second, states should strive to have as prosperous and effective an economy as possible, ideally more prosperous than all other states, since “economic might is the foundation of military might” (Mearsheimer 2001: 143-145). States have several strategies for increasing their power. They can: 1) go to war; 2) ‘blackmail’ opponents by the threat of force; 3) employ ‘bait and bleed’ strategy; provoking a long-term high-cost war on rivals; 4) or a ‘bloodletting’ strategy; ensuring that wars rivals fight protract (Mearsheimer 2001: 147-155). On the other hand, to prevent or contain aggressive states from turning the balance of power, states can opt for balancing²⁷ or ‘buck-passing’, a strategy of ‘passing’ the task of checking/fighting the aggressor to other states to save potential costs, usually done by improving relations with the aggressor (Mearsheimer 2001: 156-159). Mearsheimer (2001: 159-162) argues that states favor ‘buck-passing’ over ‘balancing’ due to potential benefits and relative gains. He notes that there is a strong incentive to ‘buck-pass’ or ‘free-ride’ inside balancing coalitions. Finally, states should avoid appeasement and bandwagoning since the more powerful state has greater relative gains from the arrangement, thus, it puts the bandwagoner “at the mercy of the more powerful state” (Mearsheimer 2001: 162-164). Applied to Europe, during the Cold War, European NATO members engaged in

²⁴ no state wants to have the worse part of the deal, i.e., one’s state’s relative power increases more through cooperation than the other one’s

²⁵ reverse logic, i.e., one state invests less into the cooperation, thus it gains more from it

²⁶ by having the most wealth and power

²⁷ similar to defensive realism

balancing against the Soviet Union under US leadership. In the post-Cold War period, the absence of an immediate threat led to a shift toward buck-passing, with European states increasingly relying on the United States to shoulder security responsibilities. This long-standing dependence now leaves Europe vulnerable, as it lacks the autonomous capacity to meet its security needs should the US withdraw. The shift in US focus toward the Indo-Pacific, driven by China's rise, exemplifies the realist logic of power balancing. As the US rebalances, European states face revived self-help pressures. But their lack of power maximization in the post-Cold War era exposes a structural dependence that offensive realists would interpret as a vulnerability ready for exploitation.

From a broader structural realist perspective, Europe's current strategic uncertainty reflects systemic dependencies and internal fragmentation. For decades, US hegemony within NATO allowed European states to defer strategic responsibility, a dynamic that suppressed balancing behavior and institutionalized buck-passing. As the international system reverts to multipolarity and the US pivots away from Europe, the EU's struggle to project autonomous power reveals a structural dilemma: lacking a dominant pole, fragmented interests, and insufficient capabilities in areas like C4ISR, air defense, and nuclear deterrence, Europe remains ill-equipped for self-help. Whether Europe can overcome this weakness and act as a cohesive balancer, or remain a collection of self-interested states, will be a decisive test in the coming years (Waltz 1993; Hyde-Price 2008).

3.1.4. Critique of Realism

While structural realism offers a systemic explanation of international politics, its emphasis on military, material power, and the anarchic structure of the international system has drawn considerable critique. Structural realism is overly focused on the distribution of capabilities, which blinds it to the role of domestic politics, ideational factors, and socio-political context in shaping state behavior. This leads to an overly deterministic outlook that struggles to account for change and variation in state preferences or the emergence of cooperation in a supposedly self-help system. This is why realists were unsuccessful in predicting the creation of the EU as a political union, since it rejects the logic of anarchy and state sovereignty, instead predicting a fragmented Europe after the end of the Cold War (Mearsheimer 1990). The structural realist model tends to ignore how political identity, institutional developments, and norms can shape strategic decisions. By reducing international politics to structural constraints and strategic balancing, it often neglects how socially constructed interests and interpretations of social and

material forces influence outcomes in world affairs. Therefore, in this thesis, a second theory has been developed to account for the shortcomings of realism.

3.2. Constructivism

The constructivist school emerged as a critique of materialist IR theories. Unlike mainstream materialist theories, such as Realism, Liberalism, or Marxism, which focus predominantly on military and economic means, constructivism argues that the social reality of international relations is fundamentally built through shared meanings, perceptions, and intersubjective understandings (Wendt 1999: 8-96). Constructivists argue that power and interests are shaped by ideas, not just material capabilities, which shape their meaning and significance (Wendt 1999: 90-96, 370-378). In doing so, constructivism shifts the focus from “what states have” to “what states believe,” centering analysis on how identities are formed, reproduced, and challenged over time. While centered on intersubjective meanings, constructivism retains a positivist lens, as Wendt (1999: 77-89) argues, shared ideas can have observable causal effects that can be systematically studied. Once intersubjective meanings are institutionalized, they stabilize into relatively observable patterns of behavior, allowing scholars to formulate and test causal claims about how ideas, identities, and norms shape international outcomes. Therefore, constructivism combines an interpretive ontology with a positivist commitment to empirical inquiry and causal explanation.

3.2.1. Actors, Ideas, and Identity

In the *Social Theory of International Politics*, Alexander Wendt (1999: 8-10) first makes it clear, that he agrees with the realist and liberal emphasis on the state as the primary unit of analysis in international politics, mainly due to its role in the regulation of organized violence, given its monopoly over such violence within defined territories. However, he offers a different definition of the state. Wendt (1999: 193-245) sees states as intentional corporate actors whose identities and interests are shaped through social interaction. This ongoing social process is rooted in Wendt’s assertion that social life is “ideas all the way down,” meaning that even seemingly objective, material realities, such as power and military capacity, gain meaning only through the social interpretations that states collectively assign to them (Wendt 1999: 90-96). Ideas, in this context, include shared norms, beliefs, values, and expectations that shape how actors interpret the world and act within it. Ideational structures shape what actions are seen as appropriate or legitimate, not by coercion but through shared meaning.

Wendt notes that even the mainstream materialist theories acknowledge that ideas do play a role, but he critiques these theories for relegating ideas, ideologies, and identities to residual explanations, used only to “mop up” what is left when other explanations fall short (Wendt 1999: 92-93), as seen in the defensive realist logic. The mainstream theories treat power, interests, and institutions as idea-free baselines against which the role of ideas is measured (Wendt 1999: 92-101). Therefore, the debate is not about whether ideas matter, but how much do they matter. In contrast to mainstream IR, constructivism argues that the distribution of power in international politics is deeply intertwined with the distribution of interests, and these interests are themselves significantly constituted by ideas (Wendt 1999: 135). Consequently, power maintains its significance precisely because it is given meaning by ideas (Wendt 1999: 135-136). Thus, the logic is that ideas determine how power is understood, pursued, and wielded, and material capabilities cannot be separated from the ideational structures in which they are embedded.

Thus, a particularly important aspect of constructivism is its theory of identity. Constructivists argue that identity is relational and socially constructed; it emerges from how actors define themselves in relation to others (Veen 2011: 28; Wendt 1999: 224-225). Political identity is not fixed or intrinsic; it is shaped through repeated interaction and recognition (Veen 2011: 28; Wendt 1999: 224-225). Identity formation shapes interests and justifies behavior. Moreover, identity encompasses both self-perception and how others perceive it. Because identities are produced through practice, they are both stable and potentially transformable. This insight is crucial to understanding international change.

This construction of identity is not only international but deeply domestic. As Bozdağlıoğlu (2003: 160–161) argues, states possess no essential identity or interest prior to their engagement with others; instead, these are defined and redefined through ongoing interaction. Moreover, as Geppert (2011: 347) notes, “the process of national identity construction cannot be detached from the socio-political setting in which it takes place.” Institutions, political elites, media, and historical memory all contribute to the evolution of state identities and, in turn, to the way states behave in global politics.

This theoretical insight becomes especially significant in the European context, where the lack of a unified strategic identity hampers coherent defense planning. European leaders’ interpretations of alliance commitments or the concept of “strategic autonomy” are not uniform but shaped by divergent national identities and discourses. Countries such as Poland or the Baltic states, with deeply embedded Russophobia, prioritize deterrence and NATO alignment,

while states like Spain or Hungary exhibit strategic ambiguity. These divergences, rooted in national self-understanding rather than threat proximity, illustrate the constructivist insight that political behavior reflects collective meaning, not just material interest.

3.2.2. Culture and Structure

The focus on meaning also brings about the importance of knowledge. Wendt (1999: 141-145) differentiates between 1) private (domestic) knowledge²⁸ and 2) socially shared knowledge, known as culture. Culture permeates all social life through shared knowledge, influencing perceptions, norms, rules, institutions, ideologies, organizations, interactions, and state behavior (Wendt 1999: 141-145). Cultural frameworks shape how states interpret threats, form alliances, or define appropriate conduct. As such, national interests, such as survival, autonomy, economic prosperity, and collective self-esteem, are not objectively given but are socially constructed through interaction and identity formation (Wendt 1999: 198-202).

Constructivists also agree with realists on the fact that social structures do have an effect that is not reducible to agents and their interactions (Wendt 1999: 139). Wendt identifies the structure of any social system, including the international system, as composed of three interrelated elements: material conditions, interests, and ideas (Wendt 1999: 139). While these components are analytically distinct, they function together within one cohesive social structure (Wendt 1999: 139). Crucially, the meanings attributed to material conditions, and consequently the interests derived from them, depend on shared ideas and collective understandings among actors (Wendt 1999: 139). States act based on the meanings they assign to others and their environment (Wendt 1999: 140). Therefore, the social system is structured by the distribution of ideas and knowledge among actors, and thus, international politics cannot be understood without examining how meanings are produced, sustained, and contested among states (Wendt 1999: 189).

Mölling and Schütz (2025) emphasize that before Europe can build a coherent defense architecture, it must first define its “way of war”, a cultural framework that includes shared ideas about what threats to confront and how to respond. This reflects Wendt’s (1999) view that culture and shared knowledge guide behavior. Without a common ideational structure, the material capacities of European countries remain fragmented and underutilized. Thus, what

²⁸ held individually by states due to domestic political and ideological factors

appears as a structural weakness (see Section 3.1.1.) is, from this lens, a manifestation of ideational fragmentation.

3.2.3. Reproduction of Anarchy

Based on this, from a constructivist perspective, the logic of international anarchy is not predetermined. Anarchy, characterized simply by the absence of overarching authority, does not inherently dictate how states must behave (Wendt 1999: 308-312). Instead, the behaviors, relationships, and social structures built through states' interactions determine the logic and meaning of anarchy. Wendt (1999: 246-308) identifies three cultures of anarchy: Hobbesian (enmity), Lockean (rivalry), and Kantian (cooperation). These cultures emerge from patterns of behavior and shared understandings, not from the material condition of anarchy itself. Once established, they tend to reproduce through state practice, becoming relatively stable yet always open to transformation. Thus, as Wendt famously noted, "anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt 1999: 310).

Moreover, constructivism underscores the mutual constitution of agents and structures. States and the international system co-constitute one another, each shape and is shaped by the other (Wendt 1999: 327-333). As Adler (2005: 10) notes, this dynamic co-constitution, referred to as "structuration," is central to the constructivist ontology. This approach breaks down the rigid separation between domestic and international politics by recognizing that internal political structures, public discourses, and societal values shape how states behave abroad.

This framework allows constructivism to account for both continuity and transformation in international politics. When identities and interests are embedded in institutionalized practices, they tend to reinforce the status quo. Actors develop a stake in preserving the structures that support their interests, creating stability. However, because identities and interests are constituted through social practice, they are open to evolution if the practices and shared meanings that sustain them change. Wendt emphasizes that self-interest itself is a product of social systems; if the practices that produce it are not sustained, self-interest can change or disappear (Wendt 1999: 336-337). Ruggie (1998: 27) and Leander (2006: 19) similarly emphasize that transformation is a normal and recurrent feature of international politics, not an anomaly. Constructivism, by treating the past as a source of identity and legitimacy, is uniquely equipped to explain how historical trajectories shape current behavior (Ruggie 1998: 27; Leander 2006: 19). Thus, constructivism does not simply explain how states act, but how they come to define who they are, what they want, and what kind of world they imagine themselves

to inhabit. This offers a powerful explanation for both the persistence and change of international norms, regimes, and institutional arrangements.

The relationship between Europe and Russia has historically been shaped by cycles of identity convergence and divergence. Following the Congress of Vienna in 1815, Russia was incorporated into the European order as a conservative great power committed to maintaining monarchical legitimacy (Palmer et al. 2020: 447-457). However, by the late nineteenth century, divergent paths in political development²⁹ widened the gap between Russia and Western Europe (Palmer et al. 2020: 567-575). After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Russia's self-identification as a revolutionary, anti-capitalist state radically redefined its relationship with the West (Palmer et al. 2020: 749-778).

Similarly, the initial post-Cold War optimism of the 1990s, which envisioned Russia as a partner in a liberal international order, gave way, after the unsuccessful capitalist reforms, to a reconstruction of Russia's identity as a sovereign, revisionist power resisting Western norms (Gessen 2023; Palmer et al. 2020: 1018-1024). The constructivist lens helps us see that the periods of rapprochement and decoupling were driven less by material factors and more by shifting collective identities, normative aspirations, and mutual perceptions. This interplay of identity formation and normative contestation with the structural constraints forms the ideational foundation of the scenario matrix (Figure 3). The framework accounts for how shifting collective meanings, not just material alignments, will shape the evolution of Europe's security architecture.

3.2.4. Post-functionalism: Constructivism and European (De)integration

Constructivism has gained influence in EU studies. Post-functionalism, while not a constructivist theory per se, draws heavily on constructivist insights. Developed by Hooghe and Marks (2009), it argues that governance involves not just solving functional problems but answering identity-based questions about who should govern. Unlike earlier theories which focused on elite bargaining and economic interdependence, post-functionalism highlights a shift from a "permissive consensus" to a "constraining dissensus," where mass publics increasingly challenge EU authority (Hooghe and Marks 2009: 5). This contestation stems less from economic concerns than from fears that integration threatens cultural cohesion and self-rule. As Hooghe and Marks (2009: 13) remark, "identity trumps efficiency".

²⁹ political liberalism in the west versus tsarist monarchic rule in Russia

Thus, post-functionalism posits that governance preferences are shaped by identity rather than utility. Authority is evaluated not only by outcomes but by its symbolic meaning, especially when supranational governance is perceived as crossing communal boundaries (Hooghe and Marks 2009: 9). This explains why integration has become politicized: it now implicates sovereignty, belonging, and collective identity (Hooghe and Marks 2009: 6–7). This insight is central to the scenarios developed in this thesis, as the viability of any European defense architecture depends not only on strategic or material considerations but on its resonance with national narratives and political culture.

These dynamics are especially clear in the domain of defense integration. While the material rationale for a more autonomous European defense posture is widely acknowledged, national publics and political elites remain divided over the appropriate institutional format, whether through NATO, an EU army, or flexible coalitions (see Section 2.3.3). Trump’s return to the presidency in 2025 has further intensified these debates. These are not merely pragmatic questions of defense strategy, but ideational struggles over identity and belonging, about who ‘we’ are, and who should be entrusted with Europe’s security. As post-functionalism and constructivism jointly emphasize, these choices are shaped as much by perceived cultural proximity and symbolic legitimacy as by material capabilities. In this sense, the trajectory of European defense will not be decided solely in war rooms or parliaments, but in the realm of public narratives, about who Europeans believe they are, who they are not, who they want to be, and who they believe they can rely on.

3.2.5. Critique of Constructivism

A key criticism of the constructivist approach is its limited capacity to offer clear predictions or generalizable causal mechanisms, which weakens its utility for policy planning and strategic decision-making. Because constructivism emphasizes the fluid and contingent nature of identities, norms, and meanings, it struggles to establish clear criteria for when and how change occurs. This openness, while valuable for capturing complexity, can lead to post hoc explanations that risk circularity, arguing that behavior changed because ideas changed, without always specifying why or how those ideas gained traction in the first place. Furthermore, constructivism tends to downplay the enduring influence of material capabilities and the security dilemma, particularly in cases of great power politics. As Mearsheimer (1995: 48) argues, constructivists “rarely show how these factors [norms and identities] trump the logic of realism, especially in the realm of security competition”. Thus, while constructivism enriches our understanding of how meaning shapes international politics, it can be criticized for lacking

methodological rigor and explanatory precision in comparison to structural realism. That is why this thesis combines these two approaches for the development of the scenarios.

4. Methodology

The research question of this thesis: “*What are the possible implications of a lower level of US engagement and an unclear level of European unity for the future of European security?*”, is answered through the deployment of a 2x2 scenario matrix methodology grounded in a combined framework of structural realism and constructivism (see Section 3). This approach rests on the core assumption that the future is open-ended and shaped by the dynamic interplay between material capabilities, systemic pressures, and ideational factors.

Following Kosow and Gaßner (2008: 13–16), the purpose of scenario building is not prediction, but the generation of orientational knowledge, a structured exploration of plausible futures that informs strategic thinking. Scenarios are used here as both heuristic tools and conceptual spaces to interrogate how competing assumptions and evolving geopolitical dynamics may interact.

Crucially, this methodology is not theory-neutral. Each axis of the matrix reflects one of the two theoretical lenses: the horizontal axis (US engagement) corresponds to structural realism’s focus on alliance structures and power balances; the vertical axis (European unity) captures constructivism’s emphasis on identity, collective memory, and shared norms (see Figure 3). This design captures both structural constraints and ideational interpretations shaping European responses. In doing so, this thesis contributes to bridging the divide between materialist and ideational approaches to international politics, demonstrating that plausible futures for European security cannot be understood through one lens alone. Instead, they emerge through the dynamic interplay of structural constraints and socially constructed meanings (Figure 4), a synthesis that the scenario sketching method is uniquely equipped to explore.

4.1. Scenario Framework Design

The 2x2 matrix model balances analytical rigor, conceptual clarity, and theoretical flexibility. This technique, widely used in scenario sketching, enables the exploration of uncertainties by placing two critical and uncertain variables at the axes of the matrix, thus generating four contrasting but equally plausible futures (Rhydderch 2019; Van Notten et al. 2003). Following the five-phase process for constructing scenarios, as proposed by Kosow and Gaßner (2008: 25), the following steps were implemented:

Identification of Key Factors: Based on theories of Structural Realism and Constructivism (Section 3), key factors influencing outcomes have been identified for each theory. These factors shape how the European states interpret and respond to strategic challenges.

For structural realism: geography; distribution of direct and latent power (military strength, material capabilities, defense industrial capacity, size of population, wealth); threat of Russia (based on Russian power and geographical proximity); security dilemma (stemming from threat perception).

For constructivism: collective memory and identity (World War II and Cold War experience; Western vs. Eastern Europe divide; level of integration in the European structures); threat perception (interpretation of Russian and American power and intentions); political identity, norms, and values (nation sovereignty vs. pan-Europeanism); narratives (integration vs. sovereignty).

Specification and Integration of Critical Uncertainties: Based on literature, historical and current developments (as described in Sections 2 and 3), the research question identifies two uncertainties as critical for the future development of European defense, balance of power, and identity. As Rhydderch (2017: 3) emphasizes, scenario construction should center on uncertainties that are both highly relevant and difficult to predict:

Level of European Cohesion: Ranging from high unity (shared threat perception, common defense policy, coordinated procurement) to fragmentation (divergent national interests, populist resistance, vetoes over integration, different perception of threat).

Degree of US Engagement: The operationalization of this variable is inspired by Spatafora (2025). The premise is that the US will, to some extent, retrench from Europe,³⁰ the question is how much. In Spatafora's (2025) view, low disengagement means the US uses retreat as leverage, without substantial withdrawal.³¹ A high level of US disengagement would mean US withdrawal from Europe, possibly disengaging from NATO if European countries do not pay at least 2% of their GDP on defense, while maintaining its nuclear umbrella.³²

Projection of Key Factor Trajectories: This phase considers how the identified drivers might evolve depending on the configuration of the two critical uncertainties. Thus, a high level of European unity may foster the pooling of resources and shared defense initiatives, while low unity could lead to fragmented responses, unilateral action, and diffusion to several blocks, each

³⁰ since the Obama administration, there has been a push for it (NBC 2014; Niblett 2016)

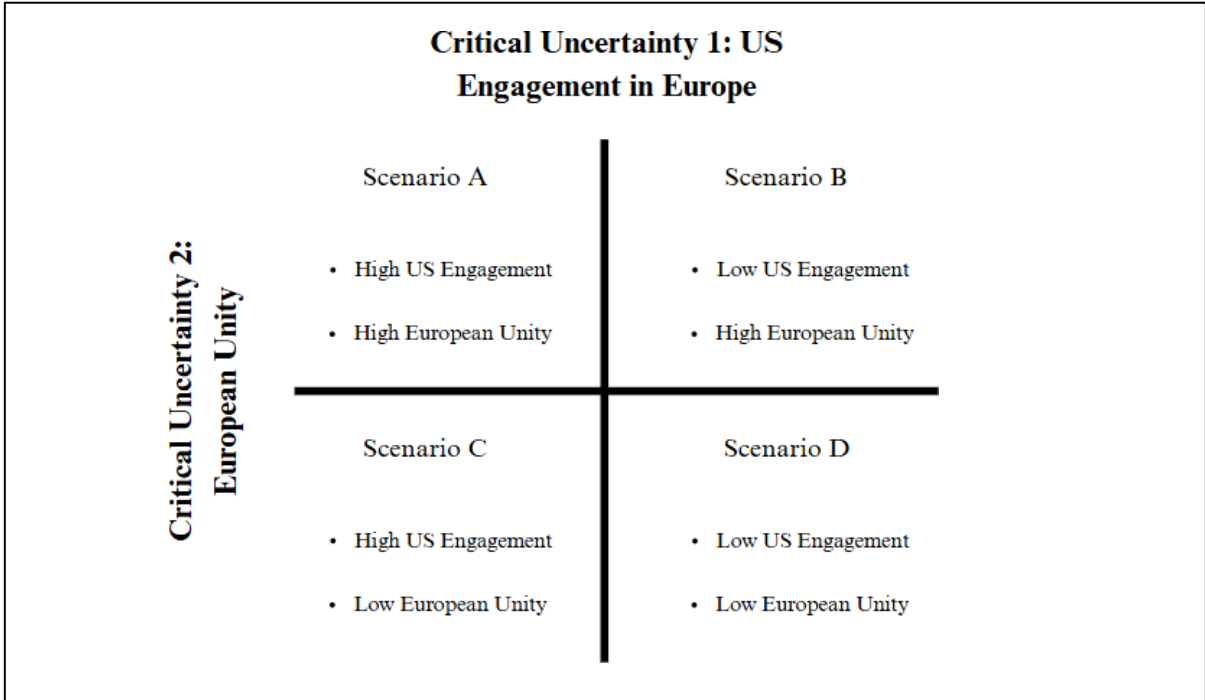
³¹ US keeps its nuclear umbrella, commitment to NATO, and its leadership in it, while retreating low number of troops

³² based on the premise that the US does not want to cause the spread of nuclear weapons as described by Spatafora 2025

with different interests. Similarly, sustained US engagement may reshape and reinforce transatlantic defense norms, while US retrenchment could accelerate the push for the strategic autonomy of Europeans (either individual states following their interests or Europe as a whole).

Scenario Logic and Matrix Construction: The interaction of the two uncertainties yields four scenarios:

Figure 3 – 2x2 Scenario matrix



Scenario Operationalization: Each scenario is developed into an internally consistent and plausible³³ narrative, integrating insights from structural realism and constructivism. These narratives incorporate structural, ideational, and cultural drivers to illustrate how each pathway could materialize and what implications it might hold for European defense.

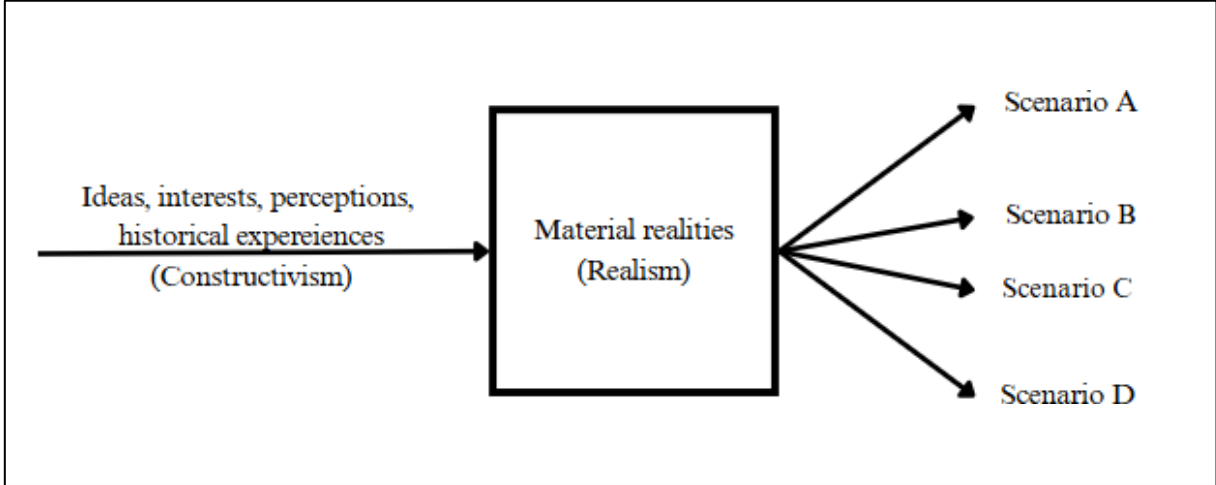
Section 5 is structured so that it first describes the material realities in Europe (e.g., realist input) and then dives into each scenario based on the 2x2 matrix (Figure 3). Each scenario combines the two mentioned uncertainties, which serve as a determinant of the dominant ideas, interests, perceptions, and historical experiences for each scenario (e.g., constructivist input) (Figure 4).

For the sake of realism, even a *high level of European unity* presupposes disagreements on highly politicized and identity-infringing issues³⁴ (such as the creation of a European Defense

³³ Following Kosow and Gaßner (2008), plausibility here refers to internal consistency and conceptual feasibility, not likelihood, ensuring that each scenario reflects a coherent and traceable logic even if it is not equally probable.
³⁴ Based on Hooghe and Marks (2008)

Union or Ukrainian accession to NATO). The key in this variable is that these disagreements are worked around or bypassed, while at the *low level of European unity*, they are not.

Figure 4 – The interplay between realism and constructivism



Each scenario presupposes that there will be no major breakthroughs in the Ukrainian war, which is what seems the most likely at the time of writing this thesis (Harvey et al. 2025).

Furthermore, Turkey and Greece are largely excluded from the detailed scenario narratives due to their relatively stable trajectories across all futures. Turkey has been for decades balancing between Europe, the US, and Russia, using its NATO membership and regional influence to pursue an autonomous, transactional foreign policy (Borschevskaya 2025; Bozdağlıoğlu 2003; Can 2024; Robinson 2023). Whether facing European cohesion or fragmentation, or high or low US engagement, given its history, Turkey is expected to maintain its flexible alignment, cooperating selectively while avoiding deep integration into any single bloc. Greece, meanwhile, plays a more reactive role (Economides 2020; Fasanotti 2025). In Scenarios A and B, it aligns with EU and NATO positions while focusing on economic recovery. In Scenarios C and D, it turns inward, again prioritizing economic recovery and aligning with dominant regional powers as needed. As such, neither country is expected to significantly shape the broader trajectory of European security in the scenarios presented.

Finally, in each scenario, Russia attempts to increase its influence in Europe. This is done for two reasons. First, the 2x2 matrix does not allow the inclusion of third uncertainty, which in this case would be *‘Russian reintegration into European structures or continued hostility.’* Thus, to account for this uncertainty as well, a 3x3 matrix would have to be developed, creating too many scenarios to develop meaningfully, making the analysis overly complex and less communicable (Dean 2019; Kosow and Gaßner 2008; Rhydderch 2017), and it is beyond the

scope of this study. Second, there is little reason to believe that Russia will attempt to reproach European NATO allies in a goodwill anytime soon. The Russian invasion of Ukraine started under the pretext of NATO expansion to Ukraine, a red line for Russia (Middtun 2023). Furthermore, the 2023 Russian foreign strategy concept states that Russia aims to counter US hegemony in global affairs (e.g., countering NATO), it aims to create a multi-polar world order, and it aims to protect Russian citizens (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2023). Thus, Russia continues to employ hybrid warfare tactics, including cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic coercion against European states (Clark 2020). Therefore, Russia is approached in each scenario as hostile towards NATO and the EU. This does not mean that in some scenarios (Scenarios C and D) some European countries will not attempt to reapproach Russia on their own, or that Russia will not attempt to reapproach some individual states. It means that Russia will be hostile towards a united Europe/NATO.

4.2 Scenario Typology

According to Van Notten et al. (2003), this scenario design qualifies as an exploratory, qualitative, and complex typology. It reflects an intuitive and participatory process relying on academic theory rather than quantified simulations (Van Notten et al. 2003). This methodology enables the inclusion of both structural/material constraints and ideational/socially constructed factors, ensuring that both causal mechanisms and cultural discourses are considered. Van Notten et al. (2003) outline the following typology:

Inclusion of norms: Scenarios are descriptive; therefore, the inclusion of norms should be limited to the theoretical input of Structural Realism and Constructivism.

Vantage point: May 30, 2025.

Subject of scenario study³⁵: Area-based (Europe) and issue-based (European defense).

Temporal and spatial scope: A medium-term time horizon of approximately 10 to 15 years has been selected for this thesis. This duration strikes a balance between analytical depth and plausibility, allowing sufficient time for significant shifts in defense posture, institutional reforms, and alliance dynamics to take shape while avoiding the excessive speculation that often accompanies longer-term projections. The geographic scope of the scenarios is centered on Europe, including both EU and non-EU countries, mainly the UK, Russia, Ukraine, and Norway, which are directly affected by shifts in the continent's security architecture. An

³⁵ Van Notten et al. (2003) distinguish between issue-based, area-based, and institution-based

external actor, the United States, is also included due to their defining influence on European defense policy. This provides a solid foundation for examining plausible developments in European security amid growing geopolitical uncertainty.

Scenario content characteristics: The temporal orientation of this scenario analysis is a chain scenario approach (opposite to the end-state approach). This means that the scenarios trace the causal and mutually constitutive processes through which different futures may unfold. In terms of dynamic structure, the scenarios are of a peripheral character,³⁶ they account for unexpected developments, political shocks, and disruptive events that may not follow a linear trajectory or fit into existing trends. Finally, regarding the level of integration,³⁷ the scenario analysis links shifts in European security architecture with broader developments in transatlantic relations, intra-EU politics, and the evolution of collective defense narratives, as shaped by the theoretical insights from structural realism and constructivism (Section 3).

Dean (2019: 5) emphasizes that scenario techniques excel under conditions of radical uncertainty, where traditional models fail to offer reliable foresight. This methodology is particularly useful for policy-relevant research, as it encourages creative thinking and strategic reflection beyond the constraints of current trends or linear extrapolations. By combining scenario typology with the selected 2x2 matrix framework, this analysis remains both analytically robust and flexible. In doing so, it produces a comprehensive and dynamic vision of how European security could evolve, depending on how political will, alliance cohesion, and identity discourses interact over the coming decade.

4.3. Scenario Data

The development of the scenarios in this thesis relies on a combination of theoretical insights, expert commentary, policy documents, and secondary data drawn from academic and institutional sources. Empirical inputs include strategic foresight publications and scenario-building exercises conducted by organizations such as, the European Parliamentary Research Service (Anghel and Damen 2025), the Institute for the Study of War (Harvey 2025), the EU Institute for Security Studies (Spatafora 2025), the International Crisis Group (2025), and the Atlantic Council (Arak 2025; Grigas 2025). These sources inform plausible assumptions

³⁶ “describe a discontinuous path to the future“(Van Notten et al. 2003: 433)

³⁷ “scenarios can be characterized by the *level of integration* that addresses the extent in which components relevant to the subject of a study are incorporated and brought together to form a whole.” (Van Notten et al. 2023: 434)

regarding strategic trajectories, defense postures, and alliance dynamics across the four scenarios.

Additionally, projections from key national and supranational security strategies, such as the EU's 2022 Strategic Compass, Russia's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept, and the US 2022 National Defense Strategy, are integrated to assess shifts in defense priorities, strategic culture, and threat perceptions. These are complemented by insights from contemporary political discourse tracked through reputable outlets such as *Foreign Policy*, *BBC*, *CNN*, *The Guardian*, and *Politico*.

Structural factors, such as military expenditure, capability development, and force integration, are grounded in quantitative data from sources like SIPRI (2025), NATO (2024) report, Eurostat (2024), and the IMF (2025), as well as qualitative sources, such as Spatafora (2025) or Anghel and Damen (2025). These inform assessments of burden-sharing, procurement trends, and Europe's material readiness under each scenario.

Together, these varied sources enable the construction of empirically grounded yet forward-looking scenario narratives. They reflect current institutional trends and political developments while also incorporating uncertainty, divergence, and potential turning points relevant to the future of European security.

4.4. Scenario Sketching Limitations

While scenario sketching offers a valuable method for exploring future trajectories under conditions of uncertainty, it comes with several methodological and empirical limitations that must be acknowledged.

First, the lack of reliable data on military production capabilities and industrial build-up potential within NATO member states and European Union countries poses a significant constraint. While data on defense spending, procurement trends, and equipment inventories are widely available (e.g., via SIPRI, NATO, Global Firepower), comprehensive figures on the state of readiness and actual capacity to manufacture critical military hardware at scale remain classified, incomplete, or inconsistent. This makes it difficult to assess the real feasibility of rapid militarization under scenarios of US disengagement or heightened European strategic autonomy.

Second, the scenarios developed in this thesis do not explicitly incorporate fiscal and monetary policy constraints. This omits a critical aspect of political economy, namely the competing

budgetary demands on national governments and the potential trade-offs required, such as cuts to welfare spending or debt expansion, which could severely shape the political viability of various paths.

Third, a normative assumption underpins Scenarios A and B: a united Europe is assumed to pursue global actor ambitions, which may not hold true. Internal divisions, divergent national interests, and limited public support could just as well steer Europe toward a more inward-looking, regional defense posture, even in scenarios with relatively high unity. This reflects a limitation in the external validity of the scenarios, as they may overestimate Europe's willingness or ability to engage globally beyond its immediate neighborhood.

Finally, it is important to recognize the inherent epistemological limitations of scenario sketching. As a non-predictive tool, it is designed to explore plausible futures rather than determine the most likely one. This makes it ill-suited for capturing unforeseen "black swan" events or sudden strategic discontinuities (Kosow and Gaßner 2008: 22-23). Moreover, the reduction of complex international dynamics into two axes and four discrete scenarios necessarily sacrifices nuance and underrepresents interdependencies that characterize real-world policymaking (Kosow and Gaßner 2008: 22-23). Crucially, scenarios do not possess the falsifiability or reproducibility of scientific theories; they cannot generate insights in the same way as the natural sciences. Instead, they must adhere to the standards of qualitative inquiry, maintaining logical consistency, transparency, clearly defined scope, and explicitly stated premises (Gaßner and Kosow 2008: 22-23, 40).

In sum, while scenario sketching offers empirically grounded and theoretically informed pathways for the future of European security, they must be read as heuristic tools rather than as precise forecasts. Their primary function is to stimulate reflection, test assumptions, and illuminate the implications of strategic choices, not to predict the future (Dean 2019; Kosow and Gaßner 2008).

5. Scenario Sketching and Analysis

This section begins by outlining the material realities underpinning Europe's current strategic position, drawing on structural realist insights into the distribution of economic resources, military capabilities, energy security, and institutional constraints. These material foundations, e.g., Europe's latent and direct power, form the structural context within which any future trajectory must unfold. They determine the hard limits of what is possible, regardless of political intent or normative aspirations. However, material power alone does not dictate strategic outcomes, as explained in Section 3.2. Therefore, after mapping the distribution of power, the section turns to scenario development, based on the two critical uncertainties identified in Section 4: *the level of European unity* and *the level of US strategic engagement in Europe* (Figure 3). These axes serve as a framework for integrating constructivist and realist insights that shape strategic choices (Figures 3 and 4). Each scenario thus reflects a different configuration of power and a distinct ideational pathway, showing how Europe's strategic future will be co-determined by what it has and how it chooses to act on it.

5.1. Distribution of Power in Europe

5.1.1. Economic Power

Europe's economic weight remains its greatest source of latent power. In 2023, the EU's collective GDP reached \$18.59 trillion, while the United Kingdom added another \$3 trillion, together positioning Europe as a \$21.6 trillion economic area, far surpassing Russia's \$2 trillion economy and second only to the United States's \$27.72 trillion GDP (Grigas 2025; IMF 2024; IMF 2025; World Bank 2023a; World Bank 2023b; World Bank 2024). This economic base is amplified by the Eurozone's financial stability and the EU's single market of over 448 million consumers (EU 2025), which enables considerable regulatory influence and trade leverage.

Yet despite this potential, Europe's economic weight is unevenly distributed and heavily dependent on the performance of its largest economy, Germany. As the key engine of EU manufacturing, exports, and fiscal discipline with a \$4,5 trillion economy (World Bank 2023c), Germany's recent economic slowdown has exposed structural weaknesses across the bloc (Arak 2025; Crow 2025). Stagnating industrial output, energy price volatility, and underinvestment in infrastructure and innovation have had ripple effects beyond Germany's borders (Arak 2025; Crow 2025). Without comprehensive reforms, ranging from digitization and labor market flexibility to capital markets integration, Germany and thus the EU risk continued stagnation

and declining global competitiveness (Arak 2025; Crow 2025). While the EU as an institution has increasingly used common borrowing, its institutional debt remains modest at approximately €547 billion, equivalent to around 3.4% of the EU's GDP (EU 2025). In contrast, the combined public debt of EU member states exceeds 82% of the GDP of the EU³⁸ (EU 2025).

Structural realism holds that power stems not only from economic resources but from the capacity to mobilize them effectively (Section 3.1.3.). In realist terms, the lack of centralized fiscal and industrial authority depicts the EU as a weak unit, limiting its coherence as an actor in an anarchic international order. In critical technologies, Europe boasts world-leading firms in aerospace, automotive, and green innovation (Clapp 2025). Yet it lags behind the US and China in high-tech sectors such as semiconductors, AI, cybersecurity, and defense-related R&D, constrained by undercapitalized markets, low risk tolerance, and a lack of economies of scale (Clapp 2025). These structural shortfalls inhibit Europe's ability to convert its economic capacity into hard power or autonomous global influence. The fragmentation of fiscal policy, industrial strategy, and digital governance across EU member states further reduces the EU's ability to act as a coherent geopolitical actor.

Energy security has followed a similar trajectory. Since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Europe has cut its dependence on Russian gas from over 40% to around 11% by diversifying suppliers and investing in LNG infrastructure (European Council 2025). Renewable energy now constitutes over 45% of electricity generation, and nuclear power is being revived in several states (Frost 2024; Payne and Abnett 2024; Eurostat 2025). Still, among some members, dependencies persist in nuclear fuel, critical raw materials, and rare earths, especially on China and Russia, leaving several states exposed to supply disruptions and coercive leverage (Eurostat 2025).

As energy becomes central to Europe's strategic autonomy agenda, the Green Deal is reframed as a tool of geopolitical resilience, suggesting an ideational (constructivist) shift (Nunzi 2025). Initiatives in green hydrogen, batteries, and grid modernization aim to anchor technological sovereignty, but fragmented procurement and limited transnational coordination continue to constrain outcomes (Nunzi 2024). From a realist perspective, true energy autonomy will depend on whether these gains translate into durable, scalable capabilities that reduce vulnerability to foreign leverage and support hard power projection. Without resolving these dependencies,

³⁸ Italy, Spain, Greece, France, Belgium, and Portugal exceed 100% of their GDP in debt (Eurostat 2024)

Europe remains an economic giant constrained by structural limits in its quest for strategic autonomy.

5.1.2. Military Power

The military landscape of Europe in 2025 reflects a sharp response to growing external threats, especially from Russia, and rising uncertainty over long-term US security commitments. The ongoing war in Ukraine has spurred European governments to boost defense-industrial production and spending, signaling a shift from ‘buck-passing’ to balancing behavior, reversing decades of underinvestment. Collectively, they spent approximately \$454 billion on defense in 2024, representing over 30% of total NATO outlays (SIPRI 2025).

Figure 5 – Military capabilities of key European NATO allies

	Poland	France	United Kingdom	Germany	Italy	Spain
Active troops	202 100	200 000	184 860	181 600	165 500	133 282
Reserves	350 000	26 000	25 934	34 000	18 500	15 150
Tanks	430	172	159	222	150	238
Artillery	611	84	158	126	145	286
Combat aircraft and helicopters	92	235	127	185	145	116
Transport Aircraft and Helicopters	165	399	180	229	289	131
Special Mission Aircraft	8	35	20	20	17	6
Tankers	0	13	6	2	6	0
Large Naval Vessels	5	35	25	22	23	21
Naval Tonnage	13 813	428 765	394 043	228 552	359 417	215 346
Aircraft Carriers	0	4	2	0	2	1
Nuclear weapons	0	290	225	0	0	0

Source: Global Firepower (2025); IISS (2025); ICAN (2025)

Germany alone boosted its defense budget by 28% to \$88.5 billion, becoming Europe's top spender (SIPRI 2025). The United Kingdom and France follow closely, with \$81.8 billion and \$64.7 billion, respectively, while Poland surged ahead with a defense allocation of \$38 billion, exceeding 4% of its GDP, aiming to build the largest land army in Europe (SIPRI 2025; Tilles 2025). As Figure 1 shows, NATO without the US fields over 2.1 million active personnel, compared to Russia's 1.3 million, underscoring Europe's quantitative edge when acting collectively. However, despite this aggregation of force, Europe's military power remains dispersed across sovereign states with varying levels of readiness, modernization, and strategic priorities, and without a unified command, which would hinder their effectiveness in combat (Burilkov and Wolff 2025). Figure 5 shows that the great powers of Europe possess significant military forces. Poland, in particular, has become the most significant military actor in Central and Eastern Europe, procuring US and South Korean-made tanks, aircraft, and missile systems on an unprecedented scale (NATO 2024b; SIPRI 2025). On the other hand, Germany's military potential is significantly unfulfilled, given it is the second most populated country in Europe (after Russia) and the largest economy. No single European state rivals Russia alone. Despite a far smaller economy, Russia maintains a significant (if often less advanced) conventional military (Figures 1 and 2). Before its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia spent around \$65 billion on defense; by 2024, wartime spending rocketed to \$149 billion (about 7% of its GDP and 19% of all government spending) (SIPRI 2025).

Europe's ability to project power remains heavily dependent on the United States, with critical gaps in C4ISR, air defense, logistics, and nuclear deterrence (Johnson 2025; Mölling and Schütz 2025; Wall and Christianson 2023). European states continue to operate dozens of distinct tanks, fighter jets, and naval platforms, leading to inefficiency and limited economies of scale³⁹ (McCarthy 2018; Burilkov and Wolff 2025). Europe also lacks an equivalent of Starlink.⁴⁰

Russia has dramatically increased its military output. In 2024 alone, it produced or refurbished 1,550 tanks (220% increase), 5,700 armored vehicles (150% increase), and 450 artillery pieces (435% increase) (Burilkov and Wolff 2025). Thus, despite losses in Ukraine, Russia could be ready for renewed aggression within three to ten years (Burilkov and Wolff 2025). NATO (with

³⁹ European NATO members operate 178 major weapon systems (tanks, ships, vehicles, artillery pieces, aircraft, etc.), in comparison, the US operates 30 (McCarthy 2018).

⁴⁰ Starlink is a satellite internet constellation developed by SpaceX that provides high-speed, low-latency broadband internet globally, particularly in remote and underserved areas, and has also emerged as a key dual-use technology with strategic military applications, including battlefield communications, drone coordination, and resilient command-and-control systems in the Ukrainian conflict (Pollet 2025).

the US) lags in ammunition production. Russia manufactures around 3 million artillery rounds annually, while NATO produces only 1.2 million, aiming to reach 2 million (Lillis et al. 2024).

In nuclear deterrence, only France and the UK possess independent arsenals, which, though significant, are limited compared to those of Russia and the US (Figures 2 and 5). As outlined in Section 2, Europe remains dependent on the US nuclear umbrella through NATO's sharing arrangements, with launch authority ultimately held in Washington. This reinforces the structural asymmetry highlighted by realists: Europe, despite its economic strength and increased defense spending, remains constrained by reliance on US strategic assets. Furthermore, the fact that Russia's only clear advantage over Europe is its nuclear superiority makes Russia more dangerous in a sense since Russia might be more inclined to leverage its only clear advantage and not hesitate to use nuclear blackmail to achieve its goals.

From a structural realist perspective, Europe's military landscape is defined less by its aggregate capacity and more by the fragmentation of that capacity across sovereign states with divergent strategic cultures, readiness levels, and political constraints. While countries like France, the UK, Germany, and Poland field sizable forces, and NATO Europe collectively surpasses Russia in troop numbers, Europe lacks a unified decision-making structure capable of autonomous action. This diffusion of authority undermines deterrence, particularly in crises requiring swift, cohesive responses. Rather than acting as a consolidated bloc, Europe functions as a constellation of medium powers whose influence is dependent on alliance frameworks.

This internal asymmetry constitutes a structural vulnerability: power is dispersed among capitals with competing priorities and domestic limitations, impeding strategic coherence. Although Europe's collective economy places it among global powers (USA and China), figures 1 and 2 show that its military is more comparable with Russia than the US, highlighting the asymmetry between Europe's economic and military potential. Furthermore, its capabilities remain institutionally fragmented and reliant on American support. As the following scenarios show, material strength alone is insufficient. Europe's strategic trajectory will hinge equally on how it interprets threats, constructs collective identities, and overcomes internal political divisions.

5.2. Scenario A – Europe Reinforces the Liberal World Order

This scenario explores the trajectories of a *high level of European unity* and a *relatively high level of US engagement in Europe* (for details, see Section 4).

5.2.1. Ideational Context

In this scenario, Europe experiences an unprecedented sense of urgency, making security a central pillar of cooperation among member states. The war in Ukraine has fostered a shared threat perception. As Fagan et al. (2024) show (see Additional Figures: Figure 7), public opinion about Russia is largely negative even in countries ambivalent toward Russia, such as Hungary. As a result, governments across the continent, including those once reluctant to increase defense spending, now adopt the Eastern European view of Moscow as an existential threat to the European project. Populist and nationalist leaders find little political incentive to resist this consensus, given the public perception of Russia as a major threat. This convergence gives rise to a pan-European security culture in which the historical experiences of Eastern members, such as Poland, Czechia, and the Baltic states, become central to the Europe’s collective narrative, yet this collective identity also encompasses needs of other states, such as the need to manage migration flows. Thus, from a constructivist perspective, private knowledge about Russian behavior held by individual members becomes socially shared knowledge among European NATO members.

Furthermore, the EU’s low level of debt compared to member states gives further incentives to defense cooperation on the EU level. Thus, a shift takes place as Europeans embrace a common security cooperation rooted in opposition to Russian aggression and the defense of liberal democracy. Simultaneously, a “global actor” ambition gains traction, given the US’s push for Europe to gain greater independence and the ‘trust gap’ (see Section 2.2.1.). This high degree of unity begins to dissolve institutional gridlock. Political leaders and citizens alike increasingly understand the realist reality of Europe (see Section 3.1.) and support the idea that Europe must “stand together” and take greater responsibility for its defense. Thus, a shared threat perception and collective identity mitigate the security dilemma (see Section 3.1.4.) by fostering coordinated defense. Constructivist forces push European states closer together.

Against the background of intensifying competition with China, the United States remains committed to European security, viewing the continent as one of the key arenas in this new era of great power rivalry. While American officials continue to pressure European allies to “do more” for their defense, this is largely a bargaining tactic rather than a signal of imminent

withdrawal. The threat of US disengagement serves primarily as leverage to prompt European self-reliance, not as an actual policy trajectory.

5.2.2. Key Developments of Scenario A

In mid-2025, the US utilizes its leverage over Europe, and the US president announces the redeployment of 10,000 US troops from Europe to the Indo-Pacific. This force is not large enough to bring any significant change on the battlefield. The goal is to “scare” European NATO allies and thus push them to boost their spending. This tactic proved successful. As a result, in early 2026, an ‘EU Defense Strategy 2026’ is published, establishing the EU’s ambition to be a global actor in security. Furthermore, in 2026, all NATO members spend a minimum of 2% of their GDP on defense.⁴¹ As a result, in 2028, European NATO has a record defense budget of around \$650 billion. This is crucial for filling in the gap accumulated throughout the years in defense spending. As the US is pleased with the increase in spending, the ‘NATO-withdrawal’ rhetoric is put aside, with the US president praising Europe for ‘paying its share’. Thus, the ‘trust-gap’ as described by Ischinger (2025) is largely closed, and NATO remains intact in its current form, meaning that members will continue to build independent but integrated capabilities. The US’s nuclear umbrella also remains intact.

European NATO members continue to acquire their equipment in the US. This is done for two reasons. The first reason is political. The idea is that if Europe continues to buy US weapons, it ties itself closer to the US, and vice versa. It also makes it easier for the US president to stay engaged in Europe, as he can “sell” to his voters the idea that the US is benefiting from increased European defense spending. The second reason is practical. Europe purchases over 60% of its equipment in the US (Section 2.2.3.), and there is little reason to believe that would change in such a short time frame because of limited economies of scale, logistical, and interoperability reasons. Furthermore, Europe does not produce some capabilities, such as 5th-generation fighter jets (Cook, E. 2025), and is thus left with no alternative other than the US. Yet, as Europe pours more money into its defense industry, it becomes more self-sufficient, producing over 55% of its weapons in Europe by 2035, with companies like Rheinmetall, BAE, and Rafael becoming key suppliers and leaders in defense-related R&D.

⁴¹ Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Romania spending over 3% in 2026 (Poland close to 5%), France, United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Czechia, and Denmark planning to reach 3% by 2027 or 2028.

The money is largely acquired through joint borrowing, since the EU has lower debt and thus lower interest rates, through programs such as EDF and ‘ReArm Europe’. This money is then redistributed to each member. European members focus on increasing efficiency with PESCO⁴² becoming a crucial component of European defense coordination, coordinating arms purchases among European NATO members. The UK also joins PESCO for greater coordination, although it is not an EU member. The first purchase is a purchase of over 200 special aircraft and 200 tanker aircraft purchased in early 2026. With NATO intact, part of these planes is placed under NATO command (50 planes). The rest is redistributed among member states, with about half being distributed to Germany (50), France (35), the UK (40), and Poland (40) alone. Furthermore, European NATO purchases over 1500 transport aircraft and helicopters in mid-2026 to end the reliance on US logistics, with similar logic for distribution. The first aircraft are already delivered in 2026, with the purchases scheduled to be completed by 2030 and 2032, respectively. In 2027, EuroSky Shield, an integrated air and missile defense system, is placed on order to cover the whole European continent with missile defense. This makes it the most expensive purchase through PESCO, with a cost of over \$100 billion. It is scheduled to be completed by 2040. Major European powers also invest heavily in their navies to ensure Europe can project power globally.

In parallel, energy security becomes an integral part of Europe’s strategic posture. Following the lessons of Russian energy coercion, the EU accelerates efforts to reduce dependency on hostile suppliers, particularly in gas and nuclear fuel. By 2027, over 50% of European natural gas imports are sourced from diversified partners, including Norway, the US (LNG), and North Africa, while joint strategic reserves and cross-border interconnectors are expanded. The Green Deal is reframed as a geopolitical tool, with investments in nuclear energy, renewables, hydrogen, and grid infrastructure positioned as foundations of strategic autonomy. These developments are politically framed not just as economic or environmental necessities, but as national security imperatives that enhance Europe’s ability to act independently in times of crisis. Thus, by 2040, Europe significantly reduced its dependency on fossil fuels and outside sources.

In 2028, the EU also develops, after two years of negotiations within the EU, a European Expeditionary Force (EEF), a 10,000-strong multinational division consisting of soldiers from

⁴² In PESCO, no state has veto power; cooperation is voluntary; therefore, Eurosceptic, nationalist, and populist leaders cannot block this cooperation; they can only choose not to cooperate.

each member state as envisioned in the EU Defense Strategy 2026.⁴³ The purpose of this force is to be the crisis management tool for member states for crises outside of EU's borders. This force may be deployed only under two conditions: (1) in defense of the territorial integrity European Union and its member states; or (2) outside EU territory, under a special mission mandated by a qualified majority vote⁴⁴ in the European Council⁴⁵. This highlights the growing European global ambition. The EEF is put to the test in 2031, where it is deployed alongside the forces of the UK into the Sahel region (mainly Chad, Libya, and Sudan) to stabilize the region. This marks the first time an EU-led force has handled a crisis of significant scale, affirming Europe's desire to act as a global security provider. The mission bolsters confidence that Europe can share the burden with the US. Furthermore, in 2032, heightened tensions in the Red Sea⁴⁶ threaten global trade. Europe, with its new collective identity as a guardian of rules-based order, takes the initiative. All 27 EU member states, together with the UK, propose Operation Achilles Heel⁴⁷ in the NATO Council, a naval mission to secure sea lanes from the Suez to Bab-el-Mandeb. Following approval, the operation is launched as a NATO-led mission, with European forces in the lead and close coordination with a US Maritime Task Force. This initiative illustrates Europe's growing strategic autonomy within the transatlantic alliance: while the mission reflects independent European security interests and is politically coordinated among EU capitals, it remains embedded in NATO's command structure. The result is a model of burden-sharing where Europe contributes leadership and capabilities without undermining NATO unity, demonstrating that greater European agency complements rather than challenges US leadership.

The Ukrainian war reached a stalemate, and a ceasefire was achieved in 2026. Ukraine pushed for NATO and EU membership. This membership is not achieved since Ukraine does have a territorial dispute (with Russia), which is a major obstacle for membership in these organizations (NATO 1999; European Commission 2025a), and is the main reason why Ukraine was not accepted into these organizations, although cooperation occurs on a daily

⁴³ Strategic Compass for Security and Defense (2022) envisions 5,000-strong Expeditionary Force (European Union 2022)

⁴⁴ The logic is that each member state contributes soldiers, and these soldiers are 'outside' of its national army, meaning that even if a member state chooses to vote against the mission being proposed, and the mission passes the majority vote, its soldiers that are part of the EEF will go onto the mission regardless.

⁴⁵ As NATO remained intact, defense is nation state priority mainly, with the EU serving more as a platform for coordination, therefore giving the power to call upon the EEF to the European Council makes more sense.

⁴⁶ sparked by state-sponsored piracy and drone attacks on shipping

⁴⁷ Reference to the fact that the freedom of navigation in the Red Sea is of absolute crucial importance for Europe (30% of all container traffic goes there – McMillan 2025)

basis.⁴⁸ Instead, recognizing that European security is closely tied to Ukrainian security and echoing the Eastern European historical experience, a coalition of willing is formed.⁴⁹ This coalition signs a formal defense pact with Ukraine in 2026, using the small window of opportunity, where the sense of urgency is the highest, and before Russia regains its strength, forming the Eastern European Defense Alliance (EEDA). This treaty de facto gives Ukraine the same assurances as NATO, since all its members except Ukraine are also NATO members⁵⁰. For greater credibility in holding up to these assurances, both the UK and France start expanding their nuclear arsenal, intending to double the number of nuclear warheads by 2035 and developing a nuclear umbrella within the EEDA. Still, considering the close Russian threat and guided by the logic of self-help, Ukraine is rumored to have started its nuclear program, but nothing is confirmed by the Ukrainian officials.

5.2.3. Outcomes of Scenario A

Russia has been rearming since the ceasefire in Ukraine was achieved, and thus by 2035, it possesses a significant military, which could defeat any single European state. Yet this force is vastly outmatched by the number of European troops. European NATO, even without the US, outmatches Russian forces in terms of quantity and quality in every weapon category, fielding 330,000 more soldiers than in 2025, 1,800 more tanks, and 1,200 more artillery pieces, exceeding the estimated requirements from Burilkov and Wolff (2025). European NATO also managed to overcome the problem of interoperability by lowering the number of distinct major weapons systems from 178 in 2025 (McCarthy 2018) to 80 in 2035. The only exception is nuclear weapons, where Russia still holds the upper hand, yet the UK and France managed to close the gap, with each possessing around 500 warheads in 2035. Therefore, the collective deterrence against Russia is significantly strengthened, deterring Russia from any major attempt to increase its power or influence, limiting its operations to disinformation campaigns and influence operations. Among the EU member states, it finds little success given the newly found unity. Yet its actions are more successful among states not members of the EU, such as Serbia, Montenegro, Georgia, and Armenia. It finds success in Serbia given its historic dispute with the EU and NATO over Kosovo (Palmer et al. 2020: 1027-1030). Serbian leaders rhetorically align

⁴⁸ Attempts were made, but Hungary, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Slovakia, the US, and Turkey vetoed it on several occasions each for their reasons.

⁴⁹ consisting of Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czechia Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Sweden, and the United Kingdom

⁵⁰ In practice, it would be impossible for Russia to fight only with EEDA and not with NATO. If it attacked only Ukraine, the other EEDA members would come to help, and Russia would have to either fight them as well, and thus invoke Article 5, or withdraw and lose.

with the Russian anti-Western narrative, but they choose not to provoke NATO and the EU,⁵¹ since NATO members surround Serbia, and the EU is its biggest trading partner (Maps 4 and 5; OEC 2025).

In the face of overwhelming disadvantage in continental Europe, Russia turns to Central Asia and the Middle East, increasing its influence through arms sales, energy diplomacy, and infrastructure investment. Given the European ambition to have a global influence, Central Asia and the Middle East become a sight of increased Europe-Russia competition.

5.3. Scenario B – Europe Achieves Strategic Autonomy

This scenario explores the trajectories of a *high level of European unity* and a *significant withdrawal of US engagement in Europe* (for details, see Section 4).

5.3.1. Ideational Context

The ideological shift in Scenario B originates not in Europe but in Washington. As American strategic focus shifts decisively to the Indo-Pacific amid intensifying rivalry with China, a bipartisan consensus emerges questioning the value of maintaining extensive commitments in Europe. While Russia remains to be seen as a disruptive actor, Europe is no longer seen as central to great power competition. Instead, it is viewed as a region where the US can scale back without incurring major strategic cost. This recalibration signals to European capitals that the traditional American security guarantee can no longer be assumed, creating a leadership vacuum that spurs the formation of a distinct European security identity.

Although Europeans remain united in viewing Russia as a threat, like in Scenario A, they are now required to assume full responsibility for their defense. This accelerates a strategic and cultural shift from dependence to autonomy. The narrative of “European sovereignty,” advocated by national and EU leaders, gains traction, and the belief that “we must stand on our own” becomes a continent-wide rallying cry. Constructivist forces push Europe closer together as sovereignty and solidarity replace reliance on the US.

Europe also retains its global ambition. In contrast to Scenario A, however, it is now driven by necessity: crisis management, maritime security, and peacekeeping abroad become essential to defending European values and interests. As in Scenario A, European cohesion mitigates the security dilemma, but now integration is reinforced by pragmatic adaptation, populist vetoes

⁵¹ by, for example, signing a defense treaty with Russia

are bypassed through coalitions of the willing, and the EU's relatively low debt enables collective defense investments.

Ultimately, faced with Russian hostility and diminished US support, Europe develops a truly autonomous security identity. Public support for integration grows, fueled by the realization that unity is the only viable response to the realist reality of Europe (see Section 3.1.).

5.3.2. Key Developments of Scenario B

In line with Trump's Project 2025 (Spatafora 2025), in mid-2025, the US president presents a plan aiming to redeploy 90% of US troops from Europe either to the Indo-Pacific or back to the US by 2030. The US plans to maintain only supporting units (logistics, intelligence, etc.) and its already deployed nuclear arsenal in Europe, arguing that the US cannot maintain a possible two-front war against Russia and China, without a significant European contribution (Spatafora 2025). The plan is quickly set in motion, with the US withdrawing several thousand soldiers later that year and starting a long process of transferring its military bases to NATO allies. At the same time, Washington adopts a harsh bargaining tone. The US openly declares it will not continue bearing Europe's defense burden unless Europe dramatically increases spending. This is like in Scenario A, except this time it is an actual policy strategy. Thus, US officials state that henceforth, European allies must lead aid to Ukraine, and those who do not pay 2% of GDP on defense cannot even "hope" that the US will help them. The US shift to Asia is "irreversible", reflecting the logic of self-help (Section 3.1.). As China rises, Europe must adapt or risk irrelevance. Such moves send alarm bells ringing across European capitals.

As a result, the European Commission, the European Council, the NATO Council, as well as formal and informal meetings of European leaders, take place on multiple occasions in 2025 and early 2026, debating how to achieve European strategic autonomy and how to redefine the US role within NATO. The UK played a crucial role, given the 'US-UK special relationship'⁵² serving as a bridge between the US and the rest of Europe. After almost a full year of tough negotiations and several attempts,⁵³ a historical compromise was reached between European allies and the United States. NATO is preserved as the central defense alliance but significantly

⁵² From a constructivist perspective, the UK–US special relationship is a socially constructed partnership grounded in shared identity, liberal democratic norms, institutional ties, and historical narratives that foster mutual trust and a sense of common purpose. It persists not merely due to strategic interests but because both states perceive each other as natural allies within a shared political and cultural community.

⁵³ A unanimous consensus is needed for such a decision to be made, yet given the sense of urgency, and the fact that from a realist perspective, the US is a key ally of all European countries, and in this scenario, it holds all the leverage. Therefore, there is a high incentive to reach almost any compromise with the US, rather than a complete decoupling.

restructured to reflect the new power realities and responsibilities. The Allied Command Operations (ACO) (see Appendix) is split into two new branches. First, the Allied Command Operations Europe (ACOE) is established to oversee all NATO operations on the European continent. European states assume primary responsibility for ACOE's planning, staffing, logistics, and rapid deployment forces. A European commander is appointed to lead ACOE.⁵⁴ The US maintains its nuclear deterrent under NATO's umbrella, but its direct military footprint in Europe is minimal. The second new branch is the Allied Command Operations Globe (ACOG),⁵⁵ which is tasked with operations outside of Europe, such as missions in the Indo-Pacific, Africa, or the Middle East. While the US remains a key actor, ACOG reflects a more balanced partnership, with European allies gaining an increasingly influential role as their military capabilities expand.⁵⁶

European leaders pushed for preservation of NATO to avoid duplication, institutional delays, and ensure continued US involvement, however limited. A restructured NATO offered Europe immediate operational sovereignty while preserving the transatlantic framework.

The US chose to stay in NATO to retain strategic influence in Europe without large deployments, leverage transatlantic intelligence and infrastructure, and preserve NATO as a global burden-sharing platform. As Europe is forced to take the lead on continental defense, US policymakers recognize the utility of coordinated operations with capable European allies in other regions. Perhaps most importantly, remaining in NATO signals a continued commitment to the American-led international order and ensures that Europe's growing autonomy occurs within a transatlantic framework rather than in opposition to it. This allows Washington to frame European rearmament not as strategic divergence, but as a complementary development that strengthens the West as a whole. Therefore, Europe gains operational sovereignty, and the US retains a platform for coalition-building in its global competition with China.

In response to the US disengagement, European NATO members dramatically increased defense spending, driven not by diplomatic persuasion but existential urgency. By 2026, all NATO members reached 2% of their respective GDP, with Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Romania spending over 3% in 2026,⁵⁷ with France, the United

⁵⁴ with headquarters in Mons, Belgium - Current NATO headquarters S.H.A.P.E. is there

⁵⁵ with headquarters in: Naples, Italy; San Francisco, USA; Reykjavik, Iceland

⁵⁶ Both ACOE and ACOG also have their respective NATO response force (NRF); e.g., NRFE and NRFG; NRFE is a 40,000-strong multinational task force staffed only with Europeans, while NRFG is a 40,000-strong multinational task force staffed by all NATO members.

⁵⁷ Poland, and the Baltic States are close to 5%.

Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Czechia, Belgium, and Denmark planning to reach 3% by 2027 or 2028. As a result, in 2028, European NATO has a record defense budget of around \$700 billion. This surge in investment reflects a historic turning point. As the US withdraws troops, European forces take over both personnel roles and base operations.

Energy security becomes integral to Europe's defense strategy, and developments in this sector mirror the developments of Scenario A (see Section 5.2.2.)

Like Scenario A, Europe undertakes major joint procurements through PESCO and EDF (see Section 5.2.2. for details), with the difference that in this scenario, it must replace US capacity altogether. This means that in addition to developments in Scenario A, Europe launches the European Satellite Defense Initiative (ESDI), doubling funding for Galileo and IRIS² systems⁵⁸, while Copernicus⁵⁹ gains military capabilities. A new European Space Command, headquartered in Prague,⁶⁰ coordinates joint operations. By 2040, Europe will achieve near-complete space autonomy, marking a critical pillar of its post-American defense strategy. Furthermore, the UK and France aim to double their number of nuclear warheads by 2035, and they develop a nuclear sharing agreement within NATO, like the US's nuclear umbrella. Simultaneously, major investments are made in naval capabilities. European states expand blue-water fleets to project force in the Mediterranean, Indo-Pacific, and Arctic. Finally, similarly to Scenario A, the EU develops its European Expeditionary Force (for details see Section 5.2.2.).⁶¹

Similarly to Scenario A, this new capacity of European NATO members comes to be mobilized in 2032, when a crisis in the Red Sea threatens global shipping lanes. European NATO members raise this issue at the NATO Council, proposing Operation Achilles Heel under the command of ACOG, to protect maritime shipping. The US agrees with the proposal, but it sends only a small expedition of 3 ships, arguing that most of the shipping in the Red Sea goes to Europe (Shah 2024), not the US, and thus Europeans should bring the main fighting force. Following the approval, the NATO mission under European leadership is dispatched to the Red Sea. This

⁵⁸ **Galileo** is the EU's global navigation satellite system providing high-precision positioning services; **IRIS²** (Infrastructure for Resilience, Interconnectivity and Security by Satellite) is the upcoming EU secure satellite constellation for broadband and government communications (European Commission 2025b; European Commission 2025c).

⁵⁹ **Copernicus** is the EU's Earth observation program delivering environmental, climate, and security data (European Commission 2025b).

⁶⁰ The EU Space Agency has its headquarters there.

⁶¹ In this scenario, this is done to enhance strategic autonomy in operations where NATO involvement is politically sensitive or unnecessary. The EEF enables rapid crisis response, particularly in Europe's neighborhood, and symbolizes Europe's ability to act independently in defense of its interests. It also strengthens internal EU cohesion by providing a flexible framework for coalitions of the willing under EU leadership.

shows the dynamics of the newly restructured NATO, where European members assume primary responsibility for regional crises directly affecting their interests, while the US plays a supporting but not dominant role.⁶² Operation Achilles Heel becomes the first major deployment led by the Allied Command Operations Globe (ACOG), demonstrating Europe's growing strategic autonomy within a transatlantic framework and its capacity to act as a global security provider

Unlike in Scenario A, the United States begins prioritizing arms sales to Indo-Pacific allies with less developed defense industries, such as the Philippines. This shift signals to Europe that US defense resources may no longer be readily available. In response, Europe accelerates efforts to reduce dependency on US arms. While existing procurement contracts are fulfilled, new acquisitions increasingly prioritize other suppliers (where possible)⁶³. Therefore, European states start acquiring more weapons from other suppliers, such as Israel (air defense)⁶⁴ or South Korea (tanks and artillery)⁶⁵ to fill in the immediate needs, and they start the process of scaling up their defense industry. As a result, by 2035, 35% of weapon purchases are acquired from non-European suppliers (a 43% decrease), with only 20% being from the US.

Developments regarding Ukraine and the formation of the Eastern European Defense Alliance mirror Scenario A (for details, see section 5.2.2.).

5.3.3. Outcomes of Scenario B

By 2035, Russia, having rearmed steadily since the Ukrainian ceasefire, fields a modern and sizeable military, capable of defeating any single European state. However, even in the absence of a robust US presence, it has no hope of defeating united Europe militarily. European NATO members, now fully responsible for the continent's defense, field 400,000 more soldiers, 2,000 additional tanks, and 1,500 more artillery pieces than in 2025, thus, like in Scenario A, exceeding the deterrence thresholds suggested by Burilkov and Wolff (2025). Interoperability improves significantly as the number of major European weapons systems drops from 178 in 2025 (McCarthy 2018) to 70⁶⁶ by 2035. While Russia retains nuclear superiority, France and

⁶² In a crisis that affects primarily US interests, the US would bring the main fighting force.

⁶³ as stated in Scenario A, Europe, for example, does not produce a 5th generation fighter jet, therefore, it is left with no other choice but the US fighter.

⁶⁴ Fabian 2024

⁶⁵ Nam and Sánchez 2024

⁶⁶ this number is lower than in Scenario A, given the increased acquisition in Europe in Scenario B

the UK each expand their arsenals to 500 warheads and establish a nuclear-sharing mechanism within NATO, narrowing the strategic gap and deterring Russia.

As a result, like in Scenario A, Russia is deterred from direct military action and its influence in Europe is limited (for details, see Section 5.2.2).

Unable to challenge Europe directly, Russia shifts its geopolitical ambitions to Central Asia and the Middle East. Through arms sales, energy diplomacy, and infrastructure projects, it seeks to reassert influence in former Soviet republics and strategic corridors. In parallel, Europe's post-American strategic ambition drives deeper engagement in both regions. Development assistance, digital infrastructure investments, and military training programs turn Central Asia and the Middle East into new arenas of Europe-Russia competition, marking a global extension of their rivalry.

5.4. Scenario C – The Old Paradigm

This scenario explores the trajectories of a *low level of European unity* and a *relatively high level of US engagement in Europe* (for details, see Section 4).

5.4.1. Ideational Context

In Scenario C, Europe's ability to act in agreement fractures, even as the United States remains strongly engaged in NATO. As outlined in Section 3.1, this reflects a constructivist dynamic of diverging threat perceptions and resurgent nationalism weakening the ideational glue of European unity. Initial post-Ukraine war solidarity fades by the mid-2020s, giving way to long-standing fault lines. Northeastern states (e.g., Baltic states, Poland) remain focused on Russia, while Southern members prioritize issues like migration and economic recovery. Western powers, France and Germany, oscillate between security concerns and other priorities.

The rise of nationalist and Eurosceptic forces further erodes EU cohesion. These parties prioritize narrowly defined national interests, complicating common initiatives and fracturing solidarity. Some publics exhibit "Russia fatigue," expressing a desire to move past the Ukraine crisis (see Additional Figures: Figure 8). The result is a breakdown of shared strategic identity, echoing Hooghe and Marks's (2009) observation that "identity trumps efficiency."

The fault lines deepen: Eastern members perceive Western/Southern members as inattentive to their security fears, while others regard Eastern hawks as overly militant. Europe reverts to a more Lockean or Hobbesian dynamic of nation-states. Thus, the logic of self-help resurfaces (see Section 3.1.).

In contrast to this fractured Europe, the United States sustains a high level of engagement, driven by its China strategy and the need to stabilize NATO. American strategic culture, increasingly skeptical of Europe's autonomy, views NATO as a hub of bilateral dependencies. It applies a calibrated approach, combining reassurances (e.g., Article 5 affirmations and arms deals) with pressure (e.g., criticism of defense spending and threats of disengagement). In practice, Washington frequently bypasses EU and NATO mechanisms in favor of direct bilateral dealings, functionally preserving the alliance while weakening its multilateral character.

5.4.2. Key Developments of Scenario C

In mid-2025, the US announces the redeployment of 10,000 troops from Europe to the Indo-Pacific, aiming to prompt European allies to bolster their defense spending. Unlike in Scenario B, this move exposes divisions among European nations. While Poland, the Baltic States, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Romania, and Czechia respond by accelerating military investments, others, particularly those farther from Russia or burdened by high debt, show limited urgency. Hungary resists deeper defense integration, maintaining ties with Russia and framing EU rearmament efforts as infringements on national sovereignty (Kuryata 2025).

The EU and NATO face growing disagreements, rendering consensus-driven initiatives like joint borrowing through the EDF unfeasible. Consequently, defense budgets rely primarily on national funding. The EU's role in foreign policy diminishes, focusing mainly on broad statements and maintaining the common market, echoing Stewart's (2025) predictions.

Defense spending disparities widen among European NATO members. The Baltic States, Poland,⁶⁷ Czechia, Romania, Finland, Sweden, and Norway aim to increase defense budgets to at least 3% of GDP by 2026–2027. In contrast, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Belgium do not plan to meet the 2% target. Germany, France, and the UK incrementally raise their defense budgets beyond 2%, but domestic political gridlock and other priorities slow progress, keeping spending below 3% of GDP even by 2030. Hungary and Slovakia seek normalization with Russia, maintaining defense spending at current levels.

The US manages an increasingly fragmented alliance, shifting from multilateral coordination to bilateral and mini-lateral ties, often bypassing Brussels. While reiterating NATO's Article 5

⁶⁷ Understanding that they are at the front line of potential Russian aggression, and that they cannot rely too much on their European allies, Poland and the Baltic states spend over 5% of their GDP on defense from 2026 to 2030, in a short time, significantly increasing their military capacity.

commitments, Washington conditions increased presence on alignment with its China strategy, higher defense spending, and rejection of EU protectionism. A notable success is pressuring Germany to boost defense spending and take greater responsibility for NATO's eastern flank. The US coordinates with Poland and Germany on developing a next-generation tank to replace the American Abrams and German Leopard 2. Southern European states are kept at arm's length, seen as less reliable. With limited European coordination and continued US pressure, European countries increasingly purchase American weapons.

Elections in France, Italy, and Portugal in 2026 and 2027 bring Eurosceptic nationalist parties to power, seeking normalization with Russia and the lifting of sanctions. As EU-wide sanctions require unanimous renewal (Jozwiak 2025), they are not extended after 2027, blocked by France, Italy, Portugal, Hungary, and Slovakia. In response, Poland, the Baltic States, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Czechia, Germany, the Netherlands, and Romania implement their own sanctions against Russia, coordinating with Washington. These states also cooperate on arms sales to Ukraine and sign bilateral defense agreements.

Energy politics mirror defense fragmentation. Countries near Russia invest in LNG infrastructure, nuclear energy, joint reserves, and cross-border interconnectivity, often collaborating with the US and Norway. Conversely, Hungary and Slovakia deepen energy ties with Russia post-sanctions, advocating for renewed contracts for Russian gas and nuclear fuel. The EU's ambition for a unified energy strategy stalls due to vetoes and divergent priorities, leading to a reliance on bilateral deals and weakening collective bargaining power.

By 2028, NATO operates as a two-tier alliance. The first tier includes countries like Poland, meeting defense spending targets and aligning with US strategic priorities. The second tier comprises members like France and Hungary, contributing minimally to joint planning. The US manages defense relations through selective partnerships, elevating reliable allies and marginalizing others. Italy faces criticism from Washington, being seen as a reliable ally with key US bases (Map 3) until recently, leading to the repositioning of US nuclear weapons from Italy to Poland in 2027.⁶⁸ A public backlash in Italy results in the re-election of a pro-European government in 2031, shifting Italy to the "coalition of the willing" camp, demonstrating the fluctuating nature of EU politics.

⁶⁸ This demonstrates the US policy of sticks (punishment for those who do not align with US policies - Italy) and carrots (rewards for those who align with Washington – Poland).

NATO's internal military planning adapts accordingly. Article 5 defense scenarios are developed primarily among the "coalition of the willing," with assumptions that some allies may abstain during crises. To mitigate risks, the US repositions its military equipment and forward command infrastructure in Europe into frontline states. The 2028 Steadfast Defender exercise reflects this dynamic, with limited participation from France and Hungary, while the US, UK, Germany, and Eastern and Northern European forces lead core maneuvers.

European NATO members continue individual procurement of American, South Korean, Turkish, and Israeli platforms. EU defense remains fragmented, with strategic autonomy achieved only in Poland.⁶⁹ European militaries become a patchwork: highly capable in countries aligned with Washington and underfunded elsewhere.

In 2031, a security crisis in the Red Sea exposes Europe's incoherence. Maritime attacks and drone strikes destabilize global trade routes, prompting Washington to form a coalition to secure sea lanes. European responses vary. Italy, France, Spain, and Greece focus on refugee management in the Mediterranean, while Eastern members contribute minimally, prioritizing the Eastern flank. A US-led coalition, including the UK, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Germany, and a Polish frigate, secures the Red Sea, reflecting divisions reminiscent of the 2003 Iraq War.

Russia exploits this vacuum. In late 2031, a massive cyberattack targets the Baltic electricity grid. The EU fails to deliver a unified response, with some capitals disputing attribution and others opposing escalatory measures. The US and Poland lead the response, deploying cyber teams and additional air defense units to the Baltic. A report by the CIA concludes that Russia is testing NATO cohesion through grey zone tactics, amplified by state media narratives of Western disunity.

By 2033, Russia escalates provocations with large-scale military drills near NATO's eastern border, including simulated incursions near Narva, Estonia. Tensions spike as the US raises readiness levels and deploys a rapid response brigade to Estonia. NATO's formal unity holds, but internal divisions surface, with some Western European ambassadors urging de-escalation. Intelligence briefings reveal Russian disinformation campaigns influencing domestic debates in several capitals. Ultimately, deterrence holds due to US assertiveness and the resolve of first-tier allies.

⁶⁹ excluding nuclear capabilities

5.4.3. Outcomes of Scenario C

By 2035, Europe remains under the NATO umbrella but fails to emerge as a unified strategic actor. The US continues as the central organizing force of European security, given Europe's persistent fragmentation. NATO endures, and deterrence holds. Russia does not initiate open war against a NATO member, fearing a US-led response. However, European contributions to collective defense are uneven and inefficient. Frontline states invest heavily in robust national defenses with significant US assistance, while others lag. The military gap between North-Eastern and Southern Europe widens. Joint capabilities remain underdeveloped due to political divisions and rivalries. Europe's defense industry stays fragmented, with national governments duplicating projects and competing for US procurement contracts rather than consolidating efforts.

The EU's CSDP is effectively sidelined. Strategic autonomy remains elusive, with Europe relying heavily on the US for deterrence and global leadership, limiting its influence in international crises. European states often default to US positions, resulting in a transatlantic relationship that is both indispensable and strained. American leaders express frustration with Europe's disunity and burden-sharing gaps, while European publics are divided between valuing US protection and resenting perceived American dominance.

Russia exploits this fragmentation but does not break NATO. Instead, Moscow selectively engages with states like Hungary or France to obstruct EU consensus on sanctions and fracture Western unity. Moscow uses concessions, hybrid tactics, and disinformation campaigns to undermine Western unity through engagement with states less hostile toward Russia.

By 2035, Europe's defense posture is a patchwork: strong in parts, vulnerable in others. Stability is fragile, maintained by American resolve rather than European cohesion. Should the US political climate shift toward isolationism, Europe would still be unprepared, unlike the more self-sufficient trajectory projected in Scenario B. Scenario C sustains the transatlantic alliance but at the cost of European strategic disunity and persistent dependency. The vision of a coordinated, sovereign Europe capable of acting in unison remains unfulfilled, with only a few members achieving some strategic autonomy.

5.5. Scenario D – The Re-return of Conflict into Europe

This scenario explores the trajectories of a *low level of European unity* and a *significant withdrawal of US engagement in Europe* (for details, see Section 4).

5.5.1. Ideational Context

In this scenario, the ideational shift in Washington mirrors the shift that occurred in scenario B (for details, see Section 5.3.1.).

However, unlike Scenario B, Europe does not respond with unity. Instead, deep internal divisions re-emerge, mirroring the ideational context of scenario C (for details, see Section 5.4.1.). The result is ideational fragmentation: no common identity or shared security culture emerges to replace the fading American umbrella. The logic of self-help (see Section 3.1.) guides policies across capitals.

5.5.2. Key Developments of Scenario D

Similarly to Scenario B, in mid-2025, the US president announces withdrawal of 90% of US troops from Europe, in line with Trump’s Project 2025 (for details, see Section 5.3.2.). Furthermore, Washington adopts a harsh bargaining tone, pushing European allies to assume greater responsibility, stating it will not defend anyone who “does not pay his share” (for details, see section 5.3.2.).

As a result, meetings are held between European leaders in Paris and Brussels, but a unified response is not achieved because each capital interprets the US withdrawal through the lens of its own national priorities, threat perceptions, and domestic constraints. States in Eastern and Northern Europe perceive the US disengagement as a security emergency requiring urgent rearmament. The southern states, focused on migration and economic stabilization, do not share the sense of immediacy regarding Russia, and they interpret the US move as an opportunity to reorient foreign policy toward non-confrontational and economic objectives. Meanwhile, France and Germany, paralyzed by domestic political fragmentation and competing strategic visions, fail to offer cohesive leadership.

For NATO, this divergence spells a profound institutional crisis. While the alliance formally persists, the credibility of its collective defense guarantee erodes rapidly. The US drawdown removes the strategic backbone of NATO deterrence, and with no coordinated European replacement, joint planning fractures. Article 5 remains in place legally, but political trust in its activation becomes uneven. Frontline states like accelerate bilateral security agreements with

Washington, while southern and western members are perceived as unreliable partners. In practice, NATO becomes a hollowed-out framework. Its operational core is sustained by ad hoc coalitions of willing states, but its political cohesion is disintegrating. The Allied Command structure is weakened, and key exercises are scaled down or regionally fragmented. As a result, NATO transforms from a unified military alliance into a loose network of states with differing levels of commitment, preparedness, and trust.

Thus, European capitals retreat into divergent strategies driven by domestic pressures and geopolitical calculation. Hungary declares neutrality and strikes a bilateral energy arrangement with the Kremlin, blocking remaining EU sanctions in exchange. Meanwhile, Poland and the Baltic states react with alarm and assertiveness. Warsaw declares a state of emergency, increases its defense spending to 5% of GDP, and openly debates the pursuit of an independent nuclear deterrent should extended deterrence fully collapse. The Baltic states fortify their eastern borders and seek new bilateral guarantees from remaining like-minded partners. The United Kingdom emerges as a crucial security actor by supporting this hardline bloc and formalizing the “coalition of the willing” by acceding to its Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)⁷⁰ Poland and the Czech Republic, and formalizing defense ties among the JEF members by creating the Baltic Security Alliance (BSA), a binding defense treaty. However, without US backing, this alliance’s ability to fully deter a strong adversary like Russia remains limited, at least in the early years. That is why all these members fulfil and even exceed NATO’s 2% target, since that is the only way to keep Washington engaged in Europe.

Meanwhile, Western European countries pursue rearmament more unevenly. France, since 2027 with a new nationalist government, is guided by a doctrine of strategic autonomy, concentrates on reinforcing its nuclear deterrent and naval projection capabilities. Other countries, such as Spain, Greece, and Italy, prioritize Mediterranean security and border control, reflecting localized threat perceptions. As each country arms for its needs, interoperability remains an issue, defense redundancies multiply, and collective deterrence weakens. Germany is caught in a strategic limbo. It struggles to reconstruct its defense posture after decades of underinvestment, hampered by domestic political divisions and other budgetary priorities. Berlin increases defense spending but remains hesitant to fully commit to either the hawkish Eastern flank or the appeasement-minded Southern flank, pursuing mainly economic goals

⁷⁰ The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) is a UK-led, high-readiness military coalition comprising the United Kingdom, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, designed to respond rapidly to crises, operate independently or alongside NATO, and enhance security in Northern Europe (JEF 2025).

through bilateral defense agreements. Proposals for a new pan-European defense pact stall in the face of political fragmentation. By 2027, Europe's security order devolves into a strategic patchwork: a few states preparing for high-intensity conflict, others pursuing neutrality with Russia. The EU is present in name but has little meaning beyond the common market.

By the late 2020s, an uncontrolled arms race spirals across the continent. Lacking a common framework, European states fall back on unilateral military buildups and fragmented regional strategies. The BSA members treat the US withdrawal as an existential crisis and rapidly escalate defense spending, turning to any available arms suppliers, while simultaneously investing in domestic production capacities. The pace of procurement intensifies. Intelligence sharing among NATO members also steadily breaks down amid fears of Russian infiltration and divergent loyalties, being replaced by bilateral sharing agreements instead.

In the nuclear domain, although the US formally keeps its nuclear umbrella, as NATO unity diminishes, the BSA members, together with Germany, explore the idea of acquiring their own nuclear weapons. With the help of the UK, the BSA develops its nuclear program to field 300 warheads by 2035⁷¹, while Germany develops its own 80 warheads after striking a bilateral deal about development with the UK. In Russia, this idea is met with hostility and criticism of the BSA members, following a media campaign criticizing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Yet in 2028, Russia is still in the middle of recovery after the war in Ukraine, and thus cannot, for example, conduct a pre-emptive strike or launch a quick invasion of the Baltic countries, risking escalation while its army is not ready for a renewed conflict. Even in a scenario with weak NATO cohesion, the slightest risk of war with the alliance is too high for Russia, given the overwhelming collective potential of NATO (Figures 1 and 2).

In 2031, as Russia's military recovers and domestic confidence grows, the Kremlin decides to test the cohesion of both NATO and the newly formed Baltic Security Alliance (BSA). Exploiting the ambiguities and fragmentation of the European security order, Russia stages a hybrid provocation in the Estonian city of Narva.⁷² Under the pretext of protecting "ethnic Russians," Moscow begins a coordinated campaign of cyberattacks, disinformation, and border provocations. Pro-Russian activists, backed by disguised Russian special operatives, stage riots and infrastructure sabotage, echoing the tactics used in Crimea in 2014 (Rinaldi 2024). Moscow

⁷¹ With a sharing agreement, e.g., each BSA member has at least some nuclear weapons on its soil.

⁷² home to a large Russian-speaking population (Posaner 2024)

denies any allegations, stating that people in Estonia are “exercising their right to protest against the oppressive government of Estonia”.

This move aims to find out the limits of NATO’s deterrent credibility and to divide European capitals on whether the incident constitutes an armed attack under Article 5. Yet the response is not what the Kremlin had hoped. The BSA reacts immediately and with full unity. Within 48 hours, BSA rapid response troops are deployed to reinforce Estonia’s, Latvia’s, and Lithuania’s eastern border. A cyber task force jointly developed by BSA members neutralizes key disruptions to communication and power grids in Narva, displaying improved coordination and preparedness among this northeastern coalition.

NATO’s response, by contrast, is fractured but not absent. While the US confirms it will uphold Article 5⁷³ and dispatches naval and air assets to the Baltic Sea, political hesitation emerges among several Western and Southern European members. France, Spain, Italy, Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary insist that more information is needed before escalating. Germany, still in the middle of the reconstruction of its armed forces, sends only a limited number of combat units. Despite this hesitancy, the presence of US reinforcements and firm BSA mobilization forces Moscow to halt further escalation.

The incident exposes the de facto shift in deterrence leadership. While NATO formally endures, its political unity has eroded to the point where a credible response comes primarily from the coalition of the willing (in this case, formalized as BSA). Russia’s gamble backfires: instead of splitting NATO further, it reinforces the BSA’s legitimacy and accelerates its operational integration. For Moscow, the episode confirms that any aggression, however ambiguous, still carries the risk of a serious military confrontation. For NATO, it highlights that while deterrence now rests on fewer shoulders, it remains real. Thus, Moscow again turns its eyes to Ukraine.

Similarly to scenarios A, B, and C, yet in this one more than ever, Ukraine does not join NATO for similar reasons as previously (for details see Section 5.2.2.). Ukrainian accession to the BSA was also not approved in 2027 and 2028, fearing unnecessary provocation of Russia and overextension of already limited resources. Thus, the logic of self-help is leaving Ukraine only with bilateral arms deals and non-binding security agreements. This pushes Ukraine towards the development of its own nuclear deterrent. Information about this leak to Moscow around 2029.

⁷³ since Estonia spends at least 2% of GDP on defense.

5.5.3. Outcomes of Scenario D

By 2035, Moscow again possesses a significant military to defeat Ukraine militarily, before it acquires nuclear weapons. Thus, similarly to 2022, Moscow launches a military invasion of Ukraine. NATO and the BSA offer arms and intelligence support to Ukraine, and they strongly condemn Russia's action, but neither alliance wants to get directly involved.⁷⁴

Thus, Scenario D culminates in a fractured European security landscape defined by strategic asymmetry, political fragmentation, and fragile deterrence. While NATO formally persists, its capacity as a unified military alliance has diminished, replaced in practice by coalitions of the willing. The Baltic Security Alliance, though limited in scale, emerges as the most operationally coherent bloc, demonstrating that credible deterrence can still be achieved through regional coordination and political resolve. However, this deterrence is uneven and overburdened. Western Europe remains divided and inward-looking, pursuing divergent priorities and reluctant to confront Russia directly. The EU, though maintaining economic functions, no longer exerts meaningful influence on collective security. With the United States largely disengaged and Russia emboldened by Europe's incoherence, the continent enters a precarious phase of localized militarization and ad hoc alliances. The re-invasion of Ukraine in 2035 underscores the systemic failure to construct a unified European defense posture in the absence of US leadership. Deterrence holds, but only narrowly, and not universally. Europe survives but does not lead.

6. Conclusion

This thesis addressed the research question “*What are the possible implications of a lower level of US engagement and an unclear level of European unity for the future of European security?*”

It explored the question through the scenario sketching method, using a 2x2 matrix that juxtaposes opposing degrees of US strategic engagement in Europe with opposing levels of European unity. By outlining plausible trajectories, this thesis provides policymakers and scholars with a structured approach to assess emerging dynamics that remain fluid and contested. Rather than predicting a single future, the scenarios highlight the consequences of current and past decisions and divisions that are already reshaping the transatlantic relationship. The analysis began with a structural realist mapping of Europe’s material foundations: its vast economic output and growing but underfunded military. These structural factors set the parameters of strategic possibility but do not guarantee coherent action or geopolitical influence.

In Scenario C, high material capacity and even strong US engagement fail to translate into European unity. Instead, internal vetoes, rival national agendas, and diverging political cultures fragment Europe’s security response, developments already visible in real-world events. Donald Trump’s threats towards NATO allies, Hungary’s resistance to further integration, and divisions over the Ukraine war strategy all reflect the challenges posed by disunity.

In contrast, Scenario B demonstrates how a united Europe can respond to US retrenchment with credible burden-sharing and autonomous action. The recent security dialogues between France, Germany, and the UK, discussing joint deployments and defense industrial cooperation outside NATO frameworks, suggest that coalitions of the willing may compensate for broader institutional paralysis, especially as trust in US leadership declines.

Thus, the key finding is that the future of European security will not be shaped by capabilities, but by how Europe resolves its internal political and cultural divisions. In the highly influential book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), Samuel Huntington’s central claim is that future global conflicts will be shaped primarily by cultural differences among civilizational (read ‘cultural’) fault lines, rather than by ideological or economic rivalries.

⁷⁴ NATO even cannot, since in this scenario, there is no consensus in the NATO council, which would be required for such a proposal.

His theory emphasizes that these deep-rooted cultural divisions will form the principal axes of geopolitical tension in the post-Cold War world. While this thesis did not explicitly draw from Huntington's framework, its findings resonate with his argument, highlighting that Europe itself is divided along fault lines between East and West, liberals and illiberal, Atlanticists and sovereigntists, and Eurosceptics and Europhiles, among which competing ideas clash. In this sense, Europe itself is not just a geopolitical project, but at its core, it is a contested cultural space, a "civilizational battleground", where competing visions of identity, governance, and strategic orientation collide. Fico's visit to Moscow to Russia's Victory Day parade is emblematic of this cultural divergence.

These internal contestations profoundly shape the prospects for a coherent European security identity. As the scenario analysis illustrates, the degree to which one set of ideas dominates over others has direct implications for Europe's strategic posture. In Scenarios A and B, high levels of European cohesion allow for fostering a shared threat perception of Russia and enabling coordinated defense efforts. In these futures, ideological unity underpins strategic integration: populist vetoes are bypassed, defense budgets rise in tandem, and the EU and NATO structures function as platforms for collective resilience. Conversely, in Scenarios C and D, contradictions lead to fractured threat perceptions, institutional paralysis, and ultimately a return to bilateralism and mini-lateralism as ad hoc solutions. Here, "coalitions of the willing" emerge not only as temporary fixes but as durable formats for security cooperation, reflecting a structural shift away from consensus-based multilateralism. This divergence suggests that the future of European security will depend on the internal ideological balance within Europe, on what type of "civilization," in Huntington's terms, Europe chooses to be, or, coming back to Mölling and Schütz (2025), how it defines European "way of war". Strategic coherence, in other words, is conditional on ideational and cultural consolidation.

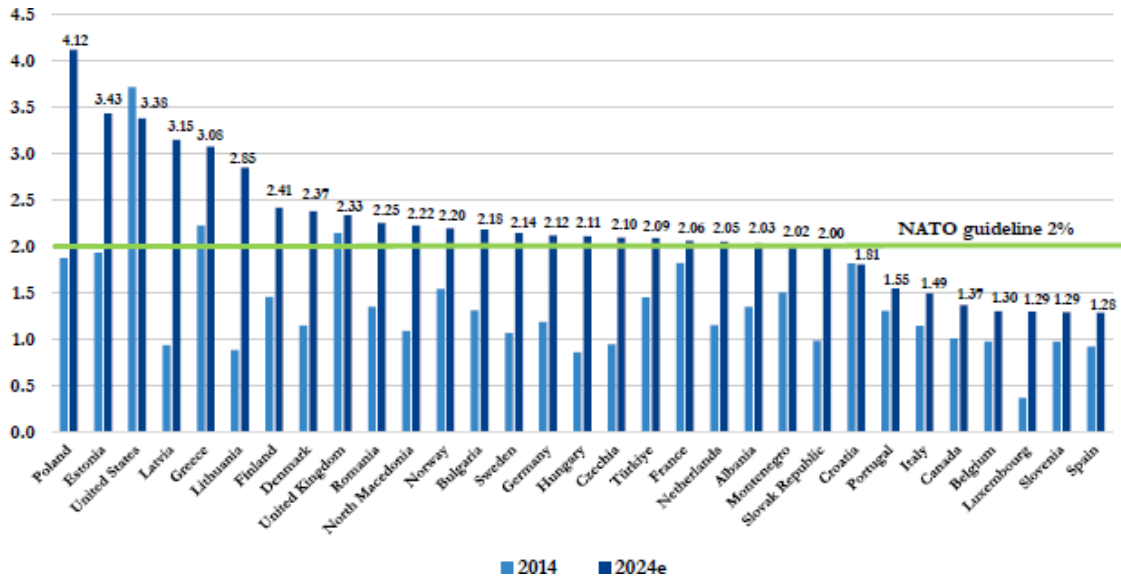
Thus, the scenario analysis shows that the central variable is not American presence, but European unity. While US engagement can stabilize fragmented alliances, it cannot substitute for the lack of a shared strategic culture. Europe's defense posture, therefore, remains a "patchwork" in scenarios marked by low unity (Scenarios C and D), but grows into a cohesive force when cultural convergence, political leadership, and institutional innovation align (Scenarios A and B).

For further research, the proposed third uncertainty in Section 4, *'Russian reintegration into European structures or continued hostility'* can be combined with either of the two uncertainties used in this thesis. It produces a scenario matrix worth further exploration as much as the one in this thesis, since it may produce vastly different alternatives about the future of European security architecture. Furthermore, research exploring the economic factors and limitations connected to rearmament in Europe would shed further light on how feasible and economically possible the rearmament sketched in this thesis (especially in Scenarios A and B) is. Lastly, scholars could explore the role of domestic political shifts, such as electoral cycles or the rise of far-right parties, in shaping threat perceptions and foreign policy preferences, factors that critically influence Europe's ability to form durable strategic coalitions.

In sum, the thesis demonstrates that the future of European security will be determined not by what Europe has, but by who it becomes. One thing is clear: the current European security architecture is at a breaking point. The choices made in the coming years by leaders in Brussels, Berlin, Paris, and Warsaw will determine whether Europe becomes a geopolitical bystander, a collection of individual states each pursuing their interests, or a coherent actor capable of navigating in an increasingly multipolar world.

Additional Figures:

Figure 6 – Defense expenditure of NATO members as a share of GDP (%)

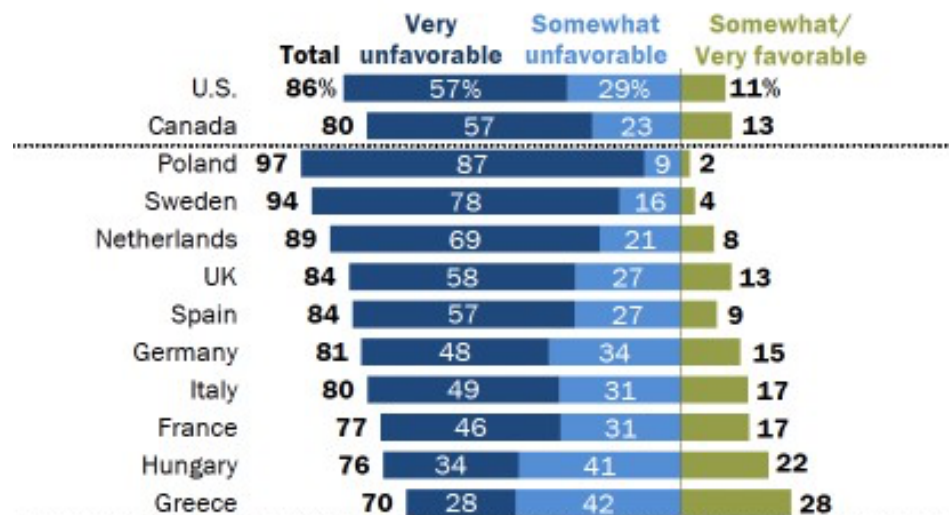


Note: 2024 figures are estimates
Source: NATO (2024b)

Figure 7 – Views on Russia

Views of Russia are largely negative around the world

% who have a ___ opinion of Russia



Source: Fagan, M., Gubbala, S., and Poushter, J. (2024). “3. Views of Russia and Putin”, *Pew Research Center*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/07/02/views-of-russia-and-putin-july-24/>. Consulted on May 19 2025.

Figure 8 – Views on War in Ukraine



Source: Survey conducted in May 2024 by Datapraxis, YouGov, Alpha Research, and Norstat in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. - Get the data
 ECFR · ecf.eu

Source: Krastev, I. and Leonard, M. (2024). “The meaning of sovereignty: Ukrainian and European views of Russia’s war on Ukraine“, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-meaning-of-sovereignty-ukrainian-and-european-views-of-russias-war-on-ukraine/>. Consulted on May 22 2025.

Appendix

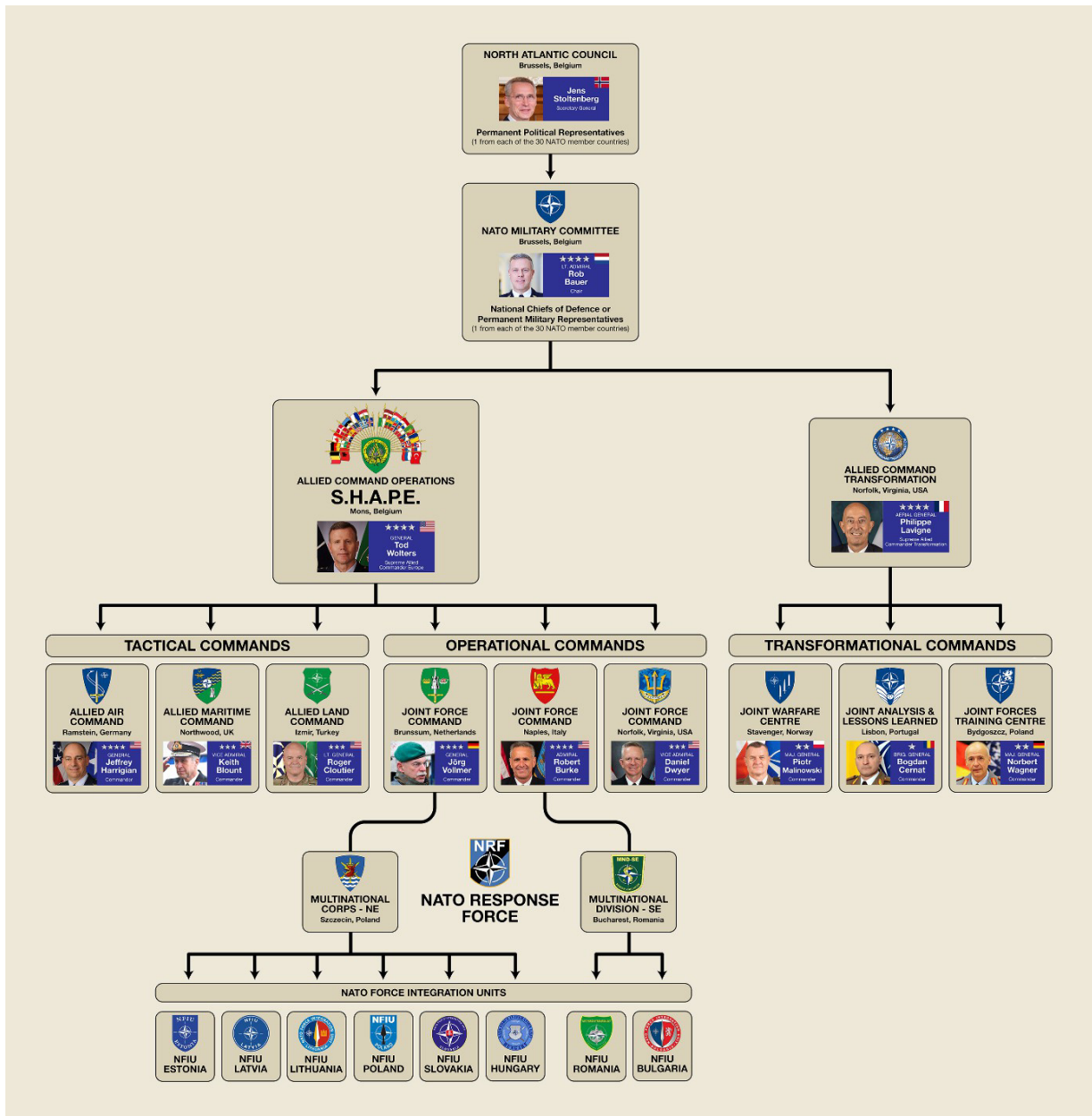
Distribution of military strength among NATO and EU members (blue - EU and NATO member; white – only NATO member; green – only EU member)

	Active troops	Reserves	Tanks	Artillery	Combat aircraft and helicopters
US	1 328 000	799 500	3 480	1 893	2 762
Türkiye	355 200	378 700	1 679	2 281	234
Poland	202 100	350 000	430	611	92
France	200 000	26 000	172	84	235
UK	184 860	25 934	159	158	127
Germany	181 600	34 000	222	126	185
Italy	165 500	18 500	150	145	145
Greece	142 700	221 350	941	1 007	145
Spain	133 282	15 150	238	286	116
Romania	81 300	55 000	197	578	13
Canada	68 000	27 000	56	0	50
Hungary	41 600	20 000	146	224	13
Netherlands	41 380	6 765	14	37	33
Bulgaria	37 000	3 000	59	63	9
Czechia	28 000	4 200	30	46	24
Belgium	25 000	6 400	0	0	30
Sweden	24 400	32 900	88	21	53
Portugal	24 000	211 700	26	104	21
Finland	24 000	870 000	150	637	41
Norway	23 250	0	33	32	24
Lithuania	23 000	104 000	0	45	0
Denmark	20 000	12 000	33	20	28
Slovakia	19 500	0	32	49	1
Latvia	17 250	36 000	0	31	0
Croatia	14 325	20 100	36	288	8
North Macedonia	9 000	60 000	11	92	0
Estonia	7 700	78 800	0	25	0
Slovenia	7 300	26 000	38	13	0
Albania	6 600	2 000	30	121	0
Montenegro	2 350	0	0	30	0
Luxembourg	1 000	0	0	0	0
Austria	16 000	125 600	42	23	11
Cyprus	10 000	2 000	60	120	0
Ireland	7 765	1 700	0	0	0
Malta	2 000	0	0	0	0

	Transport aircraft and helicopters	Special Aircraft	Tankers	Large Naval Vessels	Naval tonnage	Aircraft carriers
US	4 319	485	545	432	4 168 037	20
Türkiye	361	21	5	40	325 729	1
Poland	165	8	0	5	13 813	0
France	399	35	13	35	428 765	4
UK	180	20	6	25	394 043	2
Germany	229	20	2	22	228 552	0
Italy	289	17	6	23	359 417	2
Greece	196	6	0	23	216 348	0
Spain	131	6	0	21	215 346	1
Romania	48	1	0	9	21 634	0
Canada	130	25	5	16	119 637	0
Hungary	26	0	0	0	0	0
Netherlands	41	0	0	9	124 962	0
Bulgaria	19	0	0	6	11 239	0
Czechia	37	2	0	0	0	0
Belgium	19	0	0	2	10 190	0
Sweden	45	4	1	11	31 673	0
Portugal	37	11	2	9	38 657	0
Finland	28	1	0	0	19 434	0
Norway	28	4	0	16	65 692	0
Lithuania	6	0	0	0	0	0
Denmark	30	2	0	9	121 180	0
Slovakia	18	1	0	0	0	0
Latvia	4	0	0	0	0	0
Croatia	28	0	0	0	0	0
North Macedonia	6	0	0	0	0	0
Estonia	3	0	0	0		0
Slovenia	14	0	0	0	0	0
Albania	10	0	0	0	0	0
Montenegro	6	0	0	0	0	0
Luxembourg	1	0	0	0	0	0
Austria	29	0	0	0	0	0
Cyprus	8	0	0	0	0	0
Ireland	9	1	0	0	0	0
Malta	4	1	0	0	0	0

Source: Global Firepower (2025); IISS (2025)

NATO Command Structure



Note: Most of the positions are occupied by different people than the chart shows

Source: UsefulCharts (2022). "NATO Command Structure 2022", *UsefulCharts*, <https://usefulcharts.com/blogs/charts/nato-command-structure-2022>.

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