

European Security: A U.S. Perspective

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For a quarter century following the end of the Cold War the prevailing paradigm in the United States and much of western and central Europe was of a magnetic, largely unchallenged and gradually expanding Western-led order, in which the United States would continue as a relatively benign yet engaged European power, where eastern Europe and eventually Russia could potentially find a place, where military tensions and military forces would be reduced, and where growing interdependencies and open borders would lower conflict and generate greater security and prosperity.

Today, this seems to be a paradigm lost. The vision of a Europe whole and free is threatened by a Europe fractured and anxious.

A conflation of crises has challenged long-standing Western assumptions about the evolution of European order.

The 2008 financial crisis and ensuing Great Recession have generated considerable economic anxieties among voters across the continent. Traditional left-right divisions have splintered into new tensions between those who continue to champion open societies and open markets and those who seek to shield their societies and markets from what they perceive to be the excesses of globalization and intrusions into their sovereignty.

Brexit's message is that ever closer Union is not inevitable, and that the European Union itself may not be forever.

Russia's interventions in Georgia and Ukraine reminded Europeans that hard power remains important, underscored that borders can indeed be changed by force, and signaled that Russia is not somehow "lost in transition" but is going its own way.

The migration crisis has made it clear to many European citizens that the "Europe of institutions" is unprepared to tackle down-home challenges, and that the slogan "More Europe" is not a ready-made answer to European questions.

The reaction to the migration crisis, in turn, has made it clear that the quarter-century alignment of liberalism and nationalism in service to the European project is over – and not just in central Europe.

The result is a Europe that has turned from being an exporter of stability to an importer of instability – a Europe that is less settled and more fluid, less capable and more turbulent, less Merkel and more German at a time when more Germans are also questioning centrist answers to unpredictable challenges.

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Today the defenders of European order are either exhausted by their efforts to sustain that order or are fighting revisionists within their own ranks who are questioning the elite bargains and social underpinnings that have sustained that order.

The prevailing “establishment” European debate about order today is more about how to defend and protect rather than to reach out and project.

At the same time, the influence and activism of revisionist states, groups, and even individuals have grown dramatically.

Russia under Vladimir Putin has become a revisionist power seeking to undo the post-Cold War settlement, control its neighborhood, and disrupt Western influence.

Not only has Moscow intervened with force in Georgia, invaded Ukraine, annexed its peninsula of Crimea, and stationed troops in five of the EU’s six Eastern Partnership countries, it is exploiting fissures within EU member states and other European countries to generate uncertainty about the European project itself. Moscow’s direct interference in the election processes of democracies across Europe and in the United States, efforts to intimidate European energy consumers, launch cyberattacks in Estonia, Ukraine and other countries, proclaim a duty to protect ethnic Russians in other countries regardless of their citizenship, and conduct provocative military activities, including simulated nuclear exercises and snap conventional force alerts, as well as violate the air, land and seascapes of a number of EU and NATO member states, are all examples of the Putin regime’s challenge to the prevailing security order.

Europe’s vast eastern spaces will remain turbulent, and sporadically violent, for the foreseeable future. The continent’s eastern lands are challenged as much by their own internal weaknesses as by Russian aggression. Corruption and crony capitalism, kleptocratic elites and festering conflicts drain resources from countries that are already fragile and poor.

Ukraine is the crucible of change. It stands at a critical crossroads between a more open society integrated increasingly into the European mainstream and serving as a positive alternative model to that of Putin for the post-Soviet space; or a failed, fractured land of grey mired in the stagnation and turbulence historically characteristic of Europe’s borderlands.

The combination of western Europe’s internal preoccupations, Moscow’s revisionism, and weak states in eastern Europe is a combustible brew. Putin has openly rejected the rules of the road in European security, and in eastern Europe beyond the EU and NATO there are neither rules nor roads. Broader institutions that include all post-Soviet states, like the OSCE and the Council of Europe, have been weakened by Western disinterest and by the ability of Russia and other states to undermine reforms and undercut decisions. European-wide mechanisms built up over decades to increase transparency, predictability and de-escalation, including through arms control, have lost priority.

The stakes have been rendered higher by the surprising realization that the most unpredictable actor in this mix may in fact be the United States.

The advent of the Trump administration has not only shaken European assumptions about the steadiness and reliability of their major ally, it has exposed the painful reality of their continued dependence on what many fear to be an erratic and reckless superpower.

Europe's irritation with being dependent on Washington is almost as great as its fear of being abandoned by Washington.

Abandonment is not a likely scenario. The United States remains deeply engaged in European security. Recent European rhetoric about "strategic autonomy" has yet to be given any real substance, despite EU efforts to develop a more robust defense identity. And in terms of ultimate security guarantees, NATO and the United States will remain indispensable for a long time to come.

But a more nuanced shift in U.S. approaches to Europe seems likely.

Under Donald Trump, the United States is drifting from being a European power to a power in Europe. That simple turn of phrase carries significant implications for transatlantic relations and European security.

For 70 years the United States has been a European power. It has been integral to the balances and coalitions that comprised both Cold War and Post-Cold War Europe.

Already at the end of the Cold War, the United States was inclined to step back from Europe. But the Balkan wars returned the United States to its role as an affirmative stakeholder and shaper, actively involved in all mechanisms and institutions, from NATO, the Partnership for Peace, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and the OSCE to the U.S.-EU relationship, the OECD and the G7/G8.

It cultivated bilateral and regional partnerships, from the Northern European Initiative to the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe, across the whole continent.

It did so not just out of hegemonic impulse, but due to a number of fundamental understandings. The first was the realization that Europe alone was still unable to deal with its own civil wars. The second was that Europe remained turbulent and unfinished. Advancing a Europe whole and free was deemed both important and urgent to U.S. interests. Third was the understanding that European order was a linchpin of world order.

The United States also engaged as a European power because it realized that after two world wars in which Europeans destroyed their continent, it must play a role as Europe's pacifier. By aligning its security with its allies, it helped those allies build their security together, rather than against each other. NATO offered an umbrella under which the European experiment could flourish.

Today, however, the United States is in danger of drifting away from being a European power to being a power in Europe – selectively engaged, focused on burden-shedding as much as burden-sharing, part stakeholder, part spoiler, more open to "disaggregation" (playing Europeans off

against one another) than in the past, and less intuitively convinced of the link between European order and global order.

Donald Trump personifies this shift. He bullies allies and embraces autocrats. He upends summits and questions long-standing U.S. security commitments. He considers the EU to be a competitor in the same league as China or Russia. He has ignored the OSCE. He has threatened European companies doing business with Iran with sanctions and has threatened to impose steel and aluminum tariffs on U.S. allies for reasons of “national security.” He is disdainful of European priorities, whether climate change, the Middle East peace process, or the nuclear deal with Iran. He has been passive on eastern and southeastern Europe. The decision to provide Ukraine with lethal defensive weapons came from the Congress. So did an array of tougher sanctions on Russia. So did support for NATO when President Trump questioned the credibility of Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty.

Much of what Trump says or does makes Europeans angry. European security experts speak of the need for “strategic autonomy” and a “Plan B” – an independent European defense, including a nuclear component – should the United States turn its back on Europe. Some – for instance, the German foreign minister – go so far as to say that the goal of European integration today is now to build a “counterweight” against the United States.

Unfortunately, anger is not a policy – at least not a *good* policy. European overreaction only deepens transatlantic confusion. Premature European efforts to create so-called “autonomy” risk becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy before Europe acquires the necessary capabilities that could make such a phrase meaningful. And the goal of building a European “counterweight” would not only be an abdication of the historic experiment of European integration, it would turn most Americans from proponents to opponents of the European Union and feed Trump’s anti-EU machinations – with significant consequences for transatlantic security.

Nonetheless, Americans and Europeans alike appear to want a more balanced partnership. Perhaps it would not be so bad for the United States to be less overwhelmingly engaged in Europe. After all, most of my compatriots do wonder why 500 million Europeans still depend on 330 million Americans for protection and diplomatic initiatives that are essential for European security.

A Europe with less America is likely to win U.S. support if Americans were convinced that such a Europe would

- be hospitable to freedom and open to U.S. goods, investments, and ideas;
- be free of the strife that in the past has drained inordinate resources from other parts of the world;
- not be dominated by any power or powers hostile to the United States; and
- would be America’s counterpart, not its counterweight, when it came to tackling issues that no country, not even a superpower, could tackle on its own.

Unfortunately, time and again such a Europe has failed to materialize. In the meantime, challenges will continue to arise in the seams and gaps between erratic U.S. burden-shedding, inconsistent European burden-sharing, halting reforms in Europe’s grey zone, and unrelenting Russian efforts at disruption.