

Footprint Is Not Power

Europe Must Defend Itself Through an Alliance America Still Commands

Washington is right to end the age of Europe as an American garrison. But a drawdown that weakens Article 5 or gives away NATO's integrating machinery would turn a necessary adjustment into a strategic loss. The United States should make Europe carry the conventional burden while keeping the architecture that makes the alliance run.

THE WRONG MEASURE

On April 17, Lithuania's Defense Ministry said the Pentagon had warned it that ammunition bought from the United States might arrive late. Estonia confirmed that it, too, had been told of possible delays. These were not idle partners pleading poverty. The Baltic states, pressed against Russian territory, were already among NATO's most serious spenders, with Lithuania and Latvia near four percent of GDP and all three pledging to move toward five. Yet even they discovered that buying American weapons does not exempt a country from American priority when theaters collide. The reason for the delay was more revealing than the delay itself: an American war with Iran was drawing on the same stocks that allies on NATO's northeastern flank had already purchased.

By May 1, the warning had widened. Reuters, citing a Financial Times report, said Washington had told allies including Britain, Poland, Lithuania, and Estonia to expect long delivery delays for American weapons. Warsaw then tried to narrow the alarm. Poland's defense minister said he had no signal that Patriot batteries would be delayed, though other equipment might slip. That reassurance mattered. So did the fact that it had to be issued at all.

The stockpile problem was no longer theoretical. By late May, the Center for Strategic and International Studies had put numbers to it. Its April analysis estimated that, during the 39-day air and missile campaign against Iran, U.S. forces had heavily used seven key munitions and may have consumed around half of the prewar inventories of Patriot, THAAD, and Precision Strike Missiles, while firing about a third of the Tomahawk inventory. A May follow-up found that replacing Tomahawk, THAAD, and Patriot stocks would take three or more years. A shelf that takes years to refill cannot be treated as an inexhaustible symbol.

A few weeks later, after a meeting of NATO military planners, General Alexis Grynkeiwich, NATO's top American commander in Europe, told allies to provide more aircraft and ships as Washington reduced the forces it made available to the alliance. NATO, he said, had developed an unhealthy dependence on American forces. He was right. The United States cannot use the same interceptor twice, fly the same tanker in two oceans, or promise the same brigade to two crises. A strategy that pretends otherwise is not resolve. It is accounting fraud.

These episodes should end the shallow argument over American withdrawal from Europe. Traditional Atlanticists treat every unit brought home as a subtraction from American leadership. The administration and its defenders treat every unit brought home as a recovery of American sovereignty. The camps disagree about the drawdown, but they share the same error. They measure American power in NATO by the visible footprint of American troops.

Footprint is not power. Troops matter. A wholly offshore NATO would be a brittle promise, and a forward American presence still has military and political value. But the garrison is the most visible form of commitment, not the most durable one. It reassures allies, warns adversaries, and gives presidents something tangible to point to. It also ties down scarce forces, consumes readiness, and gives Europe permission to remain militarily unfinished.

The United States should not abandon Europe, and it should not preserve the post-Cold War settlement in amber. It should re-found NATO for a harsher century. Europe should become the first provider of conventional force for the defense of its own continent. The United States should retain the parts of the alliance no European state can replace: the supreme command, the standards that make national forces usable together, the strategic enablers that allow a campaign to move and see, and the nuclear guarantee that gives Article 5 its political weight.

That is not retrenchment. It is a shift from muscular primacy to architectural primacy. America should stop being NATO's infantryman of first resort and become its nervous system and spine.

The administration has grasped the first half of this truth and endangered the second. It is right to demand that Europe assume primary responsibility for Europe's conventional defense. It is wrong to make that demand while treating the American guarantee as conditional, theatrical, or dependent on presidential mood. A drawdown can strengthen NATO if it is deliberate. The same drawdown can weaken NATO if it looks like drift.

The instinct is right. The psychology is reckless.

A FOUNDING BARGAIN

NATO was not born as an act of charity. It was an act of design.

The standard story begins with Soviet power, and rightly so. In 1949, Western Europe was broken, the Red Army dominated the eastern half of the continent, and the Berlin blockade had shown that the postwar settlement would not defend itself. The North Atlantic Treaty bound the United States, Canada, and ten European states in a collective defense pact. Its core promise was spare and immense: an attack on one would be treated as an attack on all.

But the alliance was never only a shield against Moscow. It was also Washington's answer to the older European problem. Two world wars had taught the United States that a continent left to its own balance of power could drag America into catastrophe. Acheson, Marshall, Truman, and the founding generation understood that the United States could not merely defeat threats in Europe and then sail home. It had to organize Europe so that another continental breakdown would not again become an American emergency. NATO deterred the Soviet Union, made German rearmament possible, and channeled European recovery into an American-led structure rather than a revived rivalry among national armies.

The German question was the hinge. West Germany had to be rearmed because Europe could not be defended without German power; it also had to be contained because European peace could not rest on an unfettered German general staff. NATO solved that contradiction by putting German strength inside a larger American command. It allowed Europe to recover force without reviving the old continental gamble. That is why the alliance was architecture, not charity: it converted national power into usable power without letting any European state own the system.

The architecture came after the treaty. The treaty itself was only fourteen articles. It did not create a European super-army, and it did not require the United States to go to war automatically in the

constitutional sense. The hard machinery emerged under pressure. After North Korea's invasion of the South, NATO approved an integrated military force under centralized command. Dwight Eisenhower became the first Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) in 1950 and activated Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) the following year. From then on, the alliance was not just a promise. It was a command system.

That system was the true American stroke. The United States did not occupy every allied capital. It placed itself where plans became force, where national units became allied formations, where a decision in Washington could be translated into a campaign in Europe. It did not eliminate European sovereignty. It organized it.

The analogy is Hamiltonian in the narrow, concrete sense. Hamilton did not strengthen the new American union by sending federal officers to administer every state. He assumed state debts and built a national bank, binding creditors, commerce, and political ambition to the credit of the federal center. The states remained states, but the circuits of trust and money ran through the Union. NATO did something similar in security. European armies remained national, but the circuits of planning, command, and ultimate reassurance ran through the United States.

That bargain worked because American abundance made it affordable. After the Soviet Union collapsed, it became distorted. NATO enlarged and endured, but Europe disarmed under the shelter of American power. Washington asked for burden sharing; Europe learned that most American complaints were survivable. The result was an alliance that remained politically valuable but operationally lopsided.

Russia's war against Ukraine exposed the danger. Europe had wealth, population, and engineering talent, but not enough usable military power. In March 2023, the European Union pledged to send Ukraine one million artillery rounds within a year. By January 2024, Josep Borrell was telling defense ministers that just over half would arrive by the deadline. On the front, that shortfall was not a budget story; it was the difference between firing and waiting. By 2026, Patriot interceptors were scarce enough that Ukrainian officials were again warning that ballistic missile defense depended on supplies no one could replenish quickly. The lesson was not simply that allies had spent too little. They had allowed the habits and factories of war to atrophy.

That condition should not be hidden. It should be turned into strategy.

THE MACHINERY OF POWER

Alliances do not fight because their governments sign the same communique. They fight when a shell bought in one country can feed a gun operated by another, when a commander has a shared picture of the sky, when a convoy can cross a border without becoming a diplomatic incident. Interoperability is a word bureaucrats drained of drama; in war it means whether help arrives as combat power or as a traffic jam.

This connective tissue is where American power in NATO lives. It is less dramatic than tanks on a railway platform. It is also harder to replace.

Airpower shows the point. A European fighter bought in numbers is not yet an allied campaign. Someone must decide which runway it uses after the first missile salvo, which tanker keeps it airborne, which radar picture it trusts, and which target it is authorized to strike. In NATO, the habit of fusing national assets into a single campaign is the inheritance of American command. Europe can learn more of it. It should. But Washington should not mistake apprenticeship for abdication.

The Supreme Allied Commander Europe remains the most important uniformed position in the alliance because it converts political commitment into operational design. European officers can and should run more headquarters. NATO's February 2026 redistribution, announced after allies agreed on a new division of senior officer responsibility, points in that direction: the United Kingdom is to take over Joint Force Command Norfolk, Italy Joint Force Command Naples, and Germany and Poland Joint Force Command Brunssum on a rotating basis. The United States, meanwhile, is to lead the land, air, and maritime component commands while retaining SACEUR. That can be a useful apprenticeship. It would become a mistake only if Washington confused sharing command work with surrendering command primacy.

Standards are just as important, and less understood. A NATO standard is a small constitution for crisis. It decides whether aircraft can refuel each other, whether targeting data can move across a coalition, whether a munition bought in one capital becomes usable power in another. The country that writes and polices the standards does not need to own every platform. It shapes the market in which every platform must operate.

The same is true of the strategic enablers that make modern war coherent. Europe can buy guns faster than it can create the sensors, refueling capacity, secure networks, and transport habits that let a continent fight as a single theater. Some of these assets are expensive; others are simply the product of decades of American practice. Washington should not use them to excuse European weakness. It should use them to structure European strength.

The nuclear umbrella is not another item on the capability chart. It is the frame around the chart. British and French nuclear forces matter, and they may matter more in a Europe that has to do more for itself. But they do not substitute for the American guarantee. Only the United States can make an attack on Warsaw or Tallinn feel like a confrontation with the central power in the international system. Without that fact, Article 5 becomes a legal clause searching for a strategic author.

This is the bargain Washington should offer: Europe supplies the conventional weight, and America owns the architecture that gives that weight strategic meaning. Europe becomes stronger, but its strength runs through an alliance whose decisive machinery remains American.

The division also answers the alliance's resentment problem. Europe resents being treated as a protectorate; America resents paying for a continent rich enough to defend itself. A settlement that gives Europe the battle and America the system turns resentment into roles.

THE RACE

The danger in this design is obvious: it might succeed too well.

European military weakness is one reason American architecture is so valuable. A Europe that has little ammunition and few ready formations cannot easily dispense with the United States. But the whole purpose of a new Atlantic bargain is to change that condition. Rearmament, if it goes far enough, gives Europe the option to build not only more mass but also its own integrating layer: its own command habits, its own procurement rules, its own intelligence arrangements, perhaps one day its own nuclear center of gravity.

France has long bet on that possibility. Its language of strategic autonomy is not a rhetorical flourish. It is a standing claim that Europe should possess the keys to its own defense. Many Europeans distrust that project, and for good reason. They do not want European independence to become French preeminence with a continental accent. Germany is still reluctant to lead as a military hegemon. Poland

wants American power close, not abstractly friendly. The Baltic states have no interest in trading the U.S. guarantee for a seminar on sovereignty.

Those divisions give Washington time. They do not give it forever.

America's task is to win the race between European mass and European independence. It should welcome the first and forestall the second by making the fastest path to real capability run through NATO. The more European armies train through American-led command procedures, buy weapons built to American-compatible standards, and rely on U.S. intelligence and nuclear consultation in crisis, the higher the cost of building a parallel system becomes. Dependence created by competence is more durable than dependence imposed by pressure.

Switching costs are not created by declarations. They are built in procurement offices, training ranges, and exercises that become habit. A Polish air-defense purchase that assumes American data links, a German brigade certified inside a NATO plan, a Scandinavian naval exercise routed through SHAPE: each decision is small. Together they make autonomy expensive.

This cannot be sold as subordination. Allies will not spend five percent of GDP merely to become auxiliaries in an American empire. Nor should they. The way to defeat strategic autonomy is not to mock it but to make it unnecessary. European leaders sell autonomy because dependence feels humiliating and because U.S. politics has made reliance feel risky. A well-designed NATO bargain answers both anxieties: Europe becomes capable enough to defend its territory, and America becomes reliable at a higher level of command.

The argument must be practical: NATO gives Europe the quickest route from promise to power. A French-led or European Union-centered defense architecture would require years of political bargaining before it produced the first usable brigade. An American-led NATO architecture already exists. It works when allies feed it real force.

Washington should therefore stop trying to preserve European weakness. Weak allies are expensive. The aim is to make Europe strong in a pattern that keeps its strength legible to American command. Build more, build faster, and build in ways that plug into the alliance America leads.

CREDIBILITY FIRST

Architectural power rests on a guarantee the adversary believes. This is why the current execution is so dangerous.

Article 5 has always contained legal flexibility. Each ally decides what action it deems necessary. American presidents have never signed away Congress's constitutional role in war. But the strategic effect of Article 5 has never rested on legal automaticity alone. It has rested on the expectation that the United States would not search for loopholes while a NATO ally was under attack.

Careless rhetoric damages that expectation. In June 2025, on the way to the NATO summit in The Hague, President Donald Trump was asked whether he remained committed to Article 5. His answer was not a clean yes. It "depends on your definition," he said, adding that there were numerous definitions of the clause. The next day, NATO leaders reaffirmed their ironclad commitment to collective defense. That helped. It did not erase the order of events. Deterrence lives in sequence and tone as much as in communiqués. The hedge came before the reassurance.

A tripwire does not deter because a few thousand troops can defeat a major invasion by themselves. It deters because it makes hesitation look unlikely. The same is true of the nuclear umbrella. It is made of forces, but it works through belief.

Russia does not need certainty that the United States would abandon an ally. It needs doubt. Doubt is where probing begins: a cyberattack treated as ambiguous, a missile landing explained away as accidental, a blockade dressed up as local friction, a slice of territory seized before alliance decision-making can harden. Deterrence usually fails at the margin of uncertainty, not at the moment of formal withdrawal.

A smaller American posture in Europe therefore requires a louder American guarantee. That begins with the things the United States has chosen to keep: SACEUR, nuclear consultation, strategic enablers, and enough forward presence to make the pledge visible. The president should say that Article 5 is not a bargaining chip because the whole drawdown depends on that sentence being believed.

If allies doubt the guarantee, they will not simply spend more in ways Washington prefers. They will hedge. They will seek national exceptions, duplicate headquarters, and buy political insurance against American abandonment. The result would be exactly what U.S. strategy should avoid: a stronger Europe that is less tied to the United States. To preserve American primacy in NATO, Washington must be more reliable in the domains it keeps. It can spend less muscle in Europe only if it lends more spine.

THE ANKARA TEST

The next test has a date. NATO leaders are scheduled to meet in Ankara on July 7 and 8. The summit can become another ritual of spending targets and ironclad adjectives, or it can become the place where the alliance turns the American drawdown into a design.

The sentence Washington should bring is plain: Europe will assume operational primacy for the conventional defense of Europe, and the United States will retain strategic primacy over the architecture that makes that defense possible. Not because Europeans are irrelevant, but because the alliance works only if Europe's new force is built inside a system whose decisive guarantees Washington still owns.

Withdrawals should therefore be conditional, not theatrical. Over the next decade, the permanent American conventional footprint should shrink as European forces assume defined missions inside NATO plans. A promise in a communique should not retire an American unit. A European formation that has been assigned, certified, and exercised under stress should. Allies need a direction; adversaries should not receive a timetable.

Spending targets should be treated as inputs, not achievements. The five-percent pledge matters only if it becomes military power that NATO can use. Air defense, ammunition production, and military mobility deserve priority because they turn money into endurance. The test is not whether a budget satisfies a creative accounting rule. The test is whether, on a bad morning, forces can move, shoot, repair, and stay in the fight.

Washington should use access as leverage. An ally that buys into NATO-compatible systems should get deeper intelligence sharing, weapons integration, training, and nuclear consultation. An ally that spends lavishly on an autonomy showcase should find the road harder. The rule should be simple: the fastest route to European strength runs through the alliance America leads.

The Pacific dividend should also be explicit. Troops and platforms no longer needed as a European garrison should not vanish into budgetary fog. They should strengthen undersea power, survivable bases, and the magazines a Pacific crisis would consume. Europeans should understand that a lighter

American footprint in Europe is not America leaving the world. Asian allies should see that Europe is no longer consuming the margin on which deterrence in the Pacific depends.

Critics will answer that adversaries count brigades and allies trust soldiers more than systems. They are not wrong. The United States should keep enough forward presence to make the guarantee visible. It should keep exercising, rotating, storing, and planning in Europe. But visibility is not the same as primacy, and reassurance is not the same as doing Europe's job for it.

Drift has an itinerary of its own: the delayed shipment, the confused command handoff, the autonomy speech, the emergency summit. Each event is small enough to excuse. Together they describe an alliance in which Europe arms because it doubts America and America withdraws because it doubts Europe. That is not a transition. It is the slow conversion of dependence into mistrust.

The founders of NATO understood the difference between a garrison and an order. They did not merely station Americans in Europe. They made European security run through American command, American standards, and American strategic will. At Ankara, Washington can begin the next version of that achievement: fewer Americans doing European jobs, more Europeans fighting through an alliance only America can make whole.

The bargain is not retreat. It is Europe taking the fight and America keeping the order.