



# The Time has come to “Europeanise” NATO



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**The** relationship between the United States (US) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is often fantasised about by Europeans, who are quick to confound US defence with NATO. First, Europeans have forgotten the exact context and circumstances of NATO's birth, and the ambiguities that ensued. Second, Europeans remain self-centred and have still not acknowledged the shift in the world's geostrategic centre from Europe to the Asia-Pacific region. Finally, they are not sufficiently familiar with the United States' global defence organisation.

By shedding new light on all these points, we shall see how Europeans need to rethink their relationship with NATO and imagine a more ambitious positioning within it. This will help reduce their dependence on external contingencies and best protect their interests.

### Origins of a Misunderstanding

After the Second World War, the countries of Western Europe, ruined by war, asked the Americans to remain militarily involved on the European continent, to ensure their protection in the face of the Communist threat. The Atlantic Alliance was established when the twelve founding countries signed the Washington Treaty on 4 April 1949. NATO's principal civilian and military institutions were initially located in France from 1951 onwards for a period of fifteen years.

From the outset, however, there seems to have been a misunderstanding about the terms of burden sharing – there was a significant difference in the contribution of military capabilities between the Americans and the Europeans. The United States thought that its

most important contribution to NATO was the economic support provided by the Marshall Plan to help rebuild European countries. On the other side, though, Europeans gradually came to see the American military commitment as fair compensation for having renounced any ambition for leadership.

Furthermore, after General de Gaulle's decision to withdraw from NATO command structure in 1966 to develop its nuclear deterrent, France expressed its desire for autonomy vis-à-vis the American ally. Thereby, France promoted the principle of a European defence, while remaining a loyal but demanding ally within the Atlantic Alliance. Until France's full return to NATO's integrated military command in 2009, this positioning led to ambiguity regarding France's relationship vis-à-vis NATO.

### New Geostrategic Centre of Gravity

Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union was the United States' principal strategic competitor, and the battleground was the European continent. Today, the strategic competitor in every field is China. Despite its war of aggression against Ukraine, it is not Russia. To understand this new American stance towards Europe, we need to think out of the European box and look at the world from an American perspective.

Europeans are often victims of “Mercator bias”. In Europe, for practical reasons, the most commonly used representation of the world is the projection of the globe onto a flat map centred on Europe. This frame of reference keeps us under the illusion that we are at the centre of the world, and consequently, at the centre of our American allies' concerns. Nothing could be further from the truth.

## The United States' Defence Apparatus

The organization of the US military gives the United States the unique ability to project its military power anywhere in the world. With nearly three million people, the US Department of Defense has the

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largest defence budget in the world at \$886 billion. Notably, the highest US military authority, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), is merely the military advisor to the President of the United States. This stands in contrast to most European countries, where the Chief of Defense Staff (CHODS) is the sole operational commander of all national military forces. In the US military, operational responsibility for the employment of forces is shared between eleven strategic commands (Combatant Commands), six of which are regional and five functional. It is as if the US had eleven CHODS with strategic responsibility for the conduct of joint military operations in their geographical or functional area.

### NATO Today

NATO is a political and military organisation involving both civilian bodies and military commands. At the political level, the decision-making body is the North Atlantic Council (NAC), to which all allied nations (32 to date) send representatives. Chaired by NATO's Secretary General, the NAC is supported by an international staff that assist it in preparing and implementing its decisions. At the military level, the Military Command (MC)

oversees the command structure with the help of its executive body, the International Military Staff (IMS). This structure consists of two

strategic commands: one for operations in Europe, and another for the transformation of NATO's military capabilities and the preparation of future operations.

Allied Command Operations is under the responsibility of

an American general, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and is based in Mons, Belgium. Allied Command Transformation has been headed by a French general, the Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (SACT) since France's return to NATO command structure in 2009 and is based in Norfolk, United States.

NATO has no military forces of its own. Its real added-value is to offer its allies and partners a permanent command organisation (e.g. staff, command and communication systems). This ensures the immediate reactivity and interoperability of allied military forces provided by the nations. NATO's military strength is the sum of the armed forces of the allied nations operating together.

In Europe, the SACEUR function is assumed by the American general who also (and above all) commands the United States European Command (EUCOM), which is in Stuttgart, Germany. This general simultaneously exercises these two responsibilities on behalf of two different authorities. For the United States, as Commander EUCOM, he reports to the President of the United States. Within the NATO framework, as SACEUR,

he is under the authority of the 32 allied nations within the NAC.

### The United States and NATO

In Europe, most countries associate NATO with the United States because of its military and political pre-eminence. As mentioned, this is a misunderstanding of the US-NATO relationship. Europeans see NATO as an overarching organisation which is larger than themselves, whereas the United States sees NATO as a regional organisation which is smaller than its own defense organisation. The vast majority of Americans are largely unaware of NATO, as they do not need it to defend their interests. Most American military personnel have not served in Europe, but in Asia, and only a few people in Washington deal with transatlantic and European issues.

By contrast, Europeans have a vital need for an alliance, because no single European country has the capabilities to defend itself or to conduct large-scale military operations entirely on their own. However, the famous "Article 5" of the Washington Treaty does not guarantee American involvement in the event of aggression against a member of NATO. First, a unanimous vote at the NAC is required for this article to come into force. And even then, the article leaves each country free to determine its individual contribution in support of the attacked member.

It is an illusion to believe that in case of a conflict in Europe, all American forces would come under the exclusive political control of the NAC. NATO's campaign in the Kosovo war was particularly characterised by a cumbersome process of political validation of targets by the NAC, often because of different opinions on the validity of certain air targets. Since then, the

US has clearly indicated that its preferred mode of engagement is a "Coalition of the Willing". Therefore, there are likely to be two concurrent operations, one US caveat-free operation and one NATO operation involving a smaller number of US forces alongside European military forces.

What does the situation look like today? The strategic interests that connected Americans and Europeans during the Cold War are no longer so convergent. Since the Bush administration, American political authorities have regularly reminded Europeans that discrepancies in defence commitments are less and less acceptable to the American taxpayer.

Donald Trump's statement on a possible US withdrawal from NATO simply echoes this preexisting American reality. The Americans will elect their president to defend their own interests, not those of their allies. Keeping Joe Biden in office would not change the situation, as the US Congress would remain deeply divided on the issue of support for Europe, which we have observed with aid to Ukraine. Although the possible election of Donald Trump carries with it a greater risk for the Atlantic Alliance, it can also be seen as an opportunity for Europeans to reclaim their security by assuming greater responsibility.

### European Defence or the Defence of Europe

NATO is Europe's life insurance policy for their collective defence. Therefore, Europe must no longer conceive it as an American organisation in which they participate, but as a European organisation in which the Americans participate. The Americans already have their own organisation (EUCOM) to use their military

power on the European continent, and they will certainly not abandon it.

Given these circumstances, it is absolutely conceivable and legitimate to imagine a European SACEUR like Marshal Foch, who was the first Supreme Allied Commander during World War I. Such a European general would have to come from a militarily credible, nuclear-armed nation to have the necessary military and strategic skills to successfully command the allied armed forces in combat.

He could be assisted by an American general, who has the potential to facilitate coordination between NATO and American commands acting in coalition. Unlike his American counterpart today, a European SACEUR would have no other national function and would devote himself entirely to his responsibilities within NATO, just like the French SACT does today.

#### **A coalition of the willing:**

A coalition of the willing is an association of states to achieve a specific, narrow goal. This term has been used in several contexts and is most famously used by the US-led coalition in the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

For European allies, claiming the supreme operational function in NATO command structure has to go hand in hand with a substantial financial and capability effort, to lend credibility to their attempt to strengthen Europe's defence. Ultimately, it is a question of political will. Debates can be calmly opened with the Americans, since this approach to strengthening European investment in their own defence respects the "3D" rule commonly accepted in NATO: 1) no decoupling from the United States,

2) no duplication of NATO capabilities, 3) no discrimination against non-European allies.

We must stop believing that showing weakness is an asset for receiving US military support. The truth is that countries are more ready to help strong and powerful allies that are in a position to return the favour.

Eventually, Europeans must look at the world as it is, not as they want it to be. The uncertainty surrounding the US presidential elections and the future of the United States' commitment to NATO is an opportunity to finally rebalance the transatlantic relationship and to avoid American blackmail.

#### **Conclusion**

Greater investments by Europeans in their own defence, as required by the geopolitical situation and as called for by our American ally, will be more credible if accompanied by a pursuit for the highest operational responsibilities within NATO. In the hope of security at a lower cost, we currently let the American electorate decide our future and security. It is high time for Europeans to leave this excessive and deadly dependence behind.

We should consider NATO in the same way as the Americans – a European regional organisation in which the United States participates. One, that could well be led militarily by Europeans in coordination with the American military command in Europe. Whether within the framework of NATO or the European Union, Europeans must assume their responsibilities and organise themselves to defend their interests. Be it with the US, when there is a convergence of interests, but also independently of the US, when we do not share the same priorities. Openly considering such a possibility with our non-European allies

would create a positive dynamic that and the EU for a more credible European defence. would strengthen synergies between NATO