

The narrow but inescapable path of the European pillar of NATO



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• Introduction

The strategic context in which Europeans find themselves makes it imperative to put in place mechanisms to strengthen their ability to defend themselves, i.e. without major support from the Americans, or perhaps even alone. Admittedly, the United States is still indispensable today, but the prevailing trend in its positioning, well beyond Donald Trump, is to withdraw from the European scene.

In this debate, the idea that Europeans must develop a European pillar within NATO is taking shape: at a time when the Americans are questioning the strength of their commitment to the Atlantic Alliance, Europeans must take over, asserting themselves politically and operationally within NATO to compensate for the withdrawal of those who until recently ensured the credibility of the pact.

So what are the strengths and characteristics of a European pillar within NATO? How can it be achieved, and how can it coordinate European and transatlantic frameworks for action? And what kind of political and operational difficulties will its implementation face?

The European pillar of NATO is presented here as a possible response to both the planned withdrawal of American forces and the long-term Russian threat. It offers strategic advantages, as it should provide Europeans with the means to exercise their own sovereignty. It is a path to emancipation, now recognised as essential by the vast majority of Europeans.

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However, the implementation of a European pillar of NATO is not without its difficulties, as have been all previous attempts to assert a European identity in the field of defence. Whether it be European hesitation to ‘kill the father’, the industrial stakes of the transatlantic link or the difficult coordination of the institutional frameworks involved, there are many obstacles on the path to greater European sovereignty.

I • An old and controversial idea

I THE ‘EUROPEAN CAUCUS’ AND THE ROLE OF THE WEU

The idea of a European pillar of NATO is not new.¹ In the 1960s, the British proposed the creation of a *Eurogroup* comprising 11 European NATO member states (excluding France)². The aim was to “help ensure a stronger and more effective European contribution to common defence, thereby strengthening the Alliance and the security of its citizens”³. At the same time, the European Allies would meet for “*Euro-dinners*” or “*Euro-teas*”, while the term “*European caucus*” was sometimes used within the Alliance.⁴

Notably, the United States reacted negatively to these initiatives, believing that they would “institutionalise European disunity”⁵. Moreover, the US State Department noted in 1969 that as long as the Atlantic Alliance was a nuclear alliance with the United States at its core, any idea of a “European caucus” within NATO could only be counterproductive.⁶

This was indicative not only of the American conception of the role of Europeans within the Alliance, but also of the difficulty for Europeans to assert themselves autonomously within it.

The Eurogroup continued its activities until 1994, when its functions were transferred to the Western European Union (WEU). This European security organisation (created in 1954 and which ceased operations in 2010 after its functions were transferred to the European Union) was then the most successful form of the European pillar of the Atlantic Alliance. Thus, the Declaration on the WEU adopted on the sidelines of the Maastricht Summit (February 1992) establishing the European Union stated that “The WEU will be developed as a defence component of the European Union and as a means of strengthening the European pillar of the Atlantic Alliance. To this end, “it will formulate a common European defence policy and ensure its practical implementation by further developing its own operational role.”⁷

It was also the WEU that absorbed the *Independent European Programme Group*

1 See Thierry Tardy, “Unpacking the European Pillar in NATO”, *Future Europe Journal*, Issue 5, 2024.

2 Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Turkey.

3 “The Eurogroup”, NATO Information Service, 1976, p. 9, https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/null/1/3/137665/0353_The_Eurogroup_1976_ENG.pdf

4 See Anna Wieslander, “How France, Germany, and the UK can build a European pillar of NATO”, Atlantic Council, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/article/how-france-germany-and-the-uk-can-build-a-european-pillar-of-nato/>

5 See Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XLI, Western Europe; NATO, 1969–1972 (Telegram from the Mission to NATO to the Department of State, 2 February 1969).

6 *Ibid.* According to this memo, “the system [the United States has] constructed, always linked to US national interests, is inherently and inescapably an Atlantic system and will remain so as long as the ultimate deterrent is the American strategic nuclear arsenal. This is to say that the Europeans probably could not agree among themselves on defence issues worth caucusing about.”

7 Declaration on Western European Union, 7 February 1992, https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2003/1/16/f5e420de-160a-491e-99ee-03576aa49fc1/publishable_fr.pdf

(IEPG)⁸ in 1984, which had been established in 1976 and brought together all European NATO member countries, including France and Turkey. The Group aimed to promote cooperation among its members in the fields of research, development and production of military equipment.

Although ultimately unambitious and lacking in political support, these various initiatives are interesting in that they foreshadow what could be the European pillar of NATO today.

I THE ADDED VALUE OF THE PILLAR

The idea of a European pillar is regaining relevance in the current context of transatlantic tensions, while the Russian threat has become more pressing once again. As long as the American guarantee of protection of the European continent was considered solid, most European states were reluctant to envisage developing alternative options, especially if these implicitly aimed to exclude the United States. By questioning American involvement in Europe, and incidentally by moving closer to Russia, Trump's second term is upsetting this calculation and restoring value to initiatives aimed at empowering Europeans. This need is all the more evident as Russia sinks into a threatening posture, placing Europeans in the unprecedented situation of facing both a strong threat and the failure of the corresponding security guarantee. In the shorter term, the prospect of Europeans alone implementing an operation to supervise a hypothetical ceasefire agreement in Ukraine makes their emancipation all the more imperative.

In this context, NATO's European pillar, whose ultimate goal is European sovereignty in the field of defence, reconciles the idea of European defence with that of the Alliance's central role, even if it is faltering. In this sense, it is more inclusive than the notion of European strategic autonomy, which was often considered too exclusive of NATO and the United States. France and more Atlanticist states can therefore theoretically find common ground, with the former seeing the European pillar as the development of a more assertive role for Europeans, and the latter finding assurance that European defence will not be to the detriment of NATO.

The pillar also implies cooperation between NATO and the European Union (EU), insofar as the latter, through its initiatives in defence financing and capability development, must ultimately contribute to strengthening the position of Europeans, including within NATO.

Finally, in the radical scenario of an American withdrawal from NATO, any prior strengthening of its European pillar would help absorb the shock. In this sense, it is a way of strengthening European defence while anticipating a possible total withdrawal by the Americans, whether or not this objective is acknowledged.

At these different levels, a starting point is that NATO will remain an essential organisation for European defence, even in the event of a US withdrawal. This is because NATO is the only organisation offering expertise (largely provided by the Americans) in the planning, command and conduct of complex military operations, and that it is also the only institution that enables interoperability among its members.⁹

⁸ NATO Website, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-711B4BAD-4BE09177/natolive/news_26935.htm

⁹ It should be noted that France's 2025 *National Strategic Review* states (§121) that "NATO remains the only organisation with the credibility, structures, mechanisms and legitimacy necessary to collectively deal with a major conflict on the European continent. Greater responsibility for Europeans within NATO, coordination between the European Union and NATO, and strategic convergence between willing European countries are essential." https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/2025-08/20250713_NP_SGDSN_Actualisation_2025_RNS_FR.pdf

II • The dilemmas of NATO's European pillar

While the idea of a European pillar of NATO has a number of advantages, it is not unanimously accepted by European states, particularly because of the tensions it may create in transatlantic relations. The conceptualisation and operationalisation of the European pillar of NATO also pose a number of dilemmas, for reasons related to Europe's stance towards the United States, the industrial challenges of the transatlantic link, and the difficult coordination of the institutional frameworks involved.

I DO NOT "KILL THE FATHER"

The implementation of NATO's European pillar is first hampered by a form of restraint of most European countries. In essence, European states are so dependent on the United States that, for the vast majority of them, nothing should be said or done that could widen the growing transatlantic divide. Germany and Poland have each taken important decisions aimed at strengthening a European defence identity. And the words of Chancellor Merz on the necessary independence of Europeans in the field of defence (February 2025), or of Prime Minister Tusk on European nuclear deterrence (March 2025), in both cases in response to Trump's narrative on NATO, were previously difficult to imagine.

But these countries also face the challenge of reconciling European emancipation with maintaining transatlantic ties, a particularly complicated position in the Trump era. For a long time, the debate on European defence has revolved around the question of whether to strengthen the role of Europeans in order to guarantee American presence (the German approach) or, if necessary, to replace it (the French approach). Faced with Trump, the Atlanticist countries have acknowledged a form of American abandonment, but are not yet fully prepared to "kill the father" in order to make emancipation possible. Chancellor Merz's comments advocating greater European independence in the field of defence are thus almost systematically accompanied by references to the indispensable nature of the American presence within the Alliance.¹⁰ The same applies to European nuclear deterrence, which can only complement American deterrence. The change of era (*Zeitenwende*) is certainly evident in German and Polish defence policies, and no one is suggesting a complete break with the Americans, but the American presence, in the difficult context of the Trump presidency, also highlights the limitations of what could be a European pillar within NATO. The Atlantic Alliance summit in The Hague in June 2025 and the meeting between Europeans and the American president in Turnberry in July (during which the US-EU trade agreement was approved) confirmed the severity of this situation. In both cases, the Europeans' desire for emancipation and the brutality of the Trump presidency clash with the need, on the European side, to avoid precipitating a break-up as far as possible.¹¹ This effectively places a limit on emancipation. Thus, European efforts within NATO must be sufficiently ambitious to demonstrate European determination, without antagonising the Americans.

10 See "Germany's Merz promises to do 'whatever it takes' on defence", BBC, March 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c981w25y5wpo?utm_source=chatgpt.com; "Friedrich Merz: Europe must strengthen nuclear deterrence, but not replace US shield", inview.org.uk, 10 March 2025, https://inview.org.uk/news/181549-friedrich_merz_europe_must_strengthen_nuclear_deterrence_but_not_replace_us_shield?utm_source=chatgpt.com; "Poland Caught in the Middle of Diplomatic Maneuvers Affecting European Defence and Security", Eurasia Daily Monitor, 19 Feb. 2025, <https://jamestown.org/program/poland-caught-in-the-middle-of-diplomatic-maneuvers-affecting-european-defense-and-security/>

11 See "The trade agreement between the European Union and the United States is a senseless capitulation", *Le Monde*, 27 Sept. 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2025/09/27/l-accord-commercial-entre-l-union-europeenne-et-les-États-unis-est-une-capitulation-insensee_6643169_3234.html?search-type=classic&ise_click_rank=10

I EUROPEAN PILLAR AND INDUSTRIAL DEFENCE BASE

Secondly, the US withdrawal from Europe, even if only relative, is not expected to result in the end of trade links through which Europeans massively purchase a wide range of weapons from the Americans. According to SIPRI, the United States accounts for 64% of European allies' arms imports during the period 2020-2024, compared to 52% during the years 2015-2019.¹² And Europeans are cordially invited to continue along this path. This is evidenced by the Turnberry Agreement of July 2025, which provides, among other things, for European investments in the United States – including in the field of defence – amounting to \$600 billion. The same applies to NATO's implementation of the *Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List* (PURL) programme, through which Europeans (and Canadians) purchase American weapons that are then delivered to Ukraine.¹³

On the European side, the adoption in March 2024 of the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) and its European Defence Industrial Programme (EDIP, adopted in October 2025), and above all the SAFE instrument (Re-arm Europe plan), are all measures aimed at promoting the establishment of a European Defence Industrial Base (EDIB). With SAFE, the European Commission is taking out a €150 billion loan for Member States, which undertake to use the borrowed money to make joint acquisitions (at least two Member States or one Member State and one partner country) from European States of armaments identified as essential. Purchasers will also have to ensure that components “representing 65% of the end product's estimated costs come from the EU, EFTA or European Economic Area (EEA) states, or Ukraine”. The aim is to defragment the European defence market, promote the collective development of military capabilities and ultimately encourage joint purchases of European armaments. These initiatives fall under the European pillar of NATO in terms of capabilities; they embody the link between the European Union and NATO in the emergence of this European pillar. But in the long term, they are also likely to call into question the volume of European purchases from the United States.

Following the presentation of the SAFE Programme by the European Commission, the US Ambassador to NATO, Matthew Whitaker, unsurprisingly stated that “excluding non-EU member industries in EU defense initiatives would undermine NATO interoperability, slow Europe's rearming, raise costs, and stifle innovation”.¹⁴

Here it is the EDTIB under construction and the transatlantic defence industrial base that are opposed, or, in essence, European dependence on the US defence industry, which is theoretically challenged by a “Buy European” clause. This is not a new issue, as American calls for greater efforts on the part of Europeans in the field of defence have always been accompanied by more orders of American weapons. And the launch by the Europeans of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund in 2017-2018 had already led to a vehement response from the first Trump administration.¹⁵ Likewise, the promise made by the Europeans at the NATO summit in The Hague in June to devote 5%

¹² SIPRI, “Trends in International Arms Transfers – 2024”, March 2025, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/fs_2503_at_2024_0.pdf

¹³ Four envelopes of \$500 million each have already been financed by the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany and Canada respectively. See “NATO support for Ukraine”, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_192648.htm

¹⁴ Digital Press Briefing, U.S. Permanent Representative to NATO, Ambassador Matthew Whitaker, 13 May 2025, translation by the author, <https://www.state.gov/digital-press-briefing-u-s-permanent-representative-to-nato-ambassador-matthew-whitaker>

¹⁵ See Daniel Fiott, “The poison pill: EU defence on US terms?”, EUISS, 14 June 2019, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/poison-pill-eu-defence-us-terms>

of their GDP to their defence budget is not entirely unrelated to American expectations in terms of arms purchases. However, such a relationship between Europe and the United States is all the less sustainable given that, on the one hand, the Americans themselves are questioning the strength of their commitment to defend Europe and, on the other hand, the Europeans are laying the foundations for their own EDTIB. This has affected the European pillar of NATO, and the challenge will be great for states that have long built industrial dependence on the United States in exchange for its protection.

I COMPATIBILITY OF INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Thirdly, European defence is part of an architecture characterised by the difficult compatibility between institutions, including NATO and the European Union, with different mandates and members. The European pillar of NATO wishes to bring these institutional frameworks closer together, but in reality it risks coming up against their differences rather than being facilitated by real convergences on the need for European emancipation.

The response to the war in Ukraine has highlighted three frameworks for European defence action: NATO in its role of collective defence of its Member States; the European Union with an expanded security agenda, ranging from sanctions to training the Ukrainian armed forces and including the aforementioned initiatives in the field of capability development; and thirdly, an *ad hoc* multilateral format operating outside any institutional framework, as illustrated by the coalition of volunteers for Ukraine or certain minilateral programmes for the production of weapons systems. The European pillar of NATO can only be built on the basis of these three frameworks, relying on their compatibility and mutual reinforcement. This raises the question of the link between NATO and the European Union, but also that of the relationship between the EU and third countries, in particular those that are members of NATO.

At the first level, the European pillar of NATO must recognise that the European Union plays a role alongside its Member States. The premise of recognising the centrality of NATO, which leads to the idea of a European pillar within it, must be accompanied by a reciprocal premise that the European Union is also essential to the defence of Europe. At the end of the Biden presidency, the Americans recognised in a Franco-American roadmap “the importance of strengthening the NATO-EU strategic partnership and promoting a stronger and more capable European defence, underpinning the European pillar of transatlantic security that contributes positively to collective security”. The document also stated that “The United States supports European Allies’ and partners’ growing investments in military capabilities that enable our shared defence, in complementary with NATO.”¹⁶

The situation today is radically different, and the very idea of a strategic partnership between NATO and the European Union is difficult to conceive given Trump’s perception of what the Union is. Yet it is in this context that the European pillar of NATO is being built, as a bridge between the two institutions. At the very least, the United Kingdom’s recognition of the EU’s added value for European defence must be sought, in return for opening up capability development programmes to the British.¹⁷

16 Franco-American roadmap, 8 June 2024, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2024/06/08/feuille-de-route-franco-americaine>

17 In addition to the UK’s financial contribution to the SAFE programme, for example, which is currently under negotiation.

The European pillar of NATO makes cooperation with the United Kingdom essential, without which the pillar would not exist. Of course, the British position within NATO may make it a natural leader of the European pillar, but their status as a third country vis-à-vis the Union undermines this claim. France, as a member state of the EU and a nuclear power, enjoys a privileged position, even if its relationship with NATO continues to fuel mistrust. In this context, their co-leadership of the coalition of the willing on Ukraine foreshadows what the European pillar could be, here in a largely de-institutionalised format. The establishment of a new *ad hoc* cooperation format – the E5 – bringing together the defence ministers of France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Poland and Italy, also contributes to the operationalisation of NATO's European pillar.

III • What European pillar of NATO?

In practical terms, the European pillar of NATO requires particular efforts on the part of Europeans in the areas of budget, capabilities and operations, as well as an increased presence and greater coordination of European policies within NATO structures.¹⁸ All of this must serve the long-term goal of empowering Europeans vis-à-vis the Americans so that they can, if necessary, ensure their own defence.

I BUDGETS AND CAPABILITIES: FOR WHAT PURPOSES?

If effectively implemented, the budgetary commitments made at the June 2025 NATO summit in The Hague are likely to rebalance spending on both sides of the Atlantic. The promise made by European allies to spend 3.5% of their GDP on defence (+1.5% on security issues) should be viewed in relation to the €650 billion in the Re-Arm Europe plan (which represents approximately 3.5% of the GDP of the 27 member states). However, it is understood that increasing budgets alone will not make Europeans autonomous; this will require a strategic vision of which the European pillar of NATO is only one element.

In terms of capabilities, the gaps that make the dependency on the United States are now well identified, both by the EU (Defence Investment Gaps Analysis; White Paper for European Defence¹⁹, EDA Capability Development Plan) and by NATO (NATO Defence Planning Process and Capability Targets; Force Model and Allied Response Force), even though coordination between the two processes for identifying requirements is not optimal. This also raises the question of the nature of the American commitment within the Alliance, since this determines what the Europeans must provide in order to fill any capability gaps.²⁰ Moreover, at a time when the Americans are contemplating to withdraw, one might wonder whether the establishment of a European pillar within NATO should not mean a complete overhaul of the NATO planning system, so that Europeans can take full ownership of it.²¹

¹⁸ See Kristi Raik, Marcin Terlikowski and Mario Baumann, “Beyond Burden Sharing: Conceptualising the European Pillar of NATO”, DGAP, June 2025, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/beyond-burden-sharing-conceptualizing-european-pillar-nato>

¹⁹ The White Paper for European Defence (pp. 6–7) identifies seven priority areas in terms of capabilities: air defence; artillery systems; missiles and ammunition; drones and counter-drone systems; military mobility; AI, quantum, cyber and electronic warfare; and strategic enablers.

²⁰ See Luigi Scazzieri, “Rebuilding Europe’s defences: How to unlock a coordinated defence surge”, EUISS, Sept. 2025, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/rebuilding-europes-defences-how-unlock-coordinated-defence-surge>

²¹ See Sven Biscop, “NATO: The Damage Is Done – So Think Big”, Policy Brief 379, Egmont, May 2025, https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2025/05/Sven-Biscop_Policy_Brief_379_vFinal.pdf?type=pdf

Capability development must contribute to the establishment of a European DTIB, building on the efforts made over the last eight years (EDF, EDIS, EDIP, SAFE, etc.) and making intelligent use of increased defence budgets and European funding.²² For the European pillar will not exist if the increase in funding ultimately only serves to strengthen national or non-European defence industries.

At the same time, Europeans must increase their contribution to operational activities taking place in Europe. Efforts to support Ukraine should not be underestimated in this regard, whether in terms of arms deliveries or the hypothetical Coalition of the Willing; these are examples of a European pillar under construction. But it is also a question of providing resources for the various existing force and operational models, always with a view to a diminishing American presence, or even a total withdrawal.²³

I TOWARDS A NEW EUROPEAN CAUCUS?

Within NATO, Europeans must also ensure coordination within a “Eurogroup” or “European caucus” comprising at least France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and Poland. Such coordination has never really been established, with some seeing it as a source of division within the Alliance (and this was the American argument during the Cold War, see *above*). But the visibility, and therefore also the credibility, of Europeans within NATO depend on it. Such coordination should enable European positions to emerge and be relayed as such within the Alliance.

More complex still, the EU’s visibility must also be sought within NATO by the rotating presidencies of the Council, through the regular presence of the HR/VP and the Commissioner for Defence at the North Atlantic Council, or through the presentation of non-papers by EU members.

Finally, efforts to share the burden must also lead to greater demands for Europeans to share responsibilities within NATO headquarters and strategic commands (high-level civilian and military posts). Ultimately, the question of the position of SACEUR, currently still held by an American, will arise. His responsibilities in the nuclear field make this a sensitive issue, and the retention of an American in this position is seen by many as a guarantee of their commitment. But conversely, what kind of autonomy is possible if the commander of the Allied forces in Europe is systematically non-European?

I THE EUROPEAN PILLAR BEYOND NATO

The European pillar of NATO reflects the desire of European member states of the Atlantic Alliance to do more within NATO in order to compensate for the relative withdrawal of the United States. However, this pillar cannot ignore other areas of effort taking place within the European Union and outside any institutional framework. The European pillar must therefore be approached in an inclusive manner. It has its specific characteristics in that it is anchored within NATO, but it must also be

²² See “Progress and Shortfalls in Europe’s Defence. An Assessment”, IISS, Sept. 2025, https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content---migration/files/publications---free-files/strategic-dossier/pds-2025/complete-file/iiss_strategic-dossier_progress-and-shortfalls-in-europes-defence-an-assessment_092025.pdf

²³ A report by Harvard’s Belfer Center suggests that Europeans must provide between 70 and 80 per cent of the NATO Force Model before the end of the decade, and incidentally also replace the 20,000 American troops who are set to withdraw from Europe. See Ivo Daalder, Camille Grand, and Daniela Schwarzer, “A New Transatlantic Bargain: The Case for Building a Strong European Pillar”, Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs, Feb. 2025, p. 12, <https://www.belfercenter.org/transatlantic-bargain>

closely linked to other levels of European defence, those provided by the European Union and by non-institutionalised frameworks (see *above*). Neither the exclusive version of “strategic autonomy” nor the restrictive version of a pillar centred solely on NATO will lead to the emergence of a European defence system that meets with the approval of the majority of European states.

The relationship between NATO and the European Union must therefore recognise the complementary nature of the two organisations. The Union embraces a broader security agenda, which is becoming increasingly important in the context of hybrid warfare, and provides a central platform for capability development. At both levels, the United Kingdom must be involved as much as possible in European initiatives, particularly through *ad hoc* formats (coalition of the willing, E5 format, etc.), but also in a more institutionalised manner. The inclusiveness of NATO’s European pillar depends on it.

Ultimately, we must also consider the purpose of NATO’s European pillar: in the short term, it is being built on the assumption that the Americans will always be present and indispensable, even if they take a back seat. The nature of the pillar therefore depends on the position occupied by the United States, or the position they leave to the Europeans. In the long term, however, the goal of full autonomy for Europeans, who would find themselves alone, cannot be ruled out. There is therefore a strategic dimension to the idea of a pillar, the ultimate aim of which is also European sovereignty.

I NUCLEAR POWER, THE FINAL STEP

It is in this context that the nuclear issue arises. European efforts towards autonomy cannot ignore the impact of their emancipation on the role of nuclear power, and therefore that played by French and British deterrence. On 10 July, France and the United Kingdom solemnly recognised that “there is no extreme threat to Europe that would not prompt a response by our two nations” and decided, as a result, to “deepen their nuclear cooperation and coordination.”²⁴ France’s previous statements that the French nuclear deterrence contains a “European dimension”²⁵ are also a step towards a form of extended deterrence that remains to be conceptualised and, if required, implemented.

A number of options are possible without any fundamental change in doctrine, whether joint exercises or temporary deployments of strategic forces. On the French side, closer ties with NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group could also be considered, as France’s absence could easily be seen as incompatible with the idea of a European pillar within NATO.²⁶ On many of these points, the “non-nuclear” Europeans have been more receptive than they have ever been in the past. But these efforts are likely to be all the more limited as the Alliance remains formally a nuclear alliance with the United States at its core. The coexistence of two levels of deterrence is difficult to conceive of at present, even if forms of complementarity can be sought.

²⁴ Declaration by the French Republic and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland on nuclear policy and cooperation, 10 July 2025. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/northwood-declaration-10-july-2025-uk-france-joint-nuclear-statement#:~:text=France%20and%20the%20United%20Kingdom,the%20nuclear%20cooperation%20and%20coordination>

²⁵ Statement by Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, on defence and deterrence strategy, Paris, 7 February 2020.

²⁶ See Bruno Tertrais, “Is it now time to deploy a genuine European ‘nuclear umbrella’ over the continent?”, *Le Monde*, 10 March 2025.

In the nuclear field more than in any other, the American presence is perceived as largely irreplaceable, and the emergence of a European alternative is likely to depend on the disappearance of the American option. In the meantime, as Friedrich Merz points out, any discussion on the issue of “nuclear sharing” with Paris and London will have to be “complementary” to existing American mechanisms.²⁷

Conclusion

Europeans today have no choice but to consider how they can ensure their defence in the face of Putin’s Russia on the one hand and the withdrawal of the United States on the other. This reflection invites them to emancipation, but also to the idea of a European path within the Atlantic Alliance. For the vast majority of its member states, the Alliance remains the place where European defence must be built, whether the Americans are there or withdraw. The notion of a European pillar of NATO is therefore relevant in that it reconciles the idea of defence by Europeans (including within the European Union) with a politically inclusive and operationally effective institutional framework (NATO).

That said, one difficulty facing the European pillar is its development at a time when the Americans are still present but fluctuating in terms of the reality of their presence. Given the risks that a radical departure by the Americans would pose to the Europeans’ security, the latter have no choice but to develop, within NATO, within the European Union, and outside of any organisation, the tools for a defence policy that is ultimately destined to be European.

²⁷ See Emmanuelle Maitre, “The European dimension of French deterrence: a new interest?”, Bulletin No. 129, FRS, March 2025, <https://frstrategie.org/programmes/observatoire-de-la-dissuasion/dimension-europeenne-dissuasion-francaise-un-nouvel-interet-2025>

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