

War against Iran: three lessons for Europe

The situation in the Middle East remains highly unstable and the outlook is still very uncertain. However, it is already possible to draw some preliminary lessons from the events that have unfolded since 28 February concerning the European Union's defence policy, its energy policy and its policy towards the Middle East.

I • NATO without the United States? Why not...

The Europeans have remained united in keeping their distance from this war, launched outside any international legal framework by Donald Trump's United States and Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel. And this extended even beyond the EU in the strict sense, as it was also the case with the United Kingdom. Such unanimity had not been seen in previous similar episodes, notably during the war against Iraq in 2003. At that time, France and Germany had certainly opposed the US intervention, but the United Kingdom, Poland, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Romania,

Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Lithuania had supported the operation.

I NATO HAS NO BUSINESS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Although the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, as such, any activity in the Middle East, as its name suggests, this European abstention has greatly irritated Donald Trump, who is now openly threatening that the United States will leave NATO, as he reiterated during his meeting on 9 April with Mark Rutte, the former Dutch Prime Minister and current Secretary General of the organisation.

The guarantee that the North Atlantic Treaty was supposed to provide of a US commitment alongside the Europeans in the event of Russian aggression against the Baltic States or Poland already appeared largely illusory, given the convergence observed for many months now between Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. Washington's refusal to

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Guillaume Duval,
Advisor, the future
of European
integration

invoke Article 5 of the Treaty in such a scenario has now become the basic working assumption for all those involved in Europe's defence, as well as for our enemies.

I PREPARING FOR AMERICA'S DEPARTURE

Nevertheless, the departure of the some 67,000 American troops stationed on European soil and the closure of the 30 American bases in Europe would obviously mark a further major step in American disengagement. Even if we should not overestimate the impact on Europe's conventional defence: the armed forces of EU countries number 1,470,000 soldiers, and US troops therefore account for less than 5% of this total.

Although unpredictable and showing little regard for US legal norms themselves, Donald Trump's outburst is nevertheless unlikely to result in the US leaving NATO in the very short term. Such a decision would, in fact, necessarily require the approval of the US Congress. The latter would likely be reluctant today regarding a hasty withdrawal from NATO and is expected to become significantly less compliant with Donald Trump by the end of the year. But such a withdrawal has clearly been the direction of history for several years now. And Donald Trump's relentless attacks could well bring that day closer. Especially as it is doubtful that his successor in the White House would wish to reverse this trend, regardless of its political affiliation.

It is therefore clearly necessary to begin making concrete preparations for such a withdrawal. This means, in particular, stepping up the discussions launched last March by Emmanuel Macron's proposal to extend the protection offered by French nuclear deterrence to other Europeans. It also means significantly accelerating European projects aimed at deploying the capabilities we currently lack, particularly in the space and intelligence sectors.

The fact that this break would take the form of the United States leaving NATO would have the advantage of leaving in place a functional framework with tried-and-tested standards, known rules of engagement and well-established common working practices. This framework would henceforth be entirely at the disposal of Europeans (and Canadians) and there would therefore no longer be any need to create the much-discussed 'European pillar' of NATO, which has been regularly mentioned in recent years without anyone really knowing exactly what form it might take, nor to invent a non-NATO structure to coordinate European armies, as has been attempted – largely in vain so far – within the institutions of the European Union in recent times.

WHO IS PAYING FOR NATO IN 2026 ?
(Not the national Defense budgets!)

UNITED KINGDOM € 530,086,609	GERMANY € 767.282,600	USA € 767.282,580
FRANCE € 530,086,609	ITALY € 411,469,885	CANADA € 338.983,229
TÜRKIYE € 324,388,082	SPAIN € 297.473.292	NETHERLANDS € 180,259,075
SWEDEN € 101,867,433	BELGIUM € 106,650,111	POLAND € 174,076,087
NORWAY € 86,505,205	CZECHIA € 59,842,677	DENMARK € 66,257,334
ROMANIA € 82,875,724	PORTUGAL € 55,090,888	FINLAND € 47,852,519
FINLAND € 47,852,519	GREECE € 47,507,590	HUNGARY € 44,315,706
SLOVAKIA € 44,315,706	CROATIA € 18,147,405	SLOVENIA € 12,829,314
BULGARIA € 23,146,307	LITHAUANIA € 15,475,489	LATVIA € 9,045,387
ALBANIA € 5,575,501	ESTONIA € 7,351,525	LUXEMBOURG € 8,818,867
ICELAND € 4,370,822	NORTH MACEDONIA € 4,175,190	MONTENEGRO € 1,863,648

▲ Source: NATO - ©2026 by cyberpionier

I THE AMERICANS' DEPARTURE WOULD NOT BE A DISASTER

Contrary to what one might imagine, the United States' departure from NATO would not even leave an insurmountable hole in the institution's budget: in reality, they contribute only 14 per cent, the same as Germany alone. Given the current state of transatlantic relations, one might almost wonder whether a negotiated and gradual withdrawal of the United States from NATO might not ultimately be a good solution for building and strengthening European collective security.

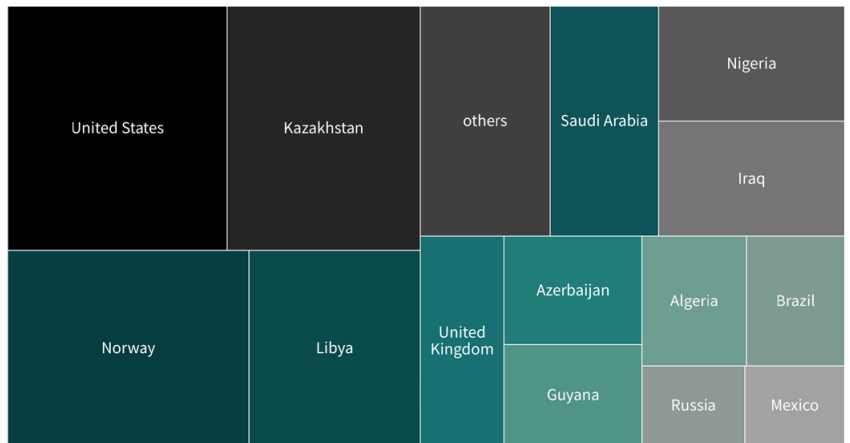
II • The urgency of the European Green Deal

Provided the ceasefire holds and the Strait of Hormuz gradually reopens, the crisis triggered by the war against Iran should be of a more limited scale for Europe than that caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The energy crisis caused by this war is, in fact, primarily affecting Asia this time, as it imports a large proportion of its oil and gas directly from this region. Nevertheless, it is affecting us and will continue to do so over the coming months, both in terms of prices and the availability of the resource.

TOP CRUDE OIL SUPPLIERS IN 2025

The EU's **top three import partners** in 2025 were the **United States, Kazakhstan and Norway**, with all three providing between 12% and 15% of the EU's oil imports (in terms of quantities imported).

The EU's fourth import partner was Libya, with a share of over 9%, followed by Saudi Arabia (6.8%) and Nigeria and Iraq (both with a share of 5.8%). Around 7% of the EU's oil imports in 2025 came from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.



▲ Source: calculations based on Eurostat (ds-059341) extracted in April 2026

TOP GAS SUPPLIERS IN 2025

Norway was the top supplier of gas to the EU in 2025, providing almost one third of all gas imports.

Other suppliers included the United States, Algeria, the UK, Azerbaijan and Russia.



▲ Source: European Commission calculation based on LSEG (Refinitiv) and ENTSO-G

Last year, the EU imported 6.8% of its oil from Saudi Arabia and 5.8% from Iraq. As for gas, supplies from the Gulf account for an even smaller share of European supplies: Qatar supplied only 3.7% of Europe's gas in 2025. But even if the fighting in the Gulf were to cease permanently, the effects of the war would continue to be felt in terms of both prices and the quantities available on global markets, because a significant part of the infrastructure in the region has been destroyed, particularly LNG production facilities in Qatar.

I HIGH TENSIONS OVER GAS IN EUROPE ONCE AGAIN

The situation in Europe is currently very tense, particularly regarding gas stocks. Their levels are in fact below those of previous years at the start of the period intended to allow us to replenish them before next winter. The global shortage resulting from the war, and in particular the destruction of Qatari production capacity, will not only drive prices up in the long term but also risks diverting flows from other sources – originally intended for Europe – to other countries.

Having successfully overcome the severe energy crisis that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine and, in particular, having quickly found alternative sources of gas supply, the European Union had tended to rest on its laurels. In particular, it had stopped seeking to further develop the mechanisms that had begun to be put in place for the joint purchase and supply of gas at European level under RePower EU.

I AFTER 2022, EUROPEANS TOOK THEIR FOOT OFF THE ACCELERATOR

Whilst also easing off on energy-saving and efficiency policies. In 2024, final energy consumption within the Union stood at 901 million tonnes of oil equivalent. This is certainly 5% less than in 2021 before the invasion of Ukraine, but it is still 18% higher than the target the EU has set for 2030 under the Green Deal. We have reduced this consumption by 1.5% per year since 2021, whereas to meet the 2030 target, it would need to be reduced by 3% per year... We must therefore urgently revisit the issue of

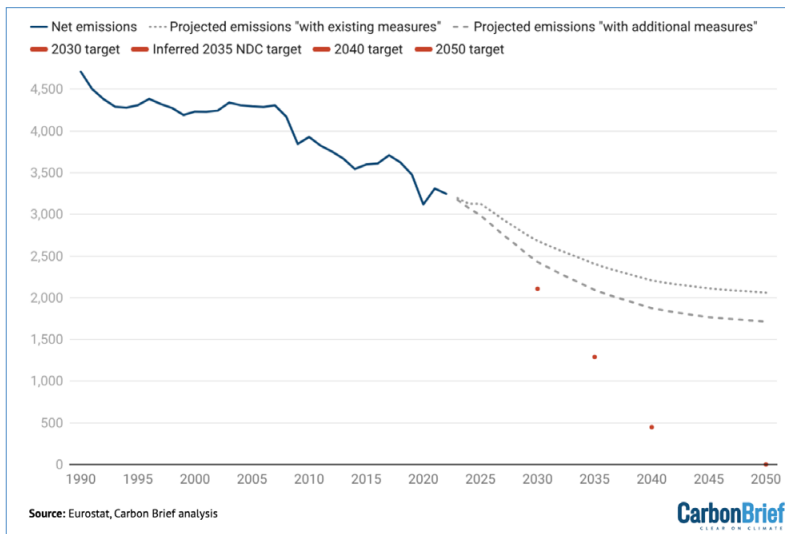
joint gas supplies and the joint management of gas and oil stocks, whilst once again stepping up efforts towards reduction of energy use, improvement of energy efficiency, and the roll-out of renewable energies.

In the longer term, this new crisis highlights just how much our very high dependence on fossil fuels from outside the EU – currently 97% for oil and 85% for gas, with a constantly rising trend – constitutes a major strategic weakness. As the war against Iran has shown, the serious potential problems linked to this extreme dependence do not concern Russia alone. Indeed, they could very well arise tomorrow from our American 'ally', from whom we currently import a quarter of the gas and a seventh of the oil used in the EU. Last year, EU countries spent €330 billion on these fossil fuel imports, representing 1.8% of European GDP, and this year that percentage will be much higher. These figures may seem modest at first glance, but a difference of plus or minus 2% often makes the difference between a profitable business and one that is loss-making and forced to lay off staff.

I DEPENDENCE ON FOSSIL FUELS: A THREAT TO EUROPE

This extreme dependence on fossil fuels therefore poses a constant threat to the stability of our economies, the security of the continent and the well-being of our fellow citizens. Breaking free from this dependence as quickly as possible is not only essential to contribute to the global effort to have even a slim chance of limiting climate change – and its disastrous consequences – to 2°C, but it is also a purely internal imperative, absolutely necessary to secure the future of the Union itself.

PROPOSED EU 2040 CLIMATE GOAL WOULD NEED MUCH STRONGER POLICY
 Past, projected and targeted emissions, MtCO₂e



The Green Deal, adopted during the previous term of the European Commission and Parliament, aimed to reduce the European Union’s greenhouse gas emissions – caused mainly by the use of fossil fuels – by 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels, achieve a 90% reduction by 2040 and make the Union carbon-neutral by 2050. By 2024, we were at 37% below 1990 levels. Reaching the 55% target by 2030 is not out of reach but would require the implementation of more proactive policies.

I WE MUST SAVE THE GREEN DEAL

However, the European Parliament, renewed in 2024, is characterised by the existence, for the first time, of a potential majority comprising the European People’s Party and the three far-right groups. Against this backdrop, the political climate in Europe has become significantly less favourable to ambitious environmental policies, and the temptation has been strong for European leaders in recent months to call into question the Green Deal itself and the policies that accompany it. This has been the case in particular regarding the obligation under European law to end the production of vehicles fitted with internal combustion engines by 2035.

Despite the deaths and destruction it has caused, one can nevertheless hope that this war will have served as a timely reminder to all European leaders of just how disas-

trous undermining the Green Deal would be, not only for the global climate but also, and above all, for Europe itself. That Donald Trump, a self-proclaimed climate sceptic and fervent supporter of fossil fuels, could be behind such an unexpected reversal of trend in Europe would be yet another example of the famous twists and turns that history regularly has in store for us...

III • The need for a different policy in the Middle East

Whilst they have – fortunately – stayed out of this war, the European Union and its member states have nonetheless been unable to influence the events that have unfolded in the Middle East over the past few weeks. Neither before 28 February, nor during the war to bring it to an end, nor since the ceasefire, thus prolonging a state of almost total diplomatic irrelevance in the region that has already lasted since at least 7 October 2023.

France and the United Kingdom have certainly sent a few ships to Cyprus and a few aircraft to the Gulf to help protect the countries of the region from Iranian missiles and drones, and Emmanuel Macron did indeed attempt to speak out in defence of Lebanon’s territorial integrity, but neither these states nor the Union itself have been able to influence the course of this war in any meaningful way. Neither they nor the European

Union have undertaken any initiative with other regional or global actors to try to restore peace in the region.

I THE MIDDLE EAST, FAR MORE CENTRAL TO EUROPE THAN TO THE UNITED STATES

Yet this is a region geographically very close to the EU's borders, as the attack on the British base in Cyprus reminded us, and a region of major importance both for our fossil fuel supplies and for trade between Europe and Asia. Moreover, the instability prevailing there could trigger one of those waves of migration that European leaders fear so much, whilst the conflicts unfolding there have a direct impact on civil peace within European societies themselves. Donald Trump is right to say that Europeans actually have far more interests to defend in this region than the United States...

Europe has not, however, always been incapable of exerting influence in this part of the world. Despite Israel's opposition, European states and the European Union itself played a central role in the negotiation and subsequent conclusion in 2015 of the JCPOA, the agreement aimed at closely monitoring Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for the lifting of Western sanctions. An agreement that Donald Trump's United States sabotaged in 2018. The Union's inability to counter this blow and to protect European companies from US sanctions sounded the death knell for our regional ambitions. And the failure to reinstate this agreement under Joe Biden's presidency paved the way for the disaster of recent weeks.

I EUROPE HAS PLAYED A ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE PAST

The European Union also played an important role during the 1990s in the negotiations that accompanied the Oslo Accords in an attempt to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It was against this particular backdrop that, in 1995, an association agreement with the European Union—which was highly favourable to Israel—was concluded with Yitzhak Rabin's government, just before his assassination, and came into force in 2000. It was, in a sense, the carrot used by the European Union to encourage Israel to make peace with the Palestinians. This is, moreover,

the reason why the European Parliament adopted a resolution in 2002 calling for the suspension of this agreement, given the anti-peace policy of Ariel Sharon's government at the time. This warning shot was not without effect, as it was followed a few months later by Israel's withdrawal from Gaza. But subsequently, the EU allowed Israeli policy to become increasingly radicalised without ever being able to respond in any meaningful way.

Despite the show of military force by the Israeli and US armies, their failure to bring about a regime change in Tehran after 40 days of massive bombing, and the US's failure to protect its allies in the region from destructive Iranian reprisals, constituted a major geopolitical failure. Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump have probably just lost the ground they had gained in the region through the Abraham Accords. One must be wary of historical analogies, which often prove misleading, but many observers have not hesitated to describe this war as the United States' 'Suez moment', referring to the fiasco of the war launched in 1956 against Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt by the alliance of Israel, the United Kingdom and France following the nationalisation of the Suez Canal – a fiasco that sounded the death knell for the role of France and the United Kingdom on the world stage. This war against Iran is likely, in any case, to mark a significant decline in American influence in the region. Following this American failure, the paralysis of European diplomacy in the Middle East cannot and must not continue.

I EUROPE IS MARGINALISED BECAUSE IT HAS FAILED TO STAND UP TO THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT

The European Union's current weakness in the Middle East stems primarily from the inability of the Union and many of its Member States to adopt, with regard to Benjamin Netanyahu's Israeli government, a position consistent with the values the Union claims to uphold, and in particular the importance it claims to attach to multilateralism, fundamental human rights and international law. The international community's failure to ensure that successive Israeli governments comply with international law regarding occupied territories or with United Nations

resolutions concerning the creation of a Palestinian state has been one of the major causes of the weakening of multilateralism observed over recent decades. This failure is certainly due primarily to the attitude of the United States, but the European Union has also actively contributed to it, particularly since 7 October 2023.

The Europeans' leniency towards the multiple violations of international law and fundamental human rights committed for decades now by successive Israeli governments can be explained first and foremost by a guilty conscience – perfectly understandable – linked to European anti-Semitism and the monstrous acts committed in its name, a sentiment that remains particularly strong in Germany. With the rise of political Islam and Islamist terrorism since the late 1990s, however, another factor has come to the fore: the idea—now very much present across the entire right wing of the European political spectrum—that Israel is the vanguard in the Middle East for the defence of 'Judeo-Christian civilisation' against Islamism, and that as such Europeans should support the Israeli government's policy whatever it may be.

I EUROPE'S DOUBLE STANDARDS ON UKRAINE AND PALESTINE HAVE UNDERMINED ITS CREDIBILITY

Since 2022, Europeans have emphasised the defence of international law and respect for fundamental human rights to oppose Russian aggression against Ukraine, whilst tolerating without reaction the numerous war crimes and crimes against humanity, as well as the multiple violations of international law committed by the Israeli government since 7 October 2023. This double standard has done much to discredit Europe in the Middle East. This is all the more so because all the region's leaders know that, if it wished to use them, the EU would in fact have powerful means at its disposal to influence the policies of Israeli leaders via the EU-Israel Association Agreement, visa policy, arms supplies or even potential sanctions.

This double talk has weakened the support that Middle Eastern countries could have provided to Ukraine in the face of Russia. It has also served to further marginalise the EU in the region. Given their military clout,

Middle Eastern countries remained obliged to deal with the United States despite their constant alignment with the Netanyahu government, but it was pointless for them to take into account the views of a European Union that is militarily insignificant and, in practice—beyond a few inconsequential diplomatic statements—just as aligned with the American and Israeli vision of the region and its future.

I ISRAELI RADICALISATION LEAVES EUROPE WITH NO CHOICE

The war against Iran, the catastrophic invasion of Lebanon and the constant radicalisation of Israeli policy – notably including the recent introduction of the death penalty for Palestinians and the increasing number of abuses by settlers in the West Bank – no longer allow the European Union to continue turning a blind eye and tolerating the policies of Benjamin Netanyahu's government without reacting. It must now urgently suspend the EU-Israel Association Agreement and sanction Israeli leaders who violate international law and commit or incite the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity. This is the sine qua non for the Union to regain credibility in this region of the world and once again contribute to restoring peace and stability there.

Following the failure of the Americans, as signalled by the 40-day war against Iran, regional actors will most likely begin seeking new key partners on the global stage in the coming years. If we do not want China to be the sole power taking the lead in this region, which is crucial for Europe, we must – finally – adopt a more balanced stance towards Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

These three issues – NATO and defence, the decarbonisation of our economies, and European policy in the Middle East – are certainly distinct but not unrelated: in all three cases, the aim is to equip ourselves with the means to strengthen the European Union's strategic autonomy and to prepare for a world in which the United States will no longer necessarily be our ally.

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Institut Jacques Delors

Penser l'Europe • Thinking Europe • Europa Denken
17 rue d'Antin, 75002 Paris, France
www.delorsinstitute.eu • info@delorsinstitute.eu

