

Trump and Putin Call the Shots. Will Europe Wag Its Tail? – OPINION

Why we must pull ourselves together – now.

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Europeans have been far too polite for far too long. At Turnberry, Ursula von der Leyen played the courteous guest while Donald Trump slapped on tariffs and pocketed promises of energy and arms contracts. Washington and Moscow now chat over Ukraine's fate as if Europe is a side dish. Our only escape is a Federation that can say no, spend smart and act like a power rather than a pawn.



Russian fighter jets and drones have violated the airspace of European states with increasing frequency this summer. These incidents raise the question of whether the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) can deal with the intensification of the hybrid war that Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, has been waging against us since 2007. He is no longer content with manipulating public opinion and disrupting electoral and decision-making processes; he is testing the military capabilities of European NATO countries. 'We are not at war, but we are no longer at peace either', [said](#) the German Chancellor Friedrich Merz in Düsseldorf on 29 September 2025.

Yet, Europe's impotence and lack of relevance are evident everywhere: from our eastern flank to the Mediterranean to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Europe was also absent during the signing of the peace agreements between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as between Armenia and Azerbaijan, at the White House. The only exception to this is Ursula von der Leyen's support of Ukraine at the Washington summit, alongside five European leaders.

Failure to recognise the realities across two dimensions – geopolitical and economic – has humiliated the leaders of the 'core' EU member states and the European Commission (EC) in particular, harming Europeans and European exporters in particular, in the process.

The monkey on our back

Our primary weakness is our inability to build a fully independent and resilient defence posture since Russia's first hybrid attacks on Europe in 2007. The war in Ukraine has further exposed how much Europe's defence depends on the United States (US), even though the share of its overall defence spending allocated to the protection of Europe is very small, ranging between four and 15 per cent. The recent Interim National Defence Strategic Guidance document [reveals](#) that the US is more concerned with the potential conflict with the People's Republic of China (PRC) over the fate of Taiwan. It is thus a big question whether the US would ensure full nuclear deterrence to Europe and comply with NATO's Article V in the event of a Russian attack.

The rhetoric at this June's NATO summit in The Hague [confirmed](#) the fears. The allies agreed to US President Donald Trump's request to allocate five per cent of their GDP to their security and defence.

A storm brewing on the horizon

This, however, will not deter Putin from testing the strength of the Atlantic Alliance in the years to come, because the rise in our defence spending mainly increases the waste and

boosts imports of American systems, which harms our economy. According to several European intelligence services, if Putin were to be victorious in Ukraine, [he would then proceed](#) with annexing Transnistria, Moldova and Belarus before eventually cutting off the Baltic states from Europe.

Russia is testing our defences a little more every day. On the night of 10 September 2025, at least 19 Russian drones entered Polish airspace. Only three were shot down, which shows the weakness of Europe's air and missile defences. Poland requested the activation of Article IV of the NATO Treaty, which provides for consultations between allies in the event of a threat to one of its members, rather than Article V, which Ukraine [considered a sign of weakness](#)

Other, more ambitious scenarios are also possible. In his book 'Who Will Defend Europe? An Awakened Russia and a Sleeping Continent', Keir Giles describes a children's map found for sale in Moscow, which shows the 'Russian motherland' as including much of Eastern Europe – Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic states, Central Asia, and even parts of Poland and Finland. Putin has repeatedly stated that he aims to restore Russia's zone of influence, which was previously part of the Soviet Union.

It's the economy, stupid

The second factor of weakness is that of our economy. A year after the September 2024 report on European competitiveness by Mario Draghi, former president of the European Central Bank, which warned of the economic stall vis-à-vis the US and China, and which formulated 170 proposals to revive Europe, [only ten per cent of these have been implemented](#).

Like Draghi, let us note that the EU's economic weight does not give it geopolitical power, despite its 450 million consumers. The EU, once described as a geopolitical dwarf but an economic giant, is now nothing more than a giant with feet of clay.

A Europe flouted

At the G7 summit, held in Canada, from 15 to 17 June 2025, the leaders of the main EU member states and Trump clashed over Ukraine and a minimum tax on the profits of US multinationals.

Shortly after, Europe suffered its first unequal treaty, akin to the Treaty of Nanking inflicted on China in 1842. Unlike in the 19th century China, however, von der Leyen met Donald Trump freely at Turnberry, Scotland, on 27 July to appease him and to protect the EU's largest exporters, Germany and Italy. She disdained our will for strategic autonomy and for fighting against climate change, instead accepting a 15 per cent increase in customs duties on European exports and a removal of such on imports from the US.

Von der Leyen also gave up on taxing its digital services sector. She did not activate the anti-coercion instrument, which would have allowed us to penalise our 'allies' across the Atlantic. Without having the slightest competence, mandate or budget to do so, Ursula von der Leyen [pledged](#) to invest 600 billion US dollars in America, to buy 750 billion dollars worth of hydrocarbons in three years and 'hundreds', according to Donald Trump, of billions of dollars in armaments.

The new paper tiger

The arguments used by the president of the EC to justify her position in Turnberry were the stability and predictability of our transatlantic trade. Yet, both lost their relevance within a few weeks. Donald Trump threatens new tariffs on the EU if it dares to tax American digital services and/or dismantle its regulations in this area.

On 5 September 2025, the EC [fined](#) Google 2.95 billion euros for violating European competition rules with its advertising technologies. The Commission has ruled that since 2014, 'Google has acted to favour its own online display advertising technology services to the detriment of competing advertising technology service providers, advertisers and online publishers'. The EC has ordered the company to end its self-referencing practices and to end its conflicts of interest in the context of advertising technology. At the time of writing, Google still has time to inform Brussels of the remedies it would propose.

Nevertheless, the EC should have directly confronted the Trump administration, which only understands the balance of power, even if it meant enduring a few difficult weeks. This is what China has done, with success. It is to be hoped that the European Parliament will refuse to implement this unequal Turnberry agreement as it stands. Immediately after von der Leyen's State of the Union address, many from the liberal/centrist (Renew), social-democratic (S&D), and green (Greens) political groups in the European Parliament [spoke out](#) in this vein, as did the representatives of the more left- and right-wing groups in the hemicycle.

A Europe ignored, then robbed

During the meeting between Trump and Putin near Anchorage, Alaska, on 15 August, the Russian dictator, who has since been particularly ungrateful, was welcomed on the red carpet and with demonstrations of friendship. Continental Europeans have been treated as if they were at Yalta: the future of the conflict in Ukraine is envisaged without them, and the partition of Ukraine that is being prepared resembles that of Germany in 1945.

On 18 August, a delegation of heads of state and government escorted Volodymyr Zelensky to the White House. The exaggerated flattery of the Europeans and the spectacle staged for American television channels, in which Donald Trump behaved like an emperor receiving his vassals, has made teeth grind. In exchange, the Europeans only obtained vague promises from Donald Trump of American support for the troops they could deploy on the ground after a ceasefire in Ukraine. The bill is heavy: military aid to Kyiv, totalling nearly 100 billion euros of American armaments, will be entirely at the expense of the Europeans, who will also have to pay a 10 per cent surcharge!

Perilous future ahead

Since the year 2000, our leaders have clearly taken Europe out of the group of powers that make history. Its marginalisation is patent: fragmented, sparsely populated, because Europeans make up only 5 per cent of the world's population, its economy is lagging behind the US and China. Under these conditions, Europe's strategic autonomy is a chimaera. Never before has the fact that Europe is not yet a Federation cost us so much.

By vassalising us, policymakers prevent Europeans from mastering our destiny. They put us at risk of recession and aggression. Their disunity and the lack of a credible European defence make them almost insignificant on the international stage, even in trade matters. Europe is nothing more than a prey for the imperialist powers that seek to dominate the world and destabilise our democracies, particularly by interfering in our electoral processes.

The USA, under Trump, is no longer reliable

Europeans, even those who had blind and long faith in NATO, are gradually waking up to the risk posed by the second Trump administration. It is not fulfilling its obligations under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, by which the Americans, and others, including Russia, 'guaranteed' Ukraine's territorial integrity. The Administration may decide to relinquish its duties under the North Atlantic Treaty and withdraw US forces from the European continent, just as it happened in Afghanistan, because it shows deep contempt for its long-standing allies, both in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific.

The US is risking losing its allies and having to face in isolation a bloc that challenges its hegemony, composed at least of China, Russia, Iran and North Korea, but which will undoubtedly be much larger, because China has woven a global network. It has become unreasonable to rely on NATO, that is, on the US, led by Donald Trump, especially since the Alliance has failed for seventy-five years to make the defence spending of European states more efficient.

The looming threat of China

The EU's trade deficit with China has doubled in five years. After flooding our markets with consumer goods and plundering our technologies, it is overtaking Europe in terms of innovation. Products that will no longer find a market in the US will be offered to us at low prices, and we will be obliged to buy them, because we absolutely need rare earths – materials that are essential for many advanced technologies, the production of which is now *de facto* monopolised by China.

Don't get lost in a *cul-de-sac*!

Despite having 1.5 million active military personnel and high-performing defence industries, which would be enough to build a force capable of deterring any possible aggressor, European political leaders only propose submission to America, at a high price.

Nearly half of the aeroplanes, missiles and armoured vehicles that equip armies in Europe come from across the Atlantic. Others come from South Korea, Brazil, Israel or Turkey. This is because these politicians generally consider only their personal and partisan interests in the short term. Some, more altruistic or more sensitive to lobbying, take their national interests into account. In the middle powers, the most ambitious dream is to lead inside Europe. Those who care about the interests of Europeans can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The lack of real unity is evident at every meeting of European leaders; the family photo is deceptive.

In its current institutional configuration, Europe is not in a position to put in place effective diplomacy and deterrence. This should include a complete and legitimate

politico-military chain of command, as well as an autonomous intelligence service. It would be foolish to follow certain European politicians and diplomats who want to commit us once again to the path of an intergovernmental 'European' defence, because they reject the federation announced on 9 May 1950 by Robert Schuman.

These irresponsible people seem confused enough to draft a European Defence Union on the basis of various provisions of the treaties and EU law, which would require a very unlikely, unanimous decision by the European Council to enter into force. Europe, if it proves them right, would once again take the path that, since 1954, has repeatedly proven to be a dead end.

What must be done after Copenhagen

EU leaders met on 1 October in Copenhagen to discuss how to strengthen Europe's common defence, governance and support for Ukraine. They are unaware of the urgency, as they have set 2030 as their deadline. It seems doubtful that Putin would wait until he is seventy-eight years old to act.

The president of the EC would like Europe to be able to detect foreign incursions and intercept threats, ranging from simple jamming to the destruction of drones. She proposed to task the EU to set up an anti-drone wall, an eastern-flank surveillance network, an air-defence shield and a space-defence shield. In response, France, Italy and Germany recalled that she has no competence in the field of defence: this task falls to NATO, not the EU – which is currently unable to even agree on who is responsible for Europe's military build-up, the financing of Ukraine's resistance and its accession to the EU.

The very high number of participants in EU meetings obviously does not help to put the European common good before the interests of the member states. Yet this would be essential for Europe to exist geopolitically in an increasingly hostile world.

Time will show who is the real paper tiger

On 2 October, Putin accused the Europeans of fuelling the 'conflict' in Ukraine, preventing its resolution and promoting constant escalation, saying he was also attentive to the militarisation of Europe. He [said](#) he does not accept Germany's assertion that its army should once again be [the most powerful in Europe](#). On 7 October, Putin [refused](#) to compromise to end the war, although he occupies [only 19.05 per cent of Ukraine; Ukraine has lost only 0.53 per cent of its territory in 2025](#).

Still, NATO believes that it is ready to defend itself against future Russian incursions involving missiles, aircraft or any other means, but is this true? According to Ben Hodges, former commander of the US Army in Europe, NATO is not prepared to deal with daily strikes by hundreds of Russian drones. In July, NATO's secretary general estimated that the Alliance must quadruple its air and missile defences. Since NATO member states decide individually on their acquisitions, how will the new systems be integrated into a common defence?

Decades of rejection of the federation of Europe and neglect of defence explain why we have sunk so low. This must be fixed before it's too late. Let us hope that a new generation of statesmen and women will pull us out of the disaster we are facing.

Federalisation is the recipe for Europe's strategic autonomy

Our strategic autonomy cannot be achieved through NATO-type cooperation, or through EU integration, or through a confederation, because the latter either turns into a federation or dissolves.

The Swiss Confederation, founded in 1291, became a federal government in 1848 after the Sonderbund Civil War. In Federalist Paper No. 20, of 11 December 1787, James Madison [described](#) the calamitous confederal organisation of the seven 'United Provinces' of the Northern Netherlands in the 18th century. The United States of America replaced the Articles of Confederation of 1776 with the federal constitution of 1787, having experienced inadequate governance during the War of Independence. Germany became a federal state in 1949, having finally learned the lessons of its past. As for the Commonwealth of Independent States, conceived by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990 to succeed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, it very quickly malfunctioned and then collapsed.

Only a federation could give us strategic autonomy.

By federating, Europe could still change the course of history. It would cease to be the vassal of the US, and it would empower us to command respect from China. Thus, a vanguard of willing member states should launch a federal core encompassing foreign policy, defence, migration and taxation.

Looking ahead

The indignation of European citizens in [Ursula von der Leyen's position in Turnberry](#) should lead to a movement towards a federal Europe, so that Europe can exist geopolitically in an increasingly hostile world. Some states, members of the EU and NATO, could start to put an end to the vassalisation of Europe. As with the Schengen area or the eurozone, this coalition of willing states would expand. Such a European state, governed by a federal constitution, should put an end to the duplication of military capabilities that mobilise resources that could be pooled to fill our defence gaps. This requires the drafting and adoption of a federal constitution by an elected European Assembly, which could be composed of certain members of the European Parliament*.

*The European Society for Defence INPA (S€D) continues its efforts to identify and support the first government to be persuaded to initiate the federative process.

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