

EU defence

How Europe can defend itself without US help



European capitals are scrambling to fill the security gap should Donald Trump withdraw American military assets

John Paul Rathbone in London and **Henry Foy** in Brussels 7 HOURS AGO

European officials are awakening to a reality that Donald Trump has long underscored: the US no longer wants to be the primary guarantor of security for either Ukraine or the continent as a whole.

For anyone who missed that message, Pete Hegseth, US defence secretary, rammed it home last week in a speech that left many Europeans aghast, in which he warned partners not to assume the US military's presence in Europe would be "forever".

"What Hegseth said is profoundly uncomfortable," Jack Watling, senior fellow at London's Royal United Services think-tank, said. "But if it forces Europe to get its act together — then this could be the proverbial kick in the unmentionables that we need."



US defence secretary Pete Hegseth warned partners last week not to assume that America's military presence in Europe would be 'forever' © Wojtek Radwanski/AFP/Getty Images

Although Trump is not the only US president to criticise his Nato allies, he is the first to force Europe to consider seriously what it would have to do if the US were to remove its defence shield. Nato's eastern flank states are particularly worried that Russian President Vladimir Putin will succeed in securing a withdrawal of American troops from their territory.

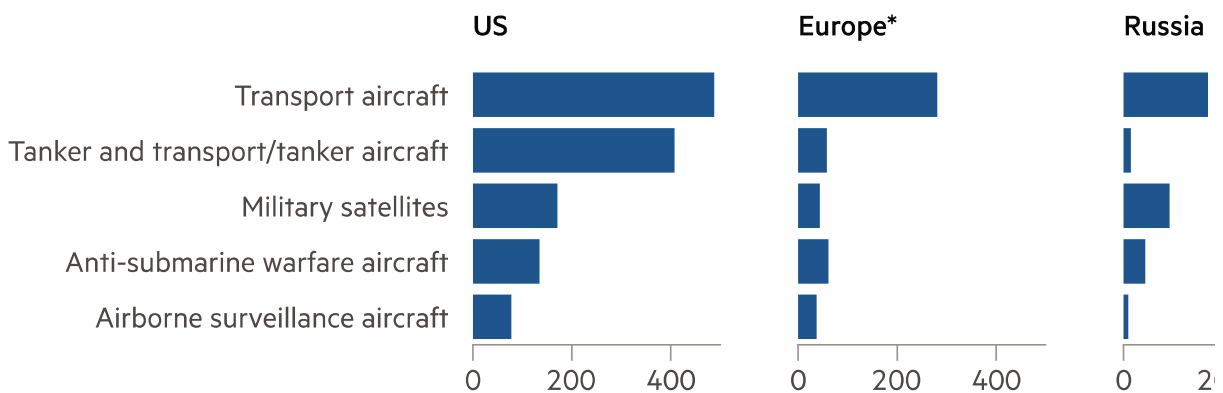
troops from their territory.

Top of Europe's "to do" list is how to increase defence spending, improve air defence, replace the logistics equipment and other enabling equipment that the US military provides, as well as how to improve European troop readiness and maintain an effective nuclear deterrent.

The most public manifestations of Europe's new urgency are discussions on defence rearmament, which have drastically accelerated in recent days, with talks focused on how to drive up national military budgets and find new financial mechanisms to pool cash for joint projects.

The US's military capabilities far outstrip Europe's

Number of military defence assets by category



Source: Military Balance 2024, IISS, [ECFR](#) • *Europe refers to EU member states and European Nato allies

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Those include a [pan-European air defence shield](#), to fill gaping holes in the continent's patchy air and missile protection systems, and [transport systems](#) such as heavy lift aircraft for rapid mobility and air-to-air refuelling which are currently provided only by the US.

Europe also has a critical lack of long-range munitions and mass military logistics platforms, Nato officials said.

If Europe acquired these strategic assets it would be "the greatest game changer", according to Camille Grand, a former senior Nato official now at the European Council on Foreign Relations, as Europe would be able to perform almost the full range of military tasks, without US assistance.

“They [the Americans] are called the indispensable ally for a reason,” said one European foreign minister. “We can’t run any form of complex military operation without them, or sustain even simple tasks.”

A case in point is France’s 2013 military operation in Mali which required the US to transport military equipment, and the constant use of US mid-air refuelling aircraft based in Spain to keep French fighter jets airborne.



European leaders gathered in Paris on Monday concluded that US support was necessary for any deployment of a peacekeeping force to Ukraine © Simon Dawson/No 10 Downing Street/dpa

[Theo Francken](#), Belgium’s defence minister, told the FT that the majority of Europe’s key defence systems were from the US.

“When we talk about F-35s . . . when we talk about a ground-to-air missile systems, they’re pretty much all American,” Francken said.

When it came to heavy lift helicopters, the US-made Chinook was the best option, the minister said, adding that a similar aircraft developed by a pan-European consortium, the NH90, was “horrible”.

Then there is the war in Ukraine.

The European leaders who gathered in Paris on Monday to discuss how to respond to US-Russia peace talks concluded that American support was necessary for any deployment of a European peacekeeping force to Ukraine.

Deployment of a European peacekeeping force to Ukraine.

“European countries have to play a leading part . . . but require a backstop from the US,” John Healey, the UK defence secretary, said on Tuesday.

The US has many bases and around 90,000 troops stationed in Europe

Selected US military bases in Europe

-  Air
-  Army
-  Navy
-  Mixed
-  Missile defence



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The challenge is that for 80 years European armies have been assembled and trained to rely on US support, and replacing that will take time — and billions of euros.

A more immediate question is what to do if the US suddenly withdrew some or all of its approximately 90,000 troops stationed in Europe.

The most urgent risk, officials and analysts said, is if Trump drew down the 20,000 American troops that Joe Biden sent to Poland, Romania and the Baltic states immediately after Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022.

Trump said on Tuesday that he does not want to pull all US troops out of Europe as part of a peace agreement. "Nobody's asking to do that, so I don't think we'd have to do that. I wouldn't want to do that. But that question has never really come up," he said.

The US president also said he would support European peacekeeping troops in Ukraine in a postwar scenario. "If they want to do that, that's great. I'm all for it if they want to do that."

Poland's premier Donald Tusk on Monday said he was hesitant about pledging to send Polish troops to postwar Ukraine as part of a European "reassurance force" because it could leave his own country, which borders both Russia and Moscow's military ally Belarus, vulnerable.

In theory, it should be easy for Europe to supply sufficient troops to guard its borders from attack. European armies have almost 2mn military personnel between them, with 1.3mn in the EU alone. But in practice many of those troops are unfit to be deployed.

"There is often a big gap between capabilities and troop readiness," Ben Barry, a former British army brigadier and a senior fellow at London's International Institute for Strategic Studies, said. "It is also far from clear that European forces have sufficient stockpiles of ammunition, supplies and spare parts."





Officials said the most urgent risk was if Trump drew down the 20,000 American troops sent to Europe immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 © Melissa Sue Gerrits/Getty Images

One European official in Munich last week recalled how European allies ran short of key munitions less than a month into the 2012 aerial campaign in Libya, and required US replenishment.

“It’s fantastic news that [Europe is] now producing vast amounts of artillery shells for Ukraine. But what about advanced munitions, long-range missiles, next-generation weaponry?” the official said. “For that, it’s all America.”

European governments are currently discussing ways of jointly funding common defence projects, including with British and other non-EU countries.

Perhaps the biggest strategic issue facing Europe is the future of the US nuclear umbrella, particularly tactical nuclear weapons which European nations lack.

France and the UK, the continent’s two nuclear powers, have around 515 nuclear warheads between them. But these are mostly strategic weapons, which lie at the top of the nuclear escalation ladder.

If the US formally declared that it would no longer protect Europe, Nato’s European states would lose access to US tactical nuclear weapons designed to destroy targets in a specific area, unlike strategic nuclear warheads which are designed to obliterate entire cities.

Europe’s lack of tactical nuclear weapons creates a “deterrence gap” — one that Russia could exploit with its own arsenal, according to Fabian Hoffmann, a doctoral research fellow at the Oslo Nuclear Project.

“European Nato has cruise and ballistic missiles, but the next step up the escalation ladder is only full-blown nuclear war, and that is a gap we need to fill,” a senior western military official said.

Europe’s desire for “defence autonomy” is not new: it has been tried for much of Nato’s history, starting with the idea of creating a European Defence Community in the early 1950s.

All those efforts failed. But that was when the US was still willing to underwrite European defence. And while “there is now a danger of catastrophising” the new US

approach, as a third senior European official said, the new reality is also very “uncomfortable”.

“Europe’s mindset has to change,” Sauli Niinistö, Finland’s former president, said. “You cannot avoid war by being weak.”

Data visualisation and cartography by Janina Conboye

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