

Opinion US foreign policy**Are Europe and America headed for divorce?**

The US military commitment to Europe is fraying — but the two sides remain locked in an unhappy marriage for now

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The US Air Force moved into Lakenheath in Britain in 1948. Ramstein air base was established in Germany in the early 1950s. Today there are over 40 US military bases in Europe, hosting around 85,000 troops.

But nothing lasts forever. And, for the first time in my life, it is conceivable that the US [military presence](#) in Europe could come to an end.

The immediate irritant is the war in Iran. European reluctance — and occasional refusal — to let the US use its European bases for missions in Iran has infuriated Donald Trump, who has lambasted Europeans as “cowards” and called Nato a “paper tiger”. Marco Rubio, the US secretary of state, has pointedly [asked](#) why America bothers to maintain bases in Europe — if it cannot use them when the chips are down.

The Trump administration is believed to be contemplating a list of [punishments](#) for European allies to be meted out when the Iran war is over. The ideas floated include booting Spain out of Nato and withdrawing recognition of British sovereignty over the Falkland Islands.

What the Trump administration may not fully realise, however, is that the fury flows both ways. European politicians are complaining bitterly — sometimes publicly — that the US launched an ill-conceived and illegal war without consulting its Nato allies. European confidence in US leadership is also at an all-time low — which is understandable when America’s commander-in-chief posts Jesus-like images of himself and threatens to erase an entire civilisation.

The Iran war has also followed a year in which the US has imposed tariffs on European allies and threatened to invade Greenland — opening up the dizzying possibility that European soldiers might end up fighting Americans. A Politico [poll](#) taken earlier this month showed that in Spain, Italy, France and Germany more people now regard the US as a threat than a “close ally”. Spain’s Pedro Sánchez has revived his political fortunes with his flamboyant condemnation of US foreign policy — and even the leaders of staunch American allies, such as Poland and Germany, are openly [questioning](#) Washington’s leadership.

Since the second world war, the US presence in Europe has been an “[empire by invitation](#)”. But some Europeans are increasingly tempted to withdraw the invitation.

So who would lose more — the US or Europe — if the American military presence in Europe was wound down?

For the Americans that would depend a great deal on whether the US still wants to project power in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Despite the political posturing on both sides of the Atlantic, the reality is that the US has been using its European bases heavily during the current war. The American airman who was shot down over Iran and rescued had probably taken off from Lakenheath.

If the US could be confident that it will never need those European bases again, it could certainly close them. But given the frequency of America's military interventions in the Middle East (as well as the Balkans), in recent decades, it seems rash to assume that the current Iran war will be the last such involvement. European purchases of American armaments and other goods are also implicitly tied to a continuing US security guarantee to Europe. As doubts about that commitment grow, the move to "buy European" is gathering pace.

Waving the Americans goodbye would also involve big risks for Europe. Russia is still waging war in Ukraine. And Donald Tusk, Poland's prime minister, has warned that Russia could attack Nato territory within months. Similar [warnings](#) — couched in years, rather than months — have come from political leaders in Berlin and [London](#). As Tusk pointed out, there are increasing doubts about whether a Trump-led US would honour the Nato mutual defence clause.

Mark Rutte, the Nato secretary-general, has [warned](#) that Europe cannot currently defend itself against Russia without American help. He has become the public face of European efforts to keep Trump happy at all costs.

Some European leaders are more optimistic than Rutte about the continent's ability to defend itself. They point out that Russia's military performance in Ukraine has been less than stellar. Even so, it is widely acknowledged that Europe currently relies on America to provide military capabilities that would be critical in any conflict. These include air defences, intelligence resources and the heavy-lift aircraft that would be needed to move troops to the frontline quickly. Filling these gaps could take many years. Nato's command structure is also built around US leadership.

For all these reasons, most European leaders remain extremely cautious about acting out their [Love Actually](#) daydreams — and telling the American president to get lost. At the same time, it is notable that the revenge fantasies against Europe, currently doing the rounds in the Trump administration, do not actually include the wholesale closure of US bases in Europe. The two sides of the Atlantic seem to understand that, for now, they are locked into an unhappy marriage.

For both the US and Europe, a formal divorce still feels like a step too far. But both sides are saying and doing things that cannot be easily forgotten or withdrawn. In an alliance, as in a marriage, that is a dangerous state of affairs.

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