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Obsolete Cold War Attitudes Are Holding Europe Back

Teaser: Instead, an independent foreign policy is desperately needed—and gaining support.

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[Article Body:]

Recently, the United States has been followed by a number of European countries in supporting a cold war policy toward Russia and China. This has created increasing problems in Europe—bringing a major war to the continent, creating serious economic difficulties, and intensifying a decline in living standards.

In this context, the case for Europe establishing an independent foreign policy has gained support, as a way of ensuring security and prosperity.

The U.S. Brings Hot War to Europe

Starting with the most extreme expression of the situation, the war in Ukraine has claimed tens of thousands of lives. The UN calculates nearly [18 million people](#) need humanitarian assistance and millions have been displaced.

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This tragedy was avoidable. The underlying cause of the war was the U.S. policy to expand NATO up to Russia's border, including the proposal that Ukraine join NATO when Russia has repeatedly made clear that that is a 'red line' threat to its security interests. The U.S. continued to push for NATO expansion despite this.

The absence of an independent European foreign policy has been demonstrated in the policy of major European governments during the past year, with these governments supporting U.S. policy in Ukraine.

This has been extraordinarily expensive. In 2022, NATO powers allocated huge sums to Ukraine—about [\\$50 billion](#) from the U.S., [€52 billion](#) from the EU and its member states, and [£2.3 billion](#) from Britain. In 2023, there has been an escalation in military aid sent. After pressure from the U.S., Germany approved the deployment of their Leopard tanks, while the British government is sending depleted uranium munitions.

Militarization in Europe is clearly on the rise, in the past year, with major European governments increasing military spending—something the U.S. has called for over many years.

Last year, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz pledged [€100 billion](#) in military spending, committing Germany to spend 2 percent of GDP on defense going forward. President Emmanuel Macron is increasing France's military spending to around [€60 billion by 2030](#)—approximately double 2017's allocation. Britain, historically the U.S.'s closest European ally, already spends [2.2 percent of GDP](#) on the military, [£48 billion a year](#).

The U.S., in turn, has [100,000 troops](#) stationed in Europe and numerous military bases, [including 119 in Germany](#).

The impact of this has negatively affected Europe's interests. Without an effort to negotiate peace in Ukraine, rather than escalation, many will die and be displaced. Meanwhile, across Europe, there is an impact of high energy prices as a result of sanctions on Russia, while increased military spending diverts resources away from addressing the cost-of-living crisis. Europe has become more dangerous and poorer.

The U.S. has not supported recent proposals for peace in Ukraine, such as those from China, which means a prolonged war. European countries could pursue a different path and play a role in backing negotiations to end the conflict.

Global Cooperation Is the Key to Economic Prosperity

Economically, Europe faces a parallel crisis. Slow economic growth, high inflation, and government austerity policies are hitting living standards while some European governments' policies toward Russia and China have made the situation worse.

Europe has been seriously damaged by participation in sanctions against Russia. These have increased energy prices while the U.S. has profited from selling more expensive liquefied gas to Europe to replace cheaper Russian gas delivered by pipelines. Journalist Seymour Hersh has made a serious case that the U.S. was also responsible for blowing up the Nord Stream pipelines between Russia and Germany. But European governments have failed to support the call for an independent investigation into this attack on Europe's energy infrastructure.

The U.S. has also urged Europe to pursue a more anti-China posture. This recently led to Europe's relationship with China deteriorating. The Comprehensive Agreement on Investment between China and the EU, agreed in principle in December 2020, has not been signed despite the economic opportunities it opens for Europe. European governments are also being asked to join the U.S. attacks on China's technology industry, some recently banning TikTok from government work phones with pressure for a wider ban.

The economic consequences of this direction would be serious for Europe. China is the EU's largest trading partner and the most rapidly growing major economy. The IMF's latest [growth projections for 2023](#) estimate China will grow by 5.2 percent—six times faster than the euro area's 0.8 percent. The potential benefits for Europe of increasing win-win economic cooperation with China are therefore considerable.

The Struggle for an Independent Foreign Policy

The U.S.'s new cold war policy has therefore tended to produce chaos in Europe. In light of this, there are now signs some major European politicians do not wish to continue down this course.

President Macron made a widely reported comment following his April 2023 visit to China. [He stated](#) that Europe must not be a “follower” of the U.S. when it comes to Taiwan, a key issue, and should instead pursue “strategic autonomy.” This followed significant economic deals struck between France and China during Macron's visit. It remains to be seen whether Macron will have the political strength to follow through on such an independent approach, particularly given the backlash these comments immediately received from Washington.

In March 2023, Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez struck a similarly independent tone, [stating](#), “Relations between Europe and China do not need to be confrontational. There is ample room for win-win cooperation.”

Globally, the pursuit of an independent foreign policy is a growing trend. Such an approach has sustained peace in Asia with most countries focusing on economic development rather than confrontation. The recent breakthrough restoring diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, established with China aiding negotiations, opens up the possibility of overcoming a number of conflicts in the Middle East. In Latin America, Lula's recent reelection in Brazil strengthens the political forces in favor of regional independence and development.

Trends in Europe seeing an independent foreign policy as important for the region's future are therefore in line with this overall global development.