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Europe Is Sidelined in Ukraine Peace Talks – Part 2: Seeking a New Role Beyond U.S. Shadow

A dread fear of irrelevance and a shock of reality that the U.S. is not a reliable partner has spread over the old continent. Will Europe be able to find its role in the world when it is dismissed by the U.S. as its close ally, or will it become further more subservient to the U.S.?



What Does Europe Fear the Most?

The primary fear among European leaders is geopolitical irrelevance. If the U.S. and Russia negotiate without European input, it clearly shows that Europe is merely a secondary actor in global affairs. This realisation is particularly painful for nations like France and Germany, which have long seen themselves as central players in international diplomacy.

Another significant concern is the destabilisation of European security. If the U.S. significantly reduces its military presence in Europe, NATO's credibility could be undermined, forcing European nations to reassess their collective defence mechanisms. Some

leaders, like UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, in a bid to reassert relevance, have even suggested deploying European peacekeepers to Ukraine—an unprecedented move that reflects both desperation and strategic subservience.

Europe must invest in building an independent security architecture and reinforce its diplomatic outreach to global partners beyond the U.S.

Beyond immediate security concerns, Europe also fears economic and political marginalisation. The shift towards a multipolar world order, where powers like China and Russia play a more dominant role, challenges Europe's traditional influence. A diminished role in global decision-making could weaken Europe's ability to protect its interests and values internationally.

A recent study by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), "Defending Europe with Less America," highlights that without a proactive strategy, Europe risks being sidelined in major geopolitical shifts. The report argues that stronger diplomatic efforts and a re-evaluation of Europe's security architecture are essential to maintaining relevance in the evolving global landscape.

Why is Europe So Subservient to the United States?

Europe's long-standing reliance on the U.S. for security has shaped a culture of dependency that prevents independent action. Since the end of World War II, NATO has been the backbone of European security, with American leadership ensuring military operational dynamics and protection. This has led to a reluctance among European nations to develop a self-sufficient defence strategy.

However, this must also be interpreted as a security dependence by design by the Americans (excluding Trump administrations) to make Europe an eternal faithful, subservient ally.

Moreover, economic dependencies play a crucial role. The U.S. remains a major trading partner and provider of military aid, making it difficult for European nations to deviate from American foreign policy objectives. Even when Trump's administration signals a shift towards a more isolationist stance, adding tariffs on European products, such as steel and aluminium, and above all a focus to containing China, European leaders struggle to assert themselves due to these entrenched dependencies. There are signs, mainly from the Baltic States, Poland and initially by the EU Commission, to appease Trump's fury by being more subservient and buying more from the U.S.

Will Europe be able to break through?

This dynamic has created a paradox: while European leaders, such as Emmanuel Macron, advocate for strategic autonomy, their actions remain closely tied to American policies. The

lack of a coherent European defence mechanism and a lack of capacity interoperability has further reinforced this dependence, leaving the EU vulnerable to shifts in U.S. foreign policy. In this respect, a study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) emphasises that without a credible European defence framework, efforts toward strategic autonomy will remain superficial. Their analysis calls for increased defence spending and stronger coordination and cooperation among EU member states to reduce dependency on the U.S.

In response, the European Union unveiled its first-ever European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) on March 5, 2024. This strategy aims to enhance the EU's defence readiness by boosting the competitiveness and capacity of the European defence industrial and technological base (EDTIB) by 2035. Despite a combined €290 billion defence budget among EU member states in 2023, the EDIS proposes an initial €1.5 billion investment in defence industrial readiness through the European Defence Investment Program (EDIP). However, this amount falls short of the €100 billion fund suggested by then European Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton. The strategy also calls for a dedicated budget allocation under the next long-term EU budget, starting in 2028 (CSIS, 2024).

Additionally, the European Commission estimates that €500 billion will be required over the next decade to bolster defence capabilities. To finance this, exempting defence spending from EU fiscal rules, as announced by EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen during the emergency meeting in Paris on 17 February 2025, incorporating defence funds into the next seven-year budget starting in 2028, reallocating current budget funds, and initiating joint EU borrowing similar to the COVID-19 recovery fund. The potential creation of a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) or a rearmament bank for joint borrowing and spending is also discussed. Each suggestion faces challenges, such as gaining consensus among member states or managing market reactions to increased national deficits.

These developments highlight the EU's recognition of the need for a robust and independent defence framework to achieve true strategic autonomy.

Europe's New Role in the World

Europe now faces a defining moment in its history. As the cradle of Western civilization, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, it has long played a central role in global affairs. However, with the emergence of a multipolar world, it must adapt to a new reality where it is no longer a first-rank power or closely aligned with a superpower.

The key challenge for European leaders is to navigate this transition without becoming geopolitically irrelevant. Whether through stronger internal defence mechanisms, renewed

diplomatic engagement, or economic diversification, Europe must redefine its role in a world where American priorities have shifted elsewhere, the “Communist China”, as put forward by U.S. Secretary of State, Marco Rubio. The coming months and years will determine whether Europe can rise to this challenge or remain trapped in its historical dependencies.

Experts suggest that Europe must invest in building an independent security architecture and reinforce its diplomatic outreach to global partners beyond the U.S. The European Parliament’s recent discussions on strengthening strategic autonomy reflect growing recognition of this need, but real policy actions are required to translate rhetoric into reality ([European Parliament, 2024](#)).

Europe’s exclusion from negotiations in the Ukraine peace settlement also reflects its declining influence in regional and in global power politics. While the U.S. and Russia are seen as primary actors, Europe’s role has been relegated to that of a secondary participant with little direct control over major diplomatic outcomes in its neighbourhood.

This shift highlights the urgent need for Europe to establish a stronger geopolitical identity beyond reliance on Washington. The EU has made incredible advances as a polity and trade area, but has left aside its geopolitical identity and security concerns.

Europe’s refusal to engage in meaningful dialogue with Russia during the conflict has contributed to its marginalisation. Without proactive, pragmatic diplomatic efforts, Europe will continue to be left out with a major role in key international affairs. Unfortunately, many present European foreign affairs leaders, such as in Germany or France, are not on the same level as seasoned diplomats from countries such as Russia, China, India, and South Africa. Europe must urgently recognise that diplomacy is not a field for amateurs.

Finally, as [Kishore Mahbubani](#), a seasoned diplomat, wrote recently in *Foreign Policy*, “**Europe needs to learn to make new friends.**” European leaders should pay more attention to Mahbubani advice. You can also have a glimpse of this set of advice [here](#).

[Ricardo Martins](#), February 25, 2025

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