Can Europe Be Secure Without U.S. Involvement?

by Evan Neiswanger

The success of Europe is largely credited to the United States's unwavering protection of the continent. U.S. security protection throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – primarily through NATO – enabled European countries to allocate resources to areas such as scientific research, universal healthcare, and education. As Robert J. Art observes, "The unanimous wish that the United States stay [in NATO] is the most potent evidence available that Western Europe's governments still do not trust themselves to avoid their worst excesses of their past."[1] This renewed concern has revived long-standing debates among scholars and policymakers about whether Europe can genuinely provide for its own defense in the absence of sustained American involvement.

Assessing the United States's central role in contemporary Europe requires a thoughtful reflection on the historical trajectory that shapes the current relationship. In 1890, the United States surpassed Great Britain as the world's largest economy, a position further enhanced by America's industrial capabilities during the Great War. "A 44-month economic boom ensued from 1914 to 1918 [for America], first as Europeans began purchasing U.S. goods for the war and later as the United States itself joined the battle."[2] American neutrality made converting the economy to a wartime footing easier than it otherwise would have been, aided by the wartime patriotism of American manufacturers.

In the aftermath of the Great War, both the Entente and Central Power countries were riddled with economic and infrastructural turmoil. Despite not joining the League of Nations, the United States solidified itself as a central economic power in Europe. The United States and banking tycoon J.P. Morgan played a central role in funding Great Britain and France's war efforts from 1916 to 1918 and were an even bigger contributor in helping countries prevent hyperinflation after the war. "The bank [J.P. Morgan] continued to assist the French government,

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[1] Robert J. Art, "Why Western Europe Needs the United States and NATO," *Political Science Quarterly* 111, no. 1 (1996): 6.

[2] Hugh Rockoff, "Until It's Over, Over There: The U.S. Economy in World War I," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 10580 (2004).

raising money in 1919 and 1920, aiding in the stabilization of the Franc in 1924 and again in 1926."[3] The U.S. also eased the Central Powers' reparation payments, as reflected by the Dawes Plan.

The Dawes Plan was a key event that showcased the United States's effort to help rebuild all of Europe, not just the Entente. Solidified in 1924, the agreement restructured Germany's World War I reparations by making them more manageable and stable. "The [Dawes] plan had been hailed by many as the salvation of the European world."[4] This economic plan demonstrated Europe's early reliance on American financial support and leadership in the aftermath of WWI.

America's involvement in World War II was substantially different from its involvement in World War I. More than four times as many American lives were lost in the former than in the latter. Additionally, the allies relied heavily on American weapons exports, particularly in air and naval theatres. "In four years, American industry turned out 296,000 airplanes, 102,000 tanks, and 372,000 artillery pieces.... Navy and civilian shipyards launched 87,620 naval vessels."[5] Although Europe relied on the unprecedented American military capacity and manufacturing capabilities during WWII, it was the aftermath of the war that began Europe's thorough dependence on the United States, especially regarding security.

WWII left Europe physically destroyed and economically exhausted. To avoid mistakes from the previous reparations of WWI, the United States adopted a deliberate and expansive role in reconstructing Europe. The United States implemented the Marshall Plan, which provided billions of dollars in aid, raw materials, machinery, etcetera, to help rebuild Europe. The Marshall Plan's chief objective was to contain the spread of communism by promoting stability and creating strong trading partners. The Marshall Plan was extremely successful and significantly increased European GDP while helping rebuild industrial productivity. "The Marshall plan in fact played a key role in inaugurating the postwar era of prosperity and stability

[3] Martin Horn, "A Private Bank at War: J.P. Morgan & Co. and France, 1914–1918," *Business History Review* 74, no. 1 (2000): 109.

[4] Thomas W. Lamont, "The Dawes Plan and European Peace," *Foreign Affairs* 3, no. 2 (1925): 182.

[5] Edward J. Marolda, "Gearing Up for Victory: American Military and Industrial Mobilization in World War II" (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1991).

in Western Europe."[6]Among other things, the Marshall Plan cemented the notion of the U.S. as Europe's indispensable partner in postwar recovery and modernization.

The Marshall Plan's success laid out the groundwork for future diplomatic and economic alliances, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The United States helped create NATO in 1949 to promote security and stability in Europe as a collective defense against the Soviet Union while mitigating the spread of communism in Europe. Although NATO benefited European countries, it also marked the beginning of Europe's deep reliance on the United States for security and prosperity. "Washington maintained hundreds of thousands of troops on the continent, along with nuclear weapons, and remained tightly bound to Europe through NATO's collective-security pact."[7] NATO integrated U.S. forces, bases, and command structures into Europe's defense structure that were largely directed by U.S. military personnel, exacerbating European dependence on American military leadership in the region.

America's nuclear umbrella also contributed immensely to Europe's economic growth and reliance on the United States during the Cold War. The U.S. provided total nuclear deterrence through NATO and reassured its member states' safety despite their limited military capability compared to the Soviets. "The European security order was indisputably dependent on America's military (and to an extent its economic) power."[8]America's ability to protect Europe while acting as a nuclear deterrent to the Soviet Union allowed Europe to focus on economic growth, democratic consolidation, and integration throughout the Cold War.

This background information begs the question: Can Europe be secure without U.S. involvement? I argue that Europe cannot maintain long-term security without the United States, as its defense has been shaped over more than a century by American military and economic structures, reinforced by the global dominance of U.S. weapons systems, centrality to NATO's command and deterrence architecture, and Europe's continued lack of a coherent independent military identity. I also contend that America's technological superiority, logistical capabilities, and defense industrial base reinforce Europe's ongoing reliance on U.S. protection. Together,

[6] J. Bradford DeLong and Barry Eichengreen, "The Marshall Plan: History's Most Successful Structural Adjustment Program," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 3899 (1991): 2.

[7] Benjamin Rhode, "Europe Without America," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* (2024): 10.

[8] Rhode, "Europe Without America," 10.

these factors demonstrate that no existing European framework can realistically replace American leadership.

Europe's dependence on the United States during the Cold War greatly expanded American influence across the continent and helped create the enduring reliance on the U.S. as reflected in the contemporary world. Initially, NATO did not require any members to contribute a specific amount of their GDP to defense spending. While the U.S. invested between 3-5% of its annual GDP on defense, most European states combined spent roughly 1–2%. Lower defense burdens allowed European governments to redirect funding toward healthcare, education, social welfare, and scientific research. "This strategy was influenced by the US plans for the economic recovery of Europe, including the Marshall Plan."[9] Europe's competitive industries grew in part because defense costs did not consume national budgets.

The U.S. invested some of its capital into advanced European manufacturing sectors whose success relied on access to American markets. American demand and investment supported European jobs, technology transfer, and integration into global supply chains. Despite its benevolent presence, the Marshall Plan manipulated war-torn Europe into producing goods that the United States would have unrestricted access to. "Washington did not perform this role out of self-sacrificing altruism, but enlightened self-interest. It considered the preservation of Western Europe within the free world a key national interest."[10] Regardless of motivation, American involvement stabilized Western Europe by reducing risks that could jeopardize its economic success.

Because the U.S. acted as the backbone of Europe post-war, European states and NATO members largely avoided developing autonomous military capacity. Large standing armies, intelligence apparatus, strategic airlift, and naval operations were all delegated to the United States. "All such efforts have stretched defense budgets, especially in Europe, where the defense

[9] Klaus Petersen, Fulvio Mioni, and Herbert Obinger, "The Cold War and the Welfare State in Western Europe," in *The Cold War and the Welfare State, ed. Klaus Petersen and Herbert Obinger* (Cham: Springer, 2021), 53.

[10] Rhode, "Europe Without America," 11.

industry experienced decades of low investment following the post–Cold War 'peace dividend."[11] Avoiding military costs produced long-term savings that allowed further investment in other civilian sectors.

Without American protection, Europe would not have sustained a trajectory in which states could prioritize domestic investment and export-oriented growth without first developing comparable militaries. "First, the Marshall Plan had a positive effect on Italy's economic development. Provinces with more reconstruction funds experienced larger increases in agricultural production—between 10 and 20 percent for major crops."[12] Europe's postwar development was therefore bound to American security guarantees and economic support from the Marshall Plan.

U.S. military superiority and defense manufacturing further reinforces Europe's reliance on the United States. Unlike European investment during the Cold War, U.S. investment focused on military research and the development of technologies in aerospace engineering, missile defense systems, and naval power. "Cold War capitalism—especially the high military Keynesian period of 1950-1970, when the defense shares never fell below 9%—was a qualitatively more militarized economy."[13] Military spending was integrated into the American economy when Europe concentrated much of its capital into social programs, contributing to persistent capability gaps between the U.S. and Europe.

The United States also maintains unmatched aircraft capabilities, including strategic bombers and advanced multirole systems such as the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II. Many European air forces have adopted the U.S.-manufactured F-35 as their next-generation platform due to its stealth, networking, and multirole capabilities. Despite Europe's investment in homegrown alternatives like FCAS and Tempest strike aircraft, both programs remain in development and require reliance on U.S. technologies for interoperability. "While Brussels has pledged €300 million to the ambitious European sixth-generation fighter jet program, it has also

[11] James Black, *Drivers of and Barriers to European Defence Cooperation* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2024), 11.

[12] Nicola Bianchi and Michela Giorcelli, "Reconstruction Aid, Public Infrastructure, and Economic Development: The Case of the Marshall Plan in Italy," *The Journal of Economic History* 83, no. 2 (2023): 503.

[13] Tim Barker, *Cold War Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Military Spending, 1947–1990* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2022), 15.

opted to purchase 11 U.S.-built F-35A aircraft,"[14] showing a lack of trust in Europe's ability to produce an able competitor to the F-35. American missile defense systems such as Patriot, Aegis and THAAD also form a core part of NATO's security architecture. In reaction to the Ukraine conflict, European military imports from America "shot up by 155 percent over 2020-2024."[15] These trends reflect Europe's continued reliance on the U.S. defense production capacity, especially in times of intercontinental conflict.

Case studies further illustrate this dependence. During the Balkan conflict in the 1990s, European states lacked the precision strike and command-and-control capabilities necessary to resolve the crisis, requiring American-led intervention. Despite European efforts to quell the Libyan conflict in 2011, it "could be contained only by a significant international military intervention spearheaded by the United States."[16] In the war in Ukraine, the United States has provided the most advanced weapons systems, while European states have struggled to match their scale and speed of assistance.

Although European states have continued to provide military and economic assistance to Ukraine, U.S. support has been critical to success on the front lines. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated, "It will be very, very, very difficult [to win without American aid] … we will have a low chance to survive without support of the United States."[17] Despite the collective size of NATO—31 member states—the United States occupies a uniquely central position in sustaining Ukraine's war effort. The reliance on U.S. systems and supply chains indicates that under current conditions, European states face structural limitations in independently matching the scale, speed, and technological sophistication of American military assistance.

The American defense industrial base significantly contributes to Europe's reliance on the U.S. for security. The American defense manufacturing sector is among the only entities capable of mass-producing advanced weapons such as fighters, missiles, submarines, and munitions. The

[14] Jack Buckby, "Europe's FCAS 6th Generation Fighter Is in Trouble," *National Security Journal,* July 29, 2025.

[15] Laura Kayali, "US Dominates European Weapons Purchases: Report," *Politico,* March 10, 2025.

[16] R. Craig Nation, *War in the Balkans, 1991–2002* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2003), 5.

[17] Volodymyr Zelenskyy, quoted in Alexander Smith and Alexandra Marquez, "Zelenskyy: 'Very Difficult' for Ukraine to Survive without U.S. Military Support," *NBC News,* February 14, 2025.

military industrial complex is intertwined with the U.S. economy, which allows billions of dollars to be spent on assembly lines and provides hundreds of thousands of jobs for Americans. "The USA's global arms exports went from 35 per cent to 43 per cent, which was almost as much as the next eight largest exporters combined."[18] Not only did the U.S. consistently invent unprecedented weapons, but it was able to produce them in bulk and sell them to Europe.

Europe's investment in the civilian markets during the twentieth century hindered their investment in military research projects and especially in assembling weapons. Even with improved budgets, domestic priorities are often splintered, and funds are insufficient to develop multiple high-end platforms independently. "Procurements are too small in scale and the system is, overall, insufficiently innovative given the worsening security environment.... this risks further fragmentation of the continent's defence-industrial base."[19] A few European countries possess advanced manufacturing capabilities (France, Great Britain, Germany, and Italy); however they still fall short of American production power, and there is no evidence that European cooperation can rally over military production, even as war rages in Ukraine.

Despite these structural limitations, some scholars argue that Europe is gradually developing the capacity for strategic autonomy, pointing to increased defense spending and collaborative initiatives within the European Union. However, these efforts remain fragmented and insufficient to replace the scale, integration, and technological sophistication of U.S. military support. Persistent coordination problems, uneven national commitments, and continued reliance on American systems suggest that such initiatives are unlikely to close the capability gap in the near term.

European security remains deeply reliant on the United States, a dependence rooted in the military power and economic structure that Washington has provided throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This reliance was reinforced by decisive American leadership during the Great War, World War II, the Marshall Plan, and the Cold War. The U.S. nuclear umbrella and NATO's command structure enabled European states to prioritize domestic welfare and

[18] Mathew George, Zvezdan Djokic, and Pieter D. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2024," *SIPRI Fact Sheet* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2025).

[19] James Hackett and Benjamin Shreer, *Progress and Shortfalls in Europe's Defence: An Assessment* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025), 55.

economic development rather than sustained military investment, widening the defense capability gap between Europe and the United States.

Over time, American dominance in weapons manufacturing, logistics, and defense technology further discouraged European governments from developing comparable defense industries. As a result, Europe's ability to independently project military power has remained limited and uneven across member states. The performance of leading European militaries such as England and France in the Balkans, Libya, and most recently Ukraine underscores the structural limitations of Europe's fragmented defense industrial base. Unless Europe fundamentally reinvents its defense institutions and industrial capacity, it cannot replace the stabilizing force the United States has provided for more than a century.

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