

01 EU GLOBAL STRATEGY EXPERT OPINION

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The countries of Europe face serious problems: ageing populations, troubled economies, resurgent xenophobia, and a deteriorating security environment on their borders. Europe's greatest strategic challenge, however, is recognising that it is no longer viewed by the US as the most important region of the world, thus signaling that Europe can no longer rely on American protection alone.

In the future, European countries will have to provide for their own defence and chart their own course in international affairs. But whether they will do so successfully is far from certain.

Europe's patron

Europe has been the central focus of US strategy for more than a century. The US entered both world wars to restore the balance of power in Europe, and it kept several hundred thousand troops there after the Second World War in order to prevent the Soviet Union from dominating the continent. The creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1949 further committed the US to defending Europe in perpetuity.

For the next 40 years, the US provided the bulk of NATO's military power and dominated its decision-making. US officials were eager to lead and their European counterparts were by and large content to follow. European officials became accustomed to relying on 'Uncle Sam' to defend them from external threats, provide protection from one another, and address disturbances in distant regions.

European defence spending declined steadily throughout the Cold War, and by its end even the UK and France were incapable of undertaking major military operations without extensive US support; a trend that has continued unabated since 1989.

Importantly, the presence of US troops on the European continent made conflict within the region near impossible. The 'American pacifier,' to use Josef Joffe's apt phrase, helped dampen rivalries within Western Europe and allowed for a vibrant European Union to flourish. Washington was also the main driving force behind NATO expansion after the collapse of the Soviet Union, despite warnings that it would poison relations with Russia and create new security obligations that might be difficult to fulfill.

Shift to Asia

Notwithstanding this long tradition of engagement, Europe's preeminent position in America's strategic calculus is now over. China's emergence as a potential 'peer competitor' and Asia's growing economic importance is shifting US attention towards East Asia – and this trend will accelerate in the years to come.

A growing proportion of US military power will be assigned to Asia, while American officials will devote more time and attention to managing strategic partnerships there. Having once focused on preventing Germany and the Soviet Union from dominating Europe, the US will now strive to keep China from dominating Asia.

Europe will play little or no role in this effort. China is not a threat to Europe, meaning European states have no incentive to balance against it. On the contrary, they will be eager to invest in China and some may be happy to sell Beijing whatever it might desire, perhaps even sophisticated weaponry. Consequently, US leaders will be increasingly reluctant to subsidise Europe's defence or guarantee its security, especially if European companies are helping China grow stronger.

Europe and the US will remain close economic partners, but European security will no longer be high on America's foreign policy agenda and security co-operation will decline as Washington focuses its attention on Asia.

Potential and risk

The implications of these trends are profound. Instead of looking to Washington to provide the bulk of NATO's defence capability, European countries will have to reacquire the capacity to defend themselves. The good news is that the major European

countries have sufficient wealth and population to defend against any conceivable external threat, including a future challenge from a revanchist Russia. The population of the European Union is nearly five times greater than Russia's and NATO's European members spend nearly four times more than Moscow on defence. Properly organised and led, European countries are capable of defending their territory and launching limited military missions outside of Europe.

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This optimistic assessment assumes Europe's major states remain united, but there is reason to doubt that they will remain so. Indeed, the main challenge in the years ahead will be preventing renewed rivalries within Europe as the 'American pacifier' evaporates. The long conflict over the euro and the recent refugee crisis have already exposed serious fissures within the European body politic, and mutual suspicions are likely to grow if European governments begin to act on their own.

Thus, EU member states may need a 'common foreign and security policy' more than ever before, but producing one might be a difficult task.

After centuries of recurrent warfare, the past 70 years of great power peace in Europe is a remarkable achievement. The US presence in Europe was a key ingredient in this long peace, but it was also the product of imaginative leadership by a generation of European statesmen.

Can the next generation of European leaders show equal imagination, and keep Europe peaceful and prosperous as America's attention shifts elsewhere? While there are hopes that they will meet the challenge, the odds are stacked against them.

