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SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

Editors

Dr. Hanna Shelest
Dr. Mykola Kapitonenko

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Contacts:

website: <http://ukraine-analytica.org/>
e-mail: Ukraine_analytica@ukr.net
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ukraineanalytica>
Twitter: https://twitter.com/UA_Analytica

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AMERICAN DECOUPLING FROM EUROPE: THE NEW APPROACHES TO WASHINGTON'S (QUASI) LEADERSHIP

Oleksandr Kraiev

Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism"

The structural transformation of the transatlantic alliance is fundamentally driven by the United States' shift from an unconditional security guarantor to a transactional "quasi-leader" that prioritises the Indo-Pacific over Europe. Fostered by President Trump's own agenda and his "America First" doctrine, Washington's strategic recalibration effectively forces European nations to rapidly internalise the financial and conventional burdens of their own continental defence. In response to this eroding security umbrella and the slowness of NATO mechanisms, agile minilateral coalitions are emerging as critical deterrence tools, highlighting Ukraine's new role as a battle-tested security provider rather than merely as a recipient.

America First

The erosion of the post-Cold War transatlantic consensus has been driven by the "America First" doctrine, which effectively replaces values-based alliance commitments with a more transactional approach to geopolitics. The personalisation of US foreign policy under Trump's second administration is defined by scepticism towards multilateral institutions such as NATO and the European Union, heavily favouring bilateral deal-making, whereby American leverage can be maximised without classic bureaucratic constraints.

The traditional security umbrella is no longer viewed as an unconditional common good for both Americans and Europeans, but is rather evaluated through

a rigid economic lens. The European allies are increasingly perceived not merely as strategic partners but as economic competitors who have historically "free-ridden" on American military investments while simultaneously maintaining favourable trade imbalances. This paradigm is evident in the administration's strong emphasis on economic metrics as a primary measure of allied utility, reflected in President Trump's assertion at the World Economic Forum that his administration has "slashed our gaping trade deficit by a staggering 77%."¹ Consequently, the American security guarantee is implicitly conditional, tethered to European concessions in trade and defence spending, thus fundamentally altering the psychological and strategic foundation of the Euro-Atlantic bond.

¹ Donald Trump speaks at the World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos. Read the transcript here, REV, 22.01.2026, <https://www.rev.com/transcripts/trump-at-wef>

This transactional restructuring of the alliance is deeply intertwined with Washington's aggressive pivot towards the Indo-Pacific, wherein China has been elevated from a peer competitor to become a strategic challenge to American global hegemony. This reassessment dictates a major reallocation of military, diplomatic, and intelligence resources away from the Euro-Atlantic theatre. Within this new calculus, European security crises, even high-intensity conflicts such as Russia's aggression against Ukraine, are increasingly viewed by Washington as regional distractions that threaten to drain the resources required for Pacific containment strategies. As Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth unequivocally stated to allies, "stark strategic realities prevent the United States of America from being primarily focused on the security of Europe."² By openly acknowledging that the US can no longer act as the primary security guarantor for the continent, Washington is actively forcing a paradigm shift, signalling that European defence must be managed locally, while American strategic bandwidth is preserved for the Asian theatre.

Furthermore, the external recalibration of US commitments is simultaneously driven by a deep crisis in foreign policy consensus at home, exacerbated by deep domestic polarisation. Trump's political approach is both a product and an amplifier of profound fatigue with foreign commitments among the US electorate, capitalising on a widespread exhaustion with "endless wars" and disproportionate overseas financial obligations. The administration's rhetoric has reinforced neo-isolationist and anti-

globalist sentiments, fracturing the long-standing bipartisan establishment that historically underwrote European security. This inward turn transforms international obligations into domestic political liabilities, shifting the political imperative towards immediate, tangible benefits for the American taxpayer and strict border enforcement.



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The institutionalisation of this fatigue dictates that maintaining the traditional architecture of European security is increasingly viewed as politically toxic. Therefore, the administration's demands are framed not merely as strategic adjustments but as domestic political imperatives. As the Department of Defence has articulated, the explicit expectation is that the Europeans step up, while America focuses on areas of the world that are in great danger, amid strong domestic pressure to prioritise consequential threats to their homeland and the security of their own borders.³ This domestic political dynamic ensures that the push for a European decoupling is not merely a temporary diplomatic posture, but a permanent structural reality dictated by the wishes of the American electorate.

2 Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Defense Contact Group (As Delivered), US Department of War, 12.02.2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/article/4064113/opening-remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-ukraine-defense-contact/>

3 Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Defense Contact Group (As Delivered), US Department of War, 12.02.2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/article/4064113/opening-remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-ukraine-defense-contact/>

The Concept of “Quasi-Leadership” and the “Backbencher” Strategy

The transition of the United States from a hegemon to a “quasi-leader” represents a recalibration of transatlantic dynamics, whereby Washington seeks to retain its political influence while reducing its asymmetric financial and military exposure. This “quasi-leadership” rests on the premise that the US acts as a managing partner rather than the sole provider of European stability. The administration has effectively rejected the traditional “Pax Americana” model, calculating that a more fragmented and unpredictable regional security environment is an acceptable strategic trade-off if it significantly reduces costs for the average US taxpayer. In this transactional framework, geographic realities are invoked to justify the reduction in unconditional support, reframing continental defence as primarily a local responsibility. This sentiment was starkly articulated by Donald Trump before returning to office: “If Europe is not going to pay, why should we pay? They are much more greatly affected. We have an ocean in between us. They don’t.”⁴ Consequently, this doctrine asserts that American engagement is no longer guaranteed by shared historical ties, but is instead strictly contingent upon the direct, measurable financial relief it provides to the United States.

Central to this new strategy is the weaponisation of burden-sharing, which has transformed NATO’s baseline defence-spending targets from diplomatic aspirations into geopolitical ultimatums. Under the paradigm of quasi-leadership, the traditional understanding of the need for collective defence is replaced by a transactional “protection pact” mentality.

Security guarantees and the Article 5 commitments are no longer viewed as the inherent rights of allied democracies, but rather as conditional services rendered only to those who fulfil specific financial quotas. This conditionality introduces unprecedented volatility into the Alliance’s security posture. The administration has made it clear that failure to meet these financial thresholds – 2%, 3%, and most recently 5% – effectively nullifies the American security umbrella. In a stark departure from decades of deterrence strategy aimed at adversaries, the threat of abandonment is now openly directed at allies. Recounting a conversation with a European leader, Trump illustrated this during his speech in South Carolina: “You didn’t pay, you’re delinquent? No, I would not protect you. In fact, I would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want. You got to pay. You got to pay your bills.”⁵ This rhetoric weakens the unconditional solidarity that has historically anchored European stability, replacing it with a pay-to-play model of collective defence.



The transition of the United States from a hegemon to a “quasi-leader” represents a recalibration of transatlantic dynamics

To operationalise this reduced presence, Washington is effectively implementing a strategy of “back-bench leadership.” Operationally, this repositioning dictates that the United States intends to transition into the role of a high-end arms supplier, intelligence coordinator, and diplomatic

4 Read the Full Transcripts of Donald Trump’s Interviews With TIME, TIME Magazine, 30.04.2024, <https://time.com/6972022/donald-trump-transcript-2024-election/>

5 Edward Helmore, Trump says he would encourage Russia to attack Nato allies who pay too little, The Guardian, 11.02.2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/feb/11/donald-trump-says-he-would-encourage-russia-to-attack-nato-countries-who-dont-pay-bills>

moderator, rather than serving as the primary provider of boots on the ground in Europe. By deliberately withdrawing the certainty of American intervention, the administration aims to force a rapid strategic maturation among its European partners. This calculated reduction of the US military presence acts as a coercive mechanism, compelling local actors to assume immediate, localised responsibility for deterring regional threats.



Washington is effectively implementing a strategy of “back-bench leadership”

The underlying rationale claims that decades of absolute American guarantees have stifled European defence capabilities, a perspective clearly voiced by J.D. Vance: “The problem with Europe is that it doesn’t provide enough of a deterrence on its own because it hasn’t taken the initiative in its own security. I think that the American security blanket has allowed European security to atrophy.”⁶ Therefore, the strategy of quasi-leadership is not merely a retreat, but an intentional shock doctrine designed to dismantle perceived European complacency, thereby forcing the continent to physically and financially internalise the burden of its own survival.

Contours of a New European Security Architecture

The practical application of American quasi-leadership creates an unprecedented institutional stress test for NATO, fracturing the established architecture of Euro-Atlantic

deterrence. The transactional rhetoric coming from Washington deliberately undermines the psychological core of Article 5, shifting the perception of collective defence from an ironclad certainty to a calculated, conditional gamble. This dynamic is fostering the creation of a “two-tier” Alliance, creating a sharp internal division between states that comfortably meet or exceed strict financial benchmarks and those deemed financially incapable or unwilling, and vulnerable to American abandonment. The resulting strategic ambiguity constitutes a critical vulnerability. By replacing unconditional American leadership with conditional audits, a deterrence vacuum emerges. This grey zone is highly susceptible to exploitation by adversaries, primarily Russia, which is encouraged to test the Alliance’s cohesion through hybrid aggression and sub-threshold provocations (namely, drone flyovers and shows of force in border regions), acutely aware that transatlantic unity for mutual defence is no longer automatic.



By replacing unconditional American leadership with conditional audits, a deterrence vacuum emerges

In direct response to this eroding transatlantic certainty, the concept of European Strategic Autonomy has undergone a radical conceptual evolution, transitioning from a solely French ambition into a pan-European survival imperative. The realisation that the continent can no longer permanently outsource its security

⁶ Senator and Member of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, of the United States of America (later Vice President of the United States of America). JD Vance used his remarks at the Munich Security Conference 2024 to call for Europe to “finally take a bigger role in assuring its own security”, Munich Security Conference, February 2024, <https://securityconference.org/en/publications/books/selected-key-speeches-volume-i/2020-2024/speech-jd-vance-2024/>

has mainstreamed the doctrine of self-reliance. French President Emmanuel Macron encapsulated this existential awakening, warning starkly: “There is a risk our Europe could die. We are not equipped to face the risks. Europe must show that it is never a vassal of the United States and that it also knows how to talk to all the other regions of the world.”⁷ Operationalising this concept requires a massive paradigm shift in defence procurement and the urgent establishment of a robust European Defence Technological and Industrial Base. The European Union is attempting to pivot away from a long-standing reliance on American off-the-shelf military hardware towards sovereign production capabilities. As European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen articulated, the new geopolitical reality dictates that “Europe must spend more, spend better and spend European”⁸, reflecting an emerging consensus that military sovereignty is impossible without industrial autonomy.

A pragmatic reality check reveals that European armed forces currently lack the critical, high-end enablers historically provided almost exclusively by the United States — including advanced communications, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance networks, strategic airlift, deep-strike precision capabilities, and the ultimate deterrent of a unified nuclear umbrella. Bridging this vast capability deficit requires a significant financial and organisational effort, but the most critical constraint is time. There is a discrepancy between the rapid, politically driven pace of American decoupling and the slow, deeply bureaucratic timeline required for European states to rebuild their military-industrial complexes. Acknowledging this



A pragmatic reality check reveals that European armed forces currently lack the critical, high-end enablers historically provided almost exclusively by the United States

critical time lag, German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius issued a sobering assessment of the continent’s readiness against an emboldened Russia, noting already in 2023 that “I don’t like to look into a crystal ball... I can’t predict if and when an attack on NATO territory might occur. But it could happen in five to eight years.”⁹ This temporal chasm between the withdrawal of the American shield and the forging of a capable European sword represents the most precarious phase in the restructuring of the continent’s security architecture.

Minilateralism as an Anti-Crisis Tool and the Regionalisation of Security

As the traditional transatlantic consensus fractures, ‘minilateralism’ is rapidly emerging as the most viable crisis management tool in the European security toolkit, fundamentally reorganising deterrence around regional agility rather than universal consensus. This shift is driven by the stark realisation that a 32-member NATO, while retaining its ultimate Article 5 mandate, operates with a slow-paced, consensus-based bureaucracy that is often too sluggish to pre-empt rapidly escalating crises. In contrast, minilateral coalitions — smaller, purpose-driven groups of nations united by shared geography and acute threat perceptions — prioritise speed

7 Maia Snow, Alessandra Scotto di Santolo, Emmanuel Macron makes worrying plea as he warns ‘Europe could die’, Express, 25.04.2024, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1892325/emmanuel-macron-brexit-france>

8 Keynote speech by President von der Leyen at the European Defence and Security Summit, European Commission, 17.04.2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/speech_24_2101

9 Russia could attack in 5-8 years. Pistorius calls on Europe and NATO to prepare for ‘worst case scenario’, RBC Ukraine, 18.02.2024, <https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/russia-could-attack-in-5-8-years-pistorius-1708287809.html>

as a strategic leverage. They offer the critical advantage of immediate, flexible decision-making without the paralysing requirement of securing universal political agreement from capitals thousands of miles away from the crisis zone. This decentralised approach directly addresses the vacuum left by the US transition towards quasi-leadership. By establishing rapid-response mechanisms that can act decisively below the level of a full NATO mobilisation, these regional alliances provide a functional, immediate patch, covering up for the reduced forward presence of U.S. combat forces, ensuring that deterrence is not solely dependent on the geopolitical mood in Washington.



The strategic centre of gravity is shifting towards regional frameworks, exemplified by the expanding operational role of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force

This dynamic is actively reshaping the deterrence architecture along Europe's Northern and Eastern flanks, where proximity to Russia dictates a different security approach. The strategic centre of gravity is shifting towards regional frameworks, exemplified by the expanding operational role of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force, which serves as a highly flexible military instrument capable of rapid deployment across the High North — or Arctic, North Atlantic, and Baltic Sea regions. For countries bordering Russia, theoretical debates over strategic autonomy are replaced by an acute perception of threat. This shared vulnerability has fostered a distinct “pre-war” mentality, driving these nations to integrate their military capabilities, intelligence sharing, and defence procurement far beyond standard NATO requirements. Consequently, new strategic axes, such as the emerging Nordic defence integration and the deepening

political-military cooperation between some NATO capitals and Kyiv, are rapidly consolidating as the functional backbone of European deterrence, capable of operating effectively even during periods of American strategic hesitation.

At the very vanguard of this minilateral security network stands Ukraine, forcing a profound paradigm shift in how European security is conceptualised. Rather than being viewed merely as a security recipient awaiting integration into Western structures, Ukraine has evolved into Europe's most essential security provider, and it possesses the most battle-tested military force on the continent. This transformation is being institutionalised not through traditional multilateral formats but through a dense web of bilateral security agreements negotiated between Kyiv and key European capitals during the last three years. This web of agreements ensures deep operational interoperability between Ukraine and its Eastern and Northern European partners. The signing of the Hundred-Year Cooperation Agreement between Ukraine and the United Kingdom is still perceived as a pinnacle of this type of cooperation, transforming tactical cooperation into a prolonged strategic course.

Minilateral integration ensures that Ukraine acts as an immediate, highly capable shield for the continent, anchoring the European security architecture precisely when the American umbrella is being recalibrated. Although the immediate benefits for Ukraine remain highly politicised, especially regarding future NATO membership, Europe gains a great deal from this type of cooperation.

Understanding — and Living — the New Reality

Ultimately, the phenomenon of American decoupling from Europe must not be misdiagnosed as a retreat into 1930s-style isolationism. Rather, it constitutes a calculated and enduring restructuring of the

transatlantic alliance. While this transition bears the distinct transactional and often disruptive signature of Donald Trump, the underlying geopolitical mechanisms are driven by structural inevitabilities — most notably, the imperative to confront the rising threat of China in the Indo-Pacific. This dictates a permanent reallocation of American strategic bandwidth. As Elbridge Colby, one of the key architects of this strategic realignment, argues, “The core strategic reality laid out by the NSS and NDS is this: Europe must assume primary responsibility for its own conventional defence.”¹⁰ Consequently, the old paradigm of unconditional American hegemony is increasingly obsolete, replaced by a rigid expectation that European allies must physically and financially shoulder the burden of their own survival.



Although the immediate benefits for Ukraine remain highly politicised, especially regarding future NATO membership, Europe gains a great deal from this type of cooperation

This transition solidifies the concept of American “quasi-leadership.” Washington is actively redefining its geopolitical posture from being a paternalistic, unconditional guarantor of European stability to becoming an offshore balancing power. In this new division of labour, the United States seeks to

retain its overarching political influence and its role as a supplier of high-end strategic assets, while simultaneously sharing out the burden of providing conventional deterrence on the continent among the Europeans. The era of the American security umbrella as a guaranteed public good has been replaced by a pay-to-play model. This is a profound psychological and operational shift for a continent accustomed to outsourcing its defence. Under such quasi-leadership, the US acts as the alliance’s managing partner and high-end tech provider, while demanding greater returns on investment and delegating the heavy lifting of regional deterrence to local actors.

The success or failure of the new European security architecture now depends entirely on the continent’s ability to race against the clock. The US transition from absolute hegemony to quasi-leadership has opened a dangerous window of vulnerability, one that revisionist states such as Russia are eager to exploit.

Oleksandr Kraiev is Director of the North America programme in the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism” and a senior lecturer at the National University “Kyiv-Mohyla Academy”. He is an international relations columnist for several Ukrainian and international media outlets. His current PhD research concerns the foreign policy doctrine of President Donald Trump. Key academic and professional spheres of interest: the UK and US foreign and domestic policy, the Irish border dispute, hybrid warfare, and modern conflicts.

10 Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the NATO Defense Ministerial (As Prepared), US Department of War, 12.02.2026, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4404801/remarks-by-under-secretary-of-war-for-policy-elbridge-colby-at-the-nato-defense/>



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