Formation of New European Security Architecture amid Changing US Policy

Ivan Gomza

Table of contents

Summary

Russia's invasion of Ukraine put an end to the European security order that was established after World War II and adjusted in 1975 at the Helsinki Conference. All foundations that underpinned this security order (inviolability of borders, sovereignty, peaceful resolution of disputes) were shaken as a result of full-scale war and new Russian claims. European states are now seeking ways to build a new security architecture, whose future contours will be determined by the further course and outcomes of the Russia-Ukraine war, including efforts to establish deterrence against Russia or even more proactive defense from it. This will also involve constructing new institutional and financial mechanisms or even institutions. The purpose of this analytical review is not so much to accurately predict what the post-war security order will look like, but rather to briefly outline the main possibilities, interests, and lines of discussion that define its formation today, in order to develop a strategy for Ukraine's most advantageous involvement in such a security order, taking into account Ukraine's interests.

Problem of Security Order in Europe Until 2025

First of all, it is worth briefly examining the main problems of the security order in Europe that manifested even before the full-scale invasion of 2022, as these challenges are characterized by significant continuity, which means that a considerable number of them continue to influence the formation of the European security order today.

In general, the post-war security order in Europe was characterized by relative stability between 1950 and 1991. Established against the backdrop of competition between two superpowers and their allies, this order was based on a UN-legitimized system of rules: (1) respect for the sovereignty of each state, regardless of its power and size, (2) inviolability of established borders, (3) primacy of human rights, and (4) peaceful resolution of conflicts. The European security community internalized these provisions as fundamental values, while the powerful US military presence on European territory and the American nuclear arsenal provided the European security community with a defensive dimension. Externalization of defensive functions allowed European countries to focus on economic (prosperity through removal of trade barriers) and value-based (strengthening and expanding the democratic community) dimensions of the liberal order. From 1975, along with the Helsinki Process, limited dialogue with the USSR was gradually added in hopes of its liberalization through economic and energy cooperation, and since Gorbachev's time, democratic transformation within the framework of "perestroika".

The end of the Cold War shook the architectural foundations of the European security community in a number of dimensions: the collapse of the USSR and Yugoslavia, disintegration of the Warsaw Pact, consolidation of the EU as a political actor changed the balance of power on the continent, eliminating the general bipolar framework of Cold War confrontation. New states were formed or revived with their own vision of their place in international processes. By the mid-2000s, the need to form a new security architecture became quite obvious. However, it was not possible to achieve a common, consistent vision of the necessary forms and components of this updated architecture, while the security community inherited from the Cold War suffered erosion and decline (1990s-2000s). There was a prevailing belief that the threat from the USSR remained in the past, Russia had embarked on a shaky but still path of democratization, and it should rather be relied upon as a factor of stability and partner in peacekeeping missions – in contrast to unpredictable new states that risked finding themselves at the epicenter of ethnic conflicts like those that devastated Yugoslavia. Other potential sources of threats were considered too distant to be capable of open attack, so the consolidation of the EU as a political union and several powerful waves of enlargement did not result in consolidation of the security component.

Moreover, the impression that threats had disappeared raised questions about the inappropriateness of a powerful US presence in Europe, and more broadly, doubts about NATO's role and principles in new conditions. The redefinition by the United States of its security priorities began already in the 1990s, finally establishing itself in the 2000s with a course toward shifting to external operations and fighting terrorism, as well as encouraging Europe to take similar actions. NATO similarly reformulated its tasks, emphasizing non-military elements such as protecting democratic principles, and later fighting international terrorism. Fifteen years later, there are all grounds to assert that a significant mistake by European countries was mass disarmament and reduction of armies in the 1990s and 2000s, which increased European dependence on the US, despite the fact that in the United States itself, conviction about the strategic advisability of defending Europe was weakening. From the mid-2010s, Washington's desire to make an "Asian pivot", that is, to reorient the strategic defense line from the USSR/Russia to China, became increasingly evident, and the inclination toward such a turn made the withdrawal of US troops from Europe a matter of time. In the EU itself during this period, a model of the Union as purely soft power was established, which did not require investment in the military sphere, since its power was based on economic and value attractiveness, which militarization (supposedly unnecessary in new conditions) could destroy.

The erosion of European security architecture is well illustrated by EU policy toward Russia. The emergence of new states that saw direct security challenges from Russia and therefore sought solutions to their security concerns in rapid membership in the EU and NATO generated enormous amounts of discussion and frankly half-hearted results. On one hand, part of the former Soviet bloc states did become members of the EU and NATO (including under the influence of "Yalta syndrome", a kind of guilt complex among part of Western elites who left Eastern European states in the Soviet sphere of influence after 1945), albeit with truncated functionality due to 1997 NATO-Russia agreements. On the other hand, a gray zone of states remained on the continent, with Ukraine at the epicenter, regarding which the Western world decided to slow down integration processes so as not to provoke Russia excessively, leaving strategic uncertainty. Such uncertainty also concerned the potential reintegration of these countries into political structures under Russia's leadership, provided they themselves desired it.

Thus, European states tried to compensate for the reduction of their own defensive capabilities and reintegration into Western blocs of part of the former Soviet sphere of influence states with a conciliatory policy toward Russia. Its forms varied from ambitious intentions to create a single European-Russian security zone from Lisbon to Vladivostok, to more practical projects of stimulating the development of economic and energy interdependencies, which would give the European side stable sales markets and cheap energy carriers to support industrial competitiveness, while weakening Russia's bellicosity with prospects of economic development and modernization. The European political class was inspired by the liberal school of international relations thesis that trade links between countries promote reduction in the likelihood of armed conflicts between them. This policy was also supported by doctrinal reorientation toward "new security threats" (for example, fighting terrorism, climate change, social inequality),

countering which did not require significant military budgets, instead offering new opportunities for cooperation with Russia in overcoming such "new challenges".

However, for international trade and addressing common challenges to reduce the likelihood of armed clashes (as happened within the European security community after 1945), it is necessary that process participants have common sincere views about the independent value of such exercises. If one of the participants considers trade a means of economic enrichment necessary for further resolving problematic issues by force, such temporary cooperation only serves as a form of building conflict potential. This is exactly the scenario that played out in EU-Russia relations. Starting from the 1990s, the Russian Federation under the pretext of peacekeeping actions created zones of frozen conflicts, especially in former Soviet republics, and openly opposed NATO's eastward expansion. In the 2000s, a series of "color revolutions" convinced Moscow that the EU's goal was "export of democracies", which, given the nature of the Russian regime, was seen as an existential threat to it. Accordingly, Moscow increasingly openly drifted toward anti-Western positions, eventually openly expressing its revanchist positions in word (see Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007) and deed (e.g., military intervention and occupation of part of Georgia in 2008, occupation of Crimea and aggression in Donbas from 2014).

Due to the fact that 15 years passed between Putin's actual declaration of a new aggressive course in relations with the West and the beginning of full-scale invasion, it is possible to note several important generalizations about the entire observation period:

▶ The principle of appeasement and mutually beneficial cooperation with the Russian Federation is characterized by continual and elastic thinking. The response to increasingly aggressive actions was traditionally attempts at reset policies (2009-2010), strengthening economic and energy ties (construction and expansion of Nord Stream gas pipelines), avoiding decisive deterrence policies (weak sanctions, focus on resolving Russian aggression through freezing within the "Minsk process", support and stimulation of bilateral dialogue with emphasis on reset in 2019, attention to Moscow's objections regarding Eastern flank defense (military presence, missile shield project). Such "pragmatic policy" even found its reflection in the EU Global Strategy 2016, which blurred the EU's value foundation.

▶ The EU showed frivolity in ignoring the fact of gradual divergence of security priorities with the US. Faith that transatlantic relations could continue as if nothing was happening was marked by unwillingness to strengthen European security and, paradoxically, growing anti-Americanism (fueled by interventions in the Middle East).

▶ The EU suffered from the absence of substantial policies for qualitative expansion of autonomous European security order capacity. Starting from 2008, a series of crises in the EU and internal disagreements about the vision of security threats and the need for US participation in European security became increasingly insurmountable within the consensus system of decision-making in the field of security and defense, which was not accompanied by necessary steps to redesign this system.

▸ The EU tended to ignore the material dimension of military potential. European countries and institutions did not invest in defense and rearmament, as they convinced themselves of the exceptionality of the Ukrainian, particularly Crimean case, and the absence of broader threat directly to the EU and NATO, supposedly achieved through actual conflict freezing. This was facilitated by active Russian propaganda on historical and cultural issues regarding the civilizational belonging of these territories to the "Russian world", reinforced by weak understanding of the post-Soviet space and bias toward Russian studies. The apogee of endless attempts to find compromise and modus operandi with Putin was German Chancellor A. Merkel's attempt to invite V. Putin to the EU summit in summer 2021, against the backdrop of deployment of a multi-thousand contingent of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border, which failed to materialize due to Baltic and Eastern European countries' veto.

The continuity of the four described principles of EU foreign and military policy reached culmination on December 17, 2021, when Russia in the form of ultimatum demands outlined its vision of European security order in two draft treaties that demanded redistribution of spheres of influence in Russia's favor. The draft "Agreement on measures to ensure the security of the Russian Federation and member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization" envisaged that NATO members would commit not to allow further expansion of the alliance, including at the expense of Ukraine, would not deploy troops or weapons in countries that joined the alliance after May 1997, would agree to prohibit deployment of medium-range missiles in the zone of Russian Federation territory reach, from any NATO military activity in Ukraine, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, would restore the activity of consultative mechanisms like the Russia-NATO Council, etc. In addition, the draft "Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on security guarantees" envisaged that both countries should not undertake security measures that could undermine the fundamental security interests of the other side and would deploy nuclear weapons only on national territory, while the US commits not to allow further NATO expansion, would refrain from deploying American medium-range missiles in Europe, would limit authorization for heavy bombers and surface warships to operate in international waters and over them within the other side's range. Such demands significantly undermined the sovereignty of individual European countries in the dimension of security and defense and generally transatlantic unity in the matter of defense against the Russian Federation. Moscow put forward even harsher demands regarding the political structure and alliances of states, rejecting principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity of so-called "near abroad" countries, which should be densely reintegrated into the Russian sphere of control.

Neither the US nor Europe agreed to these ultimatums, as is known, which does not cancel the fact that in 2022 European countries approached aggression unprepared. Understanding partially emerged that the policy of appeasement, dialogue and compromise had failed, so the EU actively joined in supporting Ukraine. In the first period, the EU adopted decisions on Ukraine's candidate status, imposed quite substantial sanctions, limited purchases of Russian energy resources, provided significant assistance to Ukrainian refugees, budget assistance to Ukraine, and

individual countries began to lead in armament and defense assistance. Subsequently, ways to strengthen security cooperation on a European scale began to be discussed. But despite decisions made since 2022 (such as: using the European Peace Facility to help Ukraine, launching ASAP and EDIRPA production capacity building programs, creating the EUMAM military mission, approving the European Defense Industry Development Strategy EDIS), by 2025 substantial changes in European security order were not observed. European states rejected the war of conquest and Russia's claims to military dominance in Europe, but did not agree on how exactly they would defend themselves in the longer term. Two sets of factors contributed to this situation:

First, the main players openly waited to see how the situation would develop.

Second, the first three years of war were marked by a return to transatlantic unity and American leadership in matters of strategy and tactics of confronting the Russian Federation, rather than building strategic autonomy. Consequently, EU dependence on American protection only increased during this period, and the pace of American weapons purchases accelerated. Americans and Europeans during this period adhered to the belief that the war would end with some compromise and freezing, and would not go beyond Ukraine. For this purpose, they jointly engaged in "escalation management", which was supposed to control the pace of Russian advancement on one hand, and avoid Russia's use of nuclear weapons on the other.

Contours of New Security Order

The question of urgent need to build a new European security order arose sharply after the change of administration in the US, and its urgency grew exponentially after the inauguration of the new president in 2025, when old problems returned in much larger scales. Given the Trump administration's preferences, US withdrawal from Europe ceased to be a distant prospect, and this began to look openly threatening given the preservation and strengthening of the Russian threat. The absence of plans in case of American troops' withdrawal from Europe, on one hand, contributed to maximum focus on slowing down the process, but also to a qualitative leap in developing the idea of European defense, which finally began to be considered with all seriousness. Visions of the viability of the strategy of deterring Russian aggression in Ukraine weakened as the intensity of hybrid, sub-threshold attacks, information campaigns and electoral manipulations increased, as well as force buildup, logistics and military production toward Baltic and Eastern European states.

On the other hand, Russia, inspired by the change of American administration and successful cooperation with China, Iran and DPRK, only sharpened demands for its own domination in the European security space, which was now reconceptualized as Eurasian. Compared to previous "Lisbon to Vladivostok" projects, the new vision of this space changed the gravitational center, reducing emphasis on Eurocentrism and instead strengthening Russo- and Sinocentrism. The strategic vision that Moscow currently cultivates consists in further pushing the United States out of Eurasia, which should weaken Europe's security and unity, with subsequent filling of the vacuum caused by US withdrawal with Russian military and Chinese economic domination.

European institutions were the first to react to the transformation of the political context. In contrast to the cautious and vague Strategic Compass 2022, which had to be rewritten already during the full-scale invasion, the White Paper on European Union Defense was created, announced in November 2024, on the eve of the new European Commission taking office and immediately after D. Trump's election as US President. The document was officially presented in March 2025. European institutions conducted an audit of their, as it turned out, not very extensive capabilities to stimulate expanded financing in the field of security and defense, joint projects, joint procurement, joint plans for developing the industrial base of defense industry – and presented corresponding plans. Currently this is insufficient to speak of full-fledged European defense, but the first steps in the corresponding direction are indisputable. Overall, the document shows that the EU gives priority to building the Union's and member states' capacity (in close cooperation and complementarity with NATO) to effectively confront the Russian Federation on land, sea, air, space and cyberspace in full-scale war that may begin against EU states by the end of the current decade.

Indicative is the formation of consensus that building EU security capabilities is an urgent task, which gave impetus to formulating a complex of concrete decisions. The

following priority directions for reforming the EU's security and defense component are distinguished:

▸ Creation of European Security Union. Movement along this trajectory involves substantial expansion of EU security capabilities and the mandate of European institutions in the security sphere, as well as transition from a predominantly national approach through coalitions of the willing to building common capabilities and creating a single market in the field of defense.
▸ Deterrence policy toward the Russian Federation. This direction means building up own defensive capabilities and supporting Ukraine's resistance, strengthened by recognition of Russia as a direct security threat to the EU. Deterrence policy will prioritize more efficient production, joint procurement, accumulation of weapons and shells, increasing readiness and capability, strengthening interoperability and productivity, accelerating production cycles, preference for EU countries' procurement of weapons manufactured in the EU, as well as building a comprehensive multi-level air defense system.
▸ Elimination of technological lag and dependencies. Ensuring this direction involves supporting the development of technological innovations and accelerating innovation cycles in the security industry of EU countries, and therefore strengthening the European Defense Fund.

However, reforming the EU's security and defense component faces two significant challenges:

1. Underdevelopment of local capabilities

Thirty years of consuming the "peace dividend" led to gradual atrophy of EU countries' military-industrial complex. The main problems are (1) fragmentation of industries, (2) incompatibility of weapon systems produced in Europe, (3) logistical challenges, (4) coordination problems of armed forces of different countries in the absence of the American component that provided it earlier.

Starting from 1991, the EU observes fragmented weapons markets, contradictory definitions of national interests, critical lack of funds in the security industry and army reductions due to region-wide policy of abandoning conscription. This is why the EU significantly lags behind the US in high-tech defense components, particularly air components, and behind the Russian Federation in mass weapons, ammunition and armed forces personnel necessary for conducting combat operations. In other words, if during the Cold War NATO's defense doctrine envisaged achieving victory over the USSR through a combination of technological advantage and contingent infusion from across the Atlantic, the EU in 2025 feels critical vulnerability vis-à-vis the Russian Federation both in the high-tech component (caused by US withdrawal) and in quantitative dimension. Moreover, extremely acute, especially given the Kremlin's inclination toward nuclear blackmail, is the question of EU (or individual European countries') capability for nuclear deterrence. France could play the main role in this matter, having since 1967 professed the doctrine of Défense tous azimuts (defense directed not against a specific adversary, but for general deterrence through access to nuclear weapons), which could

(probably) be relatively easily reconfigured for Russia's deterrence (although this contradicts General Ailleret's original idea of "not having a favorite enemy"). In addition to this doctrinal question, there is also the technical problem of extending French potential to all of Europe, and the sensitivity of a strategy that would destroy principles of nuclear non-proliferation.

2. Unfavorable American policy and its European echoes

The American political class, especially that segment that came to power with President Trump, chose a line of behavior that slows down and hinders the formation of new security architecture in Europe, for three different motives.

First, Trump and his political allies believe that the United States is one of the main victims of the old liberal order, as operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and maintaining global security infrastructure from Yokosuka to Keflavik and from Camp Humphreys to Camp Arifjan requires financial costs. More broadly, globalization, which is one of the elements of liberal order, supposedly also harmed the US economy and industry. The result of such interpretation is the desire to reduce the scale of American presence, one manifestation of which should be withdrawal from Europe. The extremely unsuccessful moment chosen by the administration for withdrawal (height of aggression against Ukraine and Moscow's attempts to intimidate European US allies with further conflict diffusion) already constitutes a challenge to European security. However, besides "cost optimization", rapid withdrawal from Europe represents a manifestation of American readiness to again resort to "détente policy" toward the Russian Federation. Through this step, Trump is trying to convince Russia of peaceful intentions, as withdrawal from Europe should emphasize the complementary (or at least non-contradictory) nature of US and Russia's strategic interests in the region. Obviously, the EU cannot afford to impose on itself the role of victim on the altar of peace, as this would not only cancel the union's subjectivity, but also pose existential threats to a significant number of member states.

Second, the divergence between the EU and US has not only strategic but also value character: rejecting the liberal order that was an ecosystem favorable to liberal democracies, Trump and actors from his entourage were guided by actual rejection of liberalism and democracy. The EU (including thanks to the EU's bet on soft power and self-identification as the flagship of planetary liberalism) appears to the new American leaders as value-alien. Hence support for alternative (illiberal) political forces in Germany, Romania and eventually Poland, accusations of the EU of censorship and freedom of speech restrictions, demonstrative disdain for pan-European institutions in favor of contacts with more friendly and value-close governments, US statements about the EU as an inherently unfriendly organization, regular announcements of tariff wars. Such an avalanche of threatening initiatives from Washington creates an unfavorable background for mutual trust and coordinated defense. The most radical anti-European members of the administration expect that under this pressure European states will minimize cooperation among themselves and agree to weaken the EU as a common structure, paying inflated duties on American products and eliminating the trade deficit in relations with the US, and eventually agree to lift sanctions and restore economic and

energy cooperation with the Russian Federation. An additional obligation should be the EU's readiness to take on security guarantees for the entire continent and financing Ukraine's reconstruction. However, threatening, the value split between the EU and US should not be overestimated: the Biden administration had a much more complementary course toward Europe, the US population signals value kinship precisely with Europe, so rebooting the political cycle in the US could smooth out the indicated splits. At the same time, taking lightly value rejection of liberal Europe, at least in short- and medium-term perspective for the EU means practicing dangerous blindness.

Third, the attack on Europe also has a purely economic dimension. Even in the narrower sphere of weapons production, despite the aforementioned fragmentation of the local defense complex, European manufacturers provided high quality of individual elements of military nomenclature, and therefore traditionally acted as competitors to the United States in the weapons market. More broadly – from aerospace to digital sphere, from banking services to agricultural practices – EU and US economic interests sometimes find themselves on collision courses or even moving in opposite directions. Accordingly, the Trump administration may seek to weaken an economic competitor. In this regard, a self-sufficient "Fortress Europe" does not correspond to Washington's interests, and therefore it will undermine attempts to build European security architecture.

Fueled by the three indicated motives, Trump's policy of undermining EU security has echoes at the level of union and individual member countries. Demonstrative change of US policy and priorities, on one hand, and substantial unreadiness for independent defense maximally sharpened splits between pro-American states ready to fight to maintain US involvement to the last even contrary to European interests, and those that look at prospects of preserving American protection in a more pragmatic way. There are also those who believe that Russian aggression does not pose direct security threats, and therefore they propose a broad definition of security to get the opportunity for additional investments in welfare and social policy, contrasting them with militarization. Overcoming these divisions often slows down and reduces the ambition of plans for building European security order, while there are no supranational powers that could solve this problem given the purely intergovernmental and consensus method of decision-making in the field of security and defense. One should also not ignore the fact that the change of American position to favorable toward the Russian Federation, support for pro-Russian forces in Europe give new breath to appeasement initiatives.

Ukraine in European Security Order

In the medium term, Ukraine must by all means promote the fundamental goal of its foreign policy – transformation into a component of European security architecture. As of 2025, the American side's readiness to accept the Russian Federation's thesis about preventing Ukraine from joining NATO as a basis for further attempts to settle the Russia-Ukraine war becomes increasingly obvious. However bitter this thought may seem, given the dystrophy that NATO will continue to experience, the value of belonging to the organization does not seem absolute. That is why Kyiv needs to shift emphasis from NATO and focus on the equally fundamental issue of overcoming the existential threat in the face of the Russian Federation, namely the scenario of Ukraine's "Finlandization". Moscow is not accidentally aggressively promoting demands for Ukraine's neutrality and reduction of cooperation with European partners: these two steps would mean preserving resource asymmetry in the "Ukraine-Russia" dyad, and therefore danger to Ukraine's national sovereignty. Accordingly, Ukraine must change the dyad either to the "Ukraine-Russia-EU" triangle, or to a network of "Ukraine-Russia-country A, B, C" polygons and thus restrain the potential of Russian expansionism.

Within the general framework of destroying fundamental Russia-Ukraine asymmetry, the main tasks currently are:

▶ Maximum use of available European military capabilities and military assistance.

▶ Rapid and deep integration of Ukrainian and European security industries, forming these capabilities in a direction that will increase defense capability.

▶ Implementation of security component in the process of Ukraine acquiring membership in the European Union.

For Ukraine's strategic interest, it is important that the European Commission already considers sectoral integration of Ukraine into the European security and defense system as a priority and maximally promotes this within its own powers. It is necessary to strengthen the track of interaction with the EC by working on those issues where the EC does not have such powers, namely: intensify work at the bilateral level, convincing governments and populations of individual member countries that Ukraine is capable of becoming a security guarantor and fundamental component of European security architecture. Within this work, it is also advisable to emphasize to partners that Ukraine in the Russian Federation's orbit (or even composition) would pose a challenge to their national security, responding to which would require even greater investment of efforts and resources from them. Figuratively speaking, it is more advantageous for them to have Ukraine on their bastion than under their walls.

Kyiv's main arguments in favor of the necessity of its participation in building European security architecture are (1) general deterrence potential embedded in the country's

geographical characteristics (wide rivers difficult to force; extensive territory suitable for "trade space for time" strategy; multi-million cities that can serve as outposts against the Russian army incapable of effective urban warfare), (2) access to know-how of modern technological digital warfare, (3) industry already adapted to the requirements of such warfare and having potential for expansion under conditions of additional financing, (4) large national armed forces, especially compared to European "bonsai armies". These four factors can play a decisive role in the EU's ability to confront the Russian Federation threat and play an autonomous role as security provider on the global arena.