

Europe between De Gaulle and Roosevelt

For decades those of us in Europe who called ourselves Atlanticists clung to the strategic relationship, indeed friendship, with the United States as the cornerstone of international security and world order. European soldiers died, fighting or keeping the peace, alongside American brothers and sisters in arms in theatres as far apart in space and time as Korea, Afghanistan, Iraq and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In those operations, France could always be counted upon to make a significant contribution. Today, France reportedly offers much of the intelligence Ukraine needs to defend itself against Russia's invasion. French forces have also deployed to Greenland to demonstrate the willingness of NATO's European pillar to protect it, and at the same time signal to President Trump that America and Europe share an interest in upholding the principle of territorial integrity.

Despite France's loyalty towards its NATO allies, France always maintained a degree of military independence from the USA and insisted that it was in Europe's interest to do the same. The argument, simplified, was: you never know how circumstances may change and Europe must be able to defend itself at all times. As De Gaulle put it: "States don't have friends, just interests." Circumstances may change and if they do, interests and alliances may change, too.

Today, France's armed forces are the only ones in the EU with a full-spectrum capability, based to a large extent on domestic technology and intellectual property. Its nuclear force de frappe today is a credible deterrent for the whole of Europe. France and Great Britain are Europe's only two nuclear powers, the difference being that French missiles are French made, while the Britain's trident missiles are made in the USA. An important question now is how to ensure that Germany, as the heart of Europe, and Poland, as the

key frontline state, can be brought under a European, i.e. French and British, nuclear umbrella more firmly.

Europe's free riding in NATO was wrong. Many warnings were ignored, such as the one by Robert Cooper, a former senior British and EU diplomat, who wrote 25 years ago: "If Europeans want to influence the United States they must bring something to the table – and that means military capability." Today, European societies face a painful adjustment as more capital will have to go into defence, at a time when capital is already scarce.

At the same time, there is a misconception among some US commentators that the USA did not benefit from decades of close relations with Europe. This narrative is wrong. Of course the United States benefited, witness for example how its big tech companies happily used the EU's internal market to roll out their products across Europe and achieve market dominance.

President Trump is right that Greenland is of strategic significance in terms of missile defence. And, as the Arctic Sea melts, new economic development opportunities arise, both in terms of trading routes and exploitation of natural resources. But the bullying tactics of President Trump is not the way forward and puts at risk the collective NATO alliance that has existed since 1948.

As the transatlantic alliance is no longer the safe bet Atlanticists thought it was, Europe has no other option than to become more self-sufficient. The European pillar of NATO should take much greater responsibility for protecting Europe's borders. This is not just about collectively owning AWACS planes. It also means redesigning European economies so that they can carry the weight of increased investment in security. The recently announced Germany fund, to be financed by an innovative blend of public and private

capital, reflects Berlin's sense of urgency and could be a way to stem industrial decline. Other European countries should follow suit.

"Speak softly and carry a big stick", Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously said. It is still good advice, also for Europe's leaders. Deploying troops to Greenland is the right thing to do in the short term, as is not giving in to tariff-pressure. That said, in the next few days, European leaders should choose their words carefully and keep open a pathway to normalisation of relations with Washington D.C. At the same time, Europe must preserve its industrial base, develop its military capabilities, stay focused on Ukraine, and further develop its economic relations with other parts of the world. At some point, Washington D.C. will realise that America's might does not make right and has its limits.

Russia was the threat in 1948. Today, Russia is shelling and killing Ukrainian civilians. That is the sombre truth and the reason why all European NATO nations need to spend more on defence. Of course, we can still hope an opportunity will arise in the future when we can look to normalise relations with Russia. The priority now is for Europe to stay relevant economically and militarily. A Europe that brings capability to the table is less likely to be disregarded.

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