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Asia: Valtioneuvoston ajankohtaisselonteko ulko- ja turvallisuuspoliittisen toimintaympäristön muutoksesta

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The (In)dispensable Ally: How to Recraft the Pillars of Europe's Security¹

The world order is undergoing an upheaval at least as radical as the end of the Cold War. At the same time, the overall security situation in Europe is weaker than ever after the end of WWII, with a major war on the continent continuing for the fifth year, a collapse of transatlantic trust, and a revanchist Russia that Europe is not ready to deter on its own in case the US withdraws or considerably reduces its contribution. Many, if not all, key pillars of our security are under enormous strain: the transatlantic relationship, European integration, and international law.

Can Europe defend itself?

First, our defence relies on NATO, with the US playing an indispensable role in the Alliance in terms of both political leadership and military capability. Under the second Trump administration, however, **the US has made clear that it expects Europe to take over responsibility for its conventional defence.**

At best, this can happen gradually in the spirit of burden-shifting, but the possibility of a more abrupt abandonment cannot be excluded. The US no longer shares European threat perceptions regarding Russia and no longer endorses the core principles of European and international security, such as sovereignty and territorial integrity. Its demands on Greenland and Ukraine have made this plain. Even if the American positions on Russia, Ukraine, and Greenland may well change under the next president, **the strategic shift away from Europe should be seen as a long-term trend, irrespective of who sits in the White House.**

For many European leaders, the dilemma of whether to make every effort to further deepen ties with the US to avoid abandonment or to actively seek ways to reduce dependence has been too sensitive to discuss publicly. Some have denied the dilemma, arguing that strengthening Europe's defence capabilities serves both goals: increasing the likelihood of continued US engagement and preparing for its possible withdrawal.

In practice, however, the two are difficult to reconcile. If the priority is to maintain the US commitment, it is essential to buy American equipment and back US foreign policy positions that have increasingly contradicted European security interests. If the goal is to reduce dependence, **it is necessary to invest more in the European defence industry and build up European capabilities in areas where NATO has so far relied heavily on the US**, such as long-range strike capability, air defence and intelligence.

Moreover, Europe needs to adapt its defence to the rapidly changing nature of warfare that is playing out in Russia's war against Ukraine. As the US–Israeli operation against Iran

¹ Lausunto pohjautuu artikkeliin [The \(In\)dispensable Ally: How to Recraft the Pillars of Estonia's and Europe's Security - International Centre for Defence and Security](#), 13.05.2026.

has revealed, even the US is ill-prepared to counter attacks of Iranian drones. In this new way of war, Ukraine has more experience and expertise than any other country in the world, but the US has blocked its accession to NATO.

NATO defence plans are currently based on the assumption of a strong and unwavering US contribution. Yet Europe also needs to prepare to defend itself without US support if need be. Many European leaders have been understandably cautious when discussing such plans in public—to avoid precipitating US withdrawal. But the discussions have gathered pace behind closed doors.

The EU complements NATO defence

The second major pillar of Europe's security and well-being is the EU. For European states, this has always entailed the dilemma between national sovereignty, on the one hand, and greater influence over external decisions and developments that affect people's lives and condition national decision-making, on the other. The deeper the integration, the sharper the dilemma.

Several member states have consistently opposed extending the qualified majority vote in EU foreign policy, arguing that the veto right increases the country's influence, since other member states are bound to take this possibility into account. Yet the EU's decisions regarding the war in Ukraine have repeatedly been blocked, delayed, or watered down by the unanimity rule—in a manner that has worked against Europe's vital security interests.

Deeper integration is seen by many Europeans as a solution to the EU's weak international influence and competitiveness. Many also look to the EU for a stronger European defence. However, **strengthening European defence within the framework of NATO is a more realistic path.** The EU's increased support for the European defence industry and innovation complements the goal of Europeanising NATO. Building new defence structures under the EU framework—from command structures to defence plans—would take time and resources that Europe currently lacks.

Another factor that adds pressure to deepen integration is enlargement, which the EU nowadays defines as a geopolitical necessity. In the case of Ukraine, one condition for full membership is the end of the war, which is currently not in sight. However, no matter when the war ends, **Europe needs Ukraine to build up a credible European defence against Russia.** It therefore needs to find a way to integrate Ukraine into the European security system. Ukraine's supporters have to look for creative solutions that are not premised on the end of the war or on internal reforms in the EU—but rather on gradually integrating Ukraine into Europe while the conflict continues.

The old tension between values and interests in a new shape

The third pillar of European security has been a firm attachment to international law. Many European states, especially small states that rely heavily on US security guarantees, are now finding it hard to reconcile the sharpening tension between international law and security interests or, more broadly, between values and interests. This is, by no means, a new challenge, but its scope is unprecedented now that the disregard of the current US administration for international law and democratic values marks a radical break from the

decades-long role of the US in upholding the rules-based order and leading the free world, however imperfectly.

A further challenge is that **the transatlantic relationship increasingly involves not only choices between values and interests, but also divergent security interests between the US (as perceived by the current administration) and Europe.** When the US lays claim to Greenland or puts pressure on Ukraine to cede territory to Russia, this violates the core European principles of territorial integrity and the inadmissibility of changing borders by force. These examples underscore that for small states, values and interests are closely intertwined, since they cannot impose their will on others as major powers often do.

However, international law does not, in itself, protect small neighbouring countries of Russia—it never did. When the US still cared about defending the rules-based order and democratic values, these provided a foundation for the transatlantic Alliance and the US' willingness to defend its European Allies. Now, the foundation is gone, and European NATO states struggle to make themselves useful to their main Ally in the spirit of transactionalism. The dilemma between values and interests can hardly be resolved by endorsing US foreign policy adventures that run counter to our own values, principles, and interests. **If the US no longer cares about territorial integrity or freedom of Russia's neighbours, American security guarantees are at best volatile—and at worst, they lack credibility.**

If the US is indispensable, then Europe is doomed

All of this leaves us in a situation where the strategy of relying on the US has become increasingly unsustainable. Yet we lack a viable alternative in the short term. **Nordic-Baltic countries have taken important steps to adapt to the deteriorating security environment by strengthening their national defence, enhancing regional cooperation, and leading the way in European support for Ukraine,** especially since US assistance has all but ended.

The big question is whether we are doing the right things to prepare for a possible US withdrawal and to craft European deterrence against Russia that would not collapse without the Americans. Washington has been an indispensable Ally for decades; yet continuing to call it indispensable suggests that Europe is doomed. The change required from Europe is not only to rearm and reduce dependencies, but also to reshape our narratives and mental maps. The dilemma of whether we precipitate US withdrawal by preparing for it constrains us.

Future generations will judge whether the choices European countries make today are sustainable. Are we clinging on for too long to an Alliance that has become dysfunctional and unreliable? Or are we turning into prudent realists who learn to be transactional and compromise our values and principles in order to survive in the new world of power politics? Are we refusing to forge a new strategy out of fear that it will weaken our security, even though the old one is falling apart?

The decisions we make today are existential for our future. Fudging choices and maintaining ambiguity may be a good approach up to a point. However, this moment calls for a serious rethinking of the pillars of European security. Our ambition should not only be to survive and overcome the current period of turbulence, but to shape the future European security order.