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With Friends Like These: How the United States Can Foster the European Union's Strategic Autonomy

By Juan Garcia-Nieto

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The partnership between the United States and the European Union (EU) is largely a successful one. Europe, once a continent ravaged by wars, achieved an unprecedented level of political and economic integration. However, the transatlantic relationship rests on a deeply flawed assumption: that the United States should be the security guarantor of Europe through its unparalleled military prowess. This hinders any EU progress towards its strategic autonomy. For this paper's purposes, strategic autonomy is understood as the capacity for the EU to conduct a defense and security policy in line with its own interests, independent from other powers. As Daniel Fiott explains, autonomy can be likened to a responsibility to take charge of its own affairs.¹ But for a responsible EU to emerge, the United States must change its ways.

Maintaining military primacy in Europe has been in the interest of the military-industrial complex (MIC) entrenched in U.S. statecraft, but is at odds with the balanced, prudent strategy which the United States needs in order to foster the EU's strategic autonomy (EUSA). These two factors (the absence of strategic autonomy, and the MIC's influence over American foreign policy) are two sides of the same coin.

This paper integrates the foreign and the domestic dimensions of American foreign policy towards the EU in order to lay out a better way forward. To improve the foreign dimension, a restrained strategy will need to change the way in which the United States engages with the EU. U.S. policymakers should also steadfastly support the projects put forward by the EU to enhance its defense integration.

But reining in the MIC is a precondition for an autonomous EU. Tackling the domestic dimension involves a combination of legal and institutional reforms aimed at, among other factors, improving the oversight of arms sales and repositioning diplomacy at the core of American foreign policy. The leverage of the MIC can be curtailed, ensuring that it remains a tool at America's disposal, and not the other way around.

The MIC, American Foreign Policy, and the EU's Yearning for Strategic Autonomy

A core assumption of this policy paper is that the MIC's interests often do not align, and even contradict, American national interests. The MIC can be understood as the ensemble of stakeholders which comprise the defense industry in a country and which cooperate closely with the public authorities (especially the Department of Defense), thus influencing the government's policies, particularly in foreign affairs.² In the United States, President Dwight Eisenhower's famed farewell address featured the first warnings against the growing size and influence of the MIC.³ A few defense contractors make up the bulk of the oligopolistic MIC: Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon and General Dynamics constituted 58% of the weapons systems produced during the Biden Administration.⁴

For obvious reasons, the MIC is more interested in foreign interventionism, including in regions which are not of vital strategic interest for the U.S.⁵ There is a profit incentive to primacy that sustains this particular grand strategy.

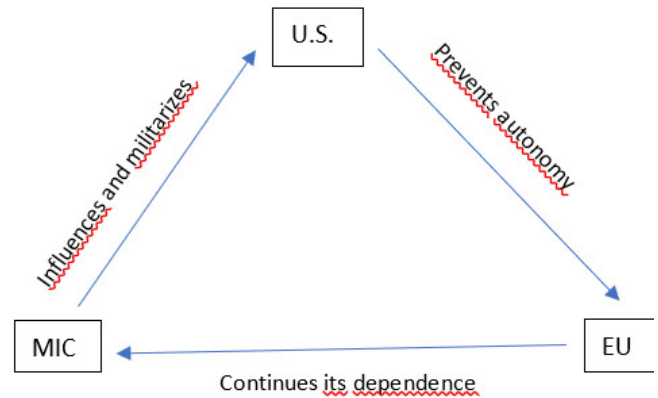
This premise is particularly visible in Washington's Europe strategy. In a multipolar era defined by the rise of China and the emerging centrality of the Indo-Pacific theater, it is in American best interests to scale down its commitments in Europe, and in so doing giving way to European strategic autonomy.⁶ In Mathieu Droin's and Christopher S. Chivvis' words, an autonomous EU would be a "pivot enabler".⁷ Besides, the EU is more capable of defending itself than its critics assume – if given the chance.⁸

The defense industry, however, has a direct stake in maintaining the status quo, which means preserving America's role as the main security guarantor in Europe. As this paper will discuss, the MIC benefits from the current fragmented scenario in Europe, torpedoing successive EU initiatives to harmonize and integrate its members' defense industries.

The interplay between the MIC, the American foreign policy elite and the EU can be understood as a triangle of interdependencies. The MIC uses its leverage to shape U.S. policies in Europe. In turn, American foreign policy unfurls based in large part on the interests and assumptions of the country's MIC,

thereby consolidating its military presence in Europe and, more broadly, its grand strategy of primacy. As a result, a fragmented EU continues tied to American defense industries, dependent on its weapons and leadership, and unable to decisively advance towards a European-led security framework.

Figure 1: The Triangle



This triangle becomes a vicious circle which both entrenches the MIC's role in American foreign policy and serves to justify this role in the first place, presenting the EU as a vulnerable, helpless actor whose only hope for survival is to be eternally tethered to the whims of American leadership. The two factors analyzed in this paper (the EU's paralyzed security and defense policy and the influence of the MIC over U.S. foreign policy) are two sides of the same coin and have to be addressed as such.

Thus, this paper attempts to answer the following question: how could the U.S. government promote EUSA while simultaneously curbing the power of the MIC in its foreign policy?

In Search of (Internal) Monsters

American foreign policy is intimately linked with a domestic creature of its own creation.

A key factor of the MIC is that it is a domestic issue intrinsic to the country not stemming from exogenous factors. America has limited power to shape international events, and no amount of legislation, policies or elections might change that. However, reining in the MIC, while a daunting task, is one that depends mainly on decisions made by U.S. policymakers. The MIC is a creature created by America, in America, and so it

befalls upon America to limit its power.

The stubbornness with which the United States clings to its Cold War-era role of the main security guarantor in Europe is one of many consequences of the undue weight of the MIC. Indeed, the relentless securitization and militarization of American grand strategy has been critiqued at length elsewhere.⁹ This proneness to project strength in theaters which do not constitute a direct threat to its national security interests contravenes John Quincy Adams' cautionary words in 1821, when he warned that America "goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy."¹⁰ Instead, the MIC has contributed to fabricating one monster after the other, stoking several foreign interventions and influencing the decision making at the highest levels of government.¹¹

The U.S. has therefore looked for monsters beyond its borders, but it has remained oblivious to the creature within its own territory. The vested interests of the MIC are at the heart of the foreign policy problem, and only by addressing it can the U.S. aspire to develop a coherent policy towards the EU independent from vested interests.¹²

The First Dimension: Restraint

Abroad

De-Americanizing the EU, Demilitarizing the United States

The Russian invasion of Ukraine precipitated a change in the foreign policy of many EU countries. Germany was particularly radical in the rupture of its longstanding Ostpolitik conceived to assuage Russia, at least in rhetoric.¹³ Chancellor Olaf Scholz gave a speech in which he announced a *Zeitenwende*: a paradigm shift in Germany's foreign policy. However, the United States also finds itself at a critical juncture, needing a *Zeitenwende* of its own.

America's *Zeitenwende* would entail reversing the post-Second World War paradigm, by which Washington is the main, if not only, guarantor of peace and stability in the Old Continent. Through its own troops, through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and through generous military aid, the United States has led the shaping of the security of modern Europe.

While reducing the U.S. troop presence, which currently stands at more than 100.000 (and growing), is one part of the story, U.S. strategy should look far beyond that.¹⁴ The United States has a near-monopoly on the security framework in the European continent, in large part due to its prominence within NATO.

The United States has already received criticism from Europeans due to its refusal to change its ways. French President Emmanuel Macron, for instance, criticized President Donald Trump's view of NATO as a commercial project by which the Americans provided an expensive security umbrella in exchange for the continuous purchasing of U.S.-manufactured weaponry and defense systems. This arrangement, in which Europeans are stuck in an American-shaped security framework while spending their money in American products was one which, according to Macron, "France did not sign up for."¹⁵ Nor did the EU as a whole, for that matter.

The fact that even its allies realize that the United States has a commercialized vision of its own stakes in Europe is very telling of the extremes to which the MIC has been at the helm of the country's foreign policy thinking. Profit-seeking by the military industry has trumped pragmatism and strategy.¹⁶ While it was during Trump's tenure when warnings such as Macron's were aired, the MIC's dominance over American foreign policy in Europe has been a constant for decades. Changing this commercialized mindset is the first step towards a more prudent policy in Europe.

American Primacy or Chaining of the EU

The problem at the crux of U.S. policy is that it has never actually supported EUSA. Rather, Washington's oft-repeated calls for European allies to "do more" on defense have mainly been limited to encouraging separate countries to increase their military spending.¹⁷ That does not solve the structural issue: European states will remain beholden to the American MIC unless the United States gives way to a remodeling of the continent's security architecture. The instances in which the EU has signaled its will to take up more responsibility in the continent's security have been met with opposition from Washington.

Two episodes epitomize America's longstanding rejection of an autonomous EU. The first one is Secre-

tary of State Madeleine Albright's speech in 1998, in which she warned EU leaders against the formation of a pan-European military force, as had been recently agreed between the French and British governments.¹⁸ The speech used a markedly aggressive tone: Albright warned that a distinct EU defense framework could risk delinking the EU from NATO, duplicating existing efforts, and discriminating against the United States and its companies. These three Ds (avoid delinking, duplication, and discrimination) lie at the heart of continued American efforts to block EUSA. But they reveal something else: if carried out, the three Ds all affect the MIC – which, from Albright's perspective, had to be avoided at all costs.

First, an EU delinked from NATO would essentially mean that military companies would lose control over the lucrative EU market, as the United States would no longer have a seat at the table. Second, a duplication of efforts by the EU would similarly lead to a shrinking of NATO's (and with it, Washington's) importance in the region. Third, discriminating against non-EU military companies equates to the development of a European military base, harming the commercial interests of the American MIC.

A decade later, the Trump Administration, otherwise known for stridently calling out European freeriding, wrote two letters to the EU urging them not to sideline American defense contractors from the Permanent Structure Cooperation (PESCO) program. These policies would, according to the Trump Administration, discriminate against American competitors.¹⁹ The message was ardently clear: EU countries should spend more on defense – but only as long as American contractors are the ones who reap the profits.

These two examples from two different administrations (one Democratic, one Republican) show just how entrenched the idea of American military primacy in Europe is. Since the 1990s, U.S. leaders have “rarely entertained the possibility of a relationship based on partnership, rather than U.S. dominance” – specifically, of military dominance.²⁰ An American *Zeitenwende* indeed entails moving from a strategy of primacy to one of mutual partnership, from a military-first approach to a diplomacy-first approach.

It would seem that the military-first approach has always been the norm in American engagement with Europe. However, as the next section will show, the United States has in the past employed a diploma-

cy-based approach towards Europe.

Past Approaches, New Blueprints

A restrained foreign policy based on supporting EUSA should look back to the strategy pursued by the United States during the early decades of the European project.

The United States took a backseat during the European integration process starting in 1957 with the Treaty of Rome, which gave birth to the European Economic Community (EEC). This was not akin to isolationism: the United States was still part of the conversation, but it was not dictating its terms. Washington acknowledged that the formation of an autonomous European political community did not harm its vital interests. To the contrary, it could help them, as a united Europe would pose a more credible deterrent to the Soviet Union than its individual member states ever could separately.

Building on the Treaty of Rome, European governments increasingly took care of the continent's own economic and political affairs, building institutions of their own, leading up to today's EU in 1993. In the words of scholar Armin Rappaport, American support for the EU project was historic, as “it was the first time a major power fostered unity rather than discord among nations in a part of the world where it had significant interests.”²¹ This should be the blueprint for a U.S. strategy for the nascent military element of the EU – backing it, not leading it.

Ultimately, this approach was an unmitigated strategic success for the United States. The continent which had consumed so many of its military and economic capabilities, and which had dragged it into two world wars, nowadays enjoys an unprecedented record of peace and prosperity. In turn, this allows the United States to shift its focus to regions where its presence might be more crucial and its national interests are more threatened. Moreover, U.S. backseat diplomacy did not exclude the fostering of close relations between both sides of the Atlantic: the U.S. government and the EU remain close partners in trade, economic relations, culture, and education.

Importantly, the European integration process was always fostered from Washington with the understanding that the military aspect was left outside its scope. The United States encouraged the formation of the

largest common market in the modern era. It accepted the adoption of a European currency. It welcomed an unprecedented customs union. It supported the Eastern enlargement of the EU. But these developments were always predicated on the understanding that the military dimension of Europe fell under the scope of NATO. But times have changed.

Seizing Momentum

The United States has been fixated with viewing the EU as a political-economic endeavor. But today, having consolidated the single market, the common currency and the customs union, the EU is eyeing the security realm.

European countries have a sizable military base. As many analysts and scholars point out, the problem with a common European defense project is not mainly one of capacity, but one of lack of integration.²² However, recent trends point to an emerging consensus among EU institutions and member states that the security element of the EU ought not be neglected anymore and integrating the 27 national defense industries has emerged as a priority of the European Parliament and the Commission.²³

The United States should recognize this and follow the example set by itself in the past, facilitating but not leading the EU conversation on defense and security. Fortunately for both Washington and Brussels, there are promising developments pointing to the formation of an autonomous EU.

The European Defense Fund (EDF) is a program embedded within the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) and integrated in the 2021-2027 EU budget. It aims to foster cooperation among European contractors from different member states throughout the research, development, and acquisition processes, with an €8 billion budget to complement states' funding.²⁴ PESCO is another scheme including 26 out of 27 member states which, since its beginning in 2017, has launched four waves of multinational projects aiming at furthering defense integration and coordination.²⁵

Besides, the war in Ukraine has prompted a geopolitical awakening for most EU countries. Its four largest member states (Germany, France, Italy, and Spain) all committed to increasing their military spending.²⁶

New alliances are emerging within EU member states. The Netherlands and Spain, which are often on opposing sides of the debates on common fiscal rules or economic integration, published a white paper in 2021 agreeing to push for an autonomous EU.²⁷ More notoriously, the Quirinale Treaty signed between France and Italy, the two EU members with the largest militaries, can serve as a steppingstone for a more cohesive defense integration.²⁸

In terms of specific projects, there is good news too: in November 2022, the German, French and Spanish governments announced an agreement on the Future Combat Air System, an integrated framework of weapons and systems (a "system of systems") which will receive more than €100 billion in funding.^{29 30}

The United States should seize this opportunity. Never before have the largest EU countries agreed in their security ambitions so clearly. France, under President Macron, has emerged as the main advocate of strategic autonomy. Washington should stand beside Paris's efforts, but it should also encourage the remaining EU governments to follow Macron's footsteps.

Backseat Diplomacy

Indeed, de-Americanizing Europe in the military realm entails supporting the EU's efforts to build an industrial complex of its own – namely, PESCO and the EDF. The specifics (for example, whether France will lead an EU defense union, or whether it will be a truly collective effort) should be for member states to decide and not a decision of the United States, in line with the backseat approach posited earlier in this paper.

Adopting a strategy of backseat diplomacy is different from strict neutrality. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is revealing fractures between the western EU members led by France and Germany, which have discreetly espoused a pragmatic approach to the conflict, and the eastern states led by Poland, Estonia, and others, which understandably view Russia as an existential threat to themselves and the EU itself. In that respect, U.S. policy should clearly support EUSA – signaling to the sceptics of strategic autonomy that the current security framework must evolve.

Unambiguously supporting the formation of a European Defense Technological and Industrial Base (ED-TIB) should be an utmost priority of the United States

because, even if overall military spending increases, the EU's dependence on the American MIC will persist.

There are already signs that much of the spending increase in Europe will be directed at purchasing military equipment and weapons from the United States.³¹ In some instances, American-made weapons will replace previous items: such is the case of Poland, which is looking to replace 240 Soviet-era tanks with state-of-the-art U.S.-made Abrams tanks.³² Warsaw also signed a \$4.6 billion deal for 32 F-35 fighters with the United States.³³ Germany is also buying American F-35s in the midst of their purported *Zeitenwende*.³⁴

The fact that EU members look across the Atlantic to upgrade their military (just as EUSA is picking momentum) is quite telling. Europeans still perceive the United States as the security guarantor, and the MIC, still their go-to supplier. Unless this premise is changed, strategic autonomy will be an unattainable dream. This is why the United States should complement its backseat diplomacy abroad with domestic reforms aimed at curtailing the MIC.

The Second Dimension. Restraint Within

The Arms Trade and the EU: Transparency

The MIC is essentially an actor (rather, a constellation of actors) operating in the United States, and so curtailment of its leeway over transatlantic relations can only be achieved by engaging in meaningful domestic reforms. This is why a pro-EUSA American strategy must be a double-pronged effort, looking inwards as much as looking abroad.

This chapter will go over the several ways in which legislative and political initiatives, strictly domestic in nature, could rein in the MIC and contribute to a progressive scaling back of U.S. security commitments in Europe, spurring the latter's autonomy.

Ensuring a constant flow of weapons sales sits at the heart of the U.S. strategy of primacy in Europe, as well as in other regions. Unsurprisingly, it is one of the least transparent aspects of the country's foreign policy. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), between 2016 and

2020, European countries have been the destination of 15% of total weapon transfers from the United States.³⁵ It is telling that European countries oversaw a 19% increase in arms imports between the 2012-2016 and the 2017-2021 periods, in contrast with the modest decrease in arms spending globally during the same time frame.³⁶ American arms exports also grew (14%) between the same periods.³⁷ These two trends are turning Europe into a new "hotspot for arms imports" in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, according to SIPRI expert Simon Wezeman.³⁸ Unsurprisingly, most arms imports will continue to come from the United States.³⁹

Therefore, increasing surveillance over weapons sold by the United States is of particular importance now, as Europe emerges as one of the epicenters of the arms trade. The Biden Administration should first take strides towards ensuring a higher level of transparency. The Administration's record so far, however, is disappointing in this regard.

In early 2022, the Biden administration scrapped the World Military Expenditures Arms Transfer Report (WMEAT) for the first time since its adoption in 1994.⁴⁰ This will negatively affect the public's access to information on weapons sales to EU member states, making it harder to fully understand the scale of their dependence on American arms suppliers.⁴¹

The sudden cancellation of the WMEAT is not the last instance of this turn towards opacity in arms sales. The Section 655 Reports, which used to be a reference point on the arms trade, have undergone severe changes over the last years, gradually becoming less and less detailed and meticulous. Section 655 of the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of 1961 requires that the U.S. government publish the eponymous reports, and Section 38 of the Arms Exports Control Act (AECA) of 1976 reinforces this.⁴² However, both laws are relatively ambiguous when it comes to requiring a detailed breakdown of the exports.

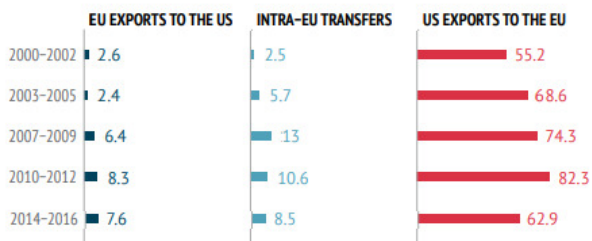
Amending these two acts by adding provisions demanding a much higher threshold of detail on the quantity and quality of the arms exported would enhance oversight. Additionally, the WMEAT or an equivalent report should be reinstated.

In particular, when it comes to arms sales to risky countries, the U.S. government should factor in the risks associated with providing weapons to those countries.⁴³ Due to the current war in Ukraine, which

makes the situation in Eastern Europe (and in extension to the EU) increasingly volatile, all branches of government should demand a higher increase of scrutiny.⁴⁴ The U.S. should be aware that Eastern EU states tend to be more hawkish towards Russia, which could increase the risk for escalation in the area.⁴⁵

The Arms Trade and the EU: Scale

Figure 2: Arms trade between the U.S. to the EU, and intra-EU transfers, in \$ billion.



Source: European Institute for Security Studies

Besides transparency, a second issue in the U.S.-EU arms trade is one of scale. Indeed, the primacy of the U.S. in the weapons market is daunting – a reminder that, when it comes to security, the U.S. clings to a commercialized view of the EU as a client and subject, not a partner. According to the State Department, the cumulative value of EU arms exports to the U.S. was roughly \$15.9 billion in the 2010-2016 period.⁴⁶ This is only around 10% of U.S. arms exports to the EU in the same six-year period, standing at a staggering \$145.3 billion. Revealingly, intra-EU transfers were estimated at a modest \$19.1 billion.⁴⁷ By undercutting efforts from the EU to create a military-industrial base of its own, most recently through Trump’s hostility against EDF, the United States is flooding Europe with its weapons and equipment, remaining at the service of the commercial interests of the MIC.

Reciprocity should be at the core of the U.S. strategy towards the EU going forward. It is not realistic to expect that the United States will open its domestic military market for reasons of national security concerns – and rightly so. But it should not expect its allies to give unencumbered access to U.S.-based companies either. Besides, despite the outcry against the protectionist elements of the EDF, the EU internal market conditions will still be more advantageous to Ameri-

can MIC companies than the opposite.⁴⁸ And, due to the persistent shortcomings in the military industries of many EU countries, American products will remain attractive in the foreseeable future, invalidating the claims that an autonomous EU would be completely cut off from American suppliers.⁴⁹

Adopting a hostile attitude (like that of past administrations) against the development of the EDF and a broader common intra-EU defense market could prove counterproductive, as it could further alienate allies and entice them to enact even stringer restrictions.⁵⁰ Access to other markets, if not monopolistic, is beneficial to the United States and its companies. But access should be gained through bona fides engagement, and not coercion, especially with long-standing allies.

Bullying the EU: the Two-Tiered Lobby

While the defense industry is a powerful domestic interest group, what is sometimes ignored is that its lobbying efforts transform the United States into a lobbying entity itself. The MIC does not have the institutionalized corpus to deal directly with foreign governments, but it need not anyway: the American government lobbies on its behalf.

Indeed, the United States has long acted like a prolongation of the defense establishment, either surreptitiously or overtly acting against EUSA. Reverting this dynamic means turning the MIC into a branch of the U.S. government’s statecraft, as is the Department of State or the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Presently, it is the other way around.

The U.S. lobbying efforts have often been channeled through NATO or via bilateral relations with its member states.⁵¹ This is in line with its aforementioned fixation on viewing the EU as an exclusively political-economic actor, ignoring its security ambitions.

However, President Trump’s hostility against EUSA-directed initiatives was very brazen and direct (to a degree not seen since Albright’s “Three Ds” speech), especially following James Mattis’s departure as Secretary of Defense.⁵² The arguments advanced by the Administration to criticize and block initiatives such as the EDF and PESCO were mainly not of a strategic nature.⁵³ Instead, the goal was to uphold the privileged position of the U.S. military

industry as the EU's main source of weapons, hinting at potential retaliation if the EU were to jeopardize it.⁵⁴ This dynamic is understandably perceived from Brussels as blackmail.

This underscores the premise outlined at the onset of this paper: the United States does not share its interests with the MIC, but allows the interests of the latter to prevail, sacrificing strategy to the benefit of military primacy and, in the process, losing the trust of longstanding allies.

During the discussions leading to the EDF, U.S. officials adopted a strategy of divide and conquer, aware of the myriad of actors, states and companies involved. This concerted effort took diverse shapes, ranging from lavish dinners hosted by high-ranking U.S. officials or invitations to the Pentagon or even the White House to the EU member states deemed more skeptical of EUSA, to encounters of a more bullying nature, such as a "lecture" given to EU ambassadors by senior American official Michael J. Murphy, aggressively cautioning them against the protectionist provisions of the EDF.^{55 56}

European officials have rebuked the conduct of Trump officials, most of all the former U.S. Ambassador to the EU, Gordon B. Sondland, one of the staunchest opponents of the EDF and EUSA more broadly. As the former Vice President of the French Senate recalled, "in linking the European Defense Fund to NATO, the Americans now seem to correlate the solidarity of the alliance with the purchase of U.S. military equipment".⁵⁷ The Trump Administration indeed adopted a "parochial" posture, defending American military companies and their unrestricted access to EU defense initiatives.⁵⁸ At the same time, his Administration defended a markedly protectionist agenda in the U.S.

In the past, U.S. pressure against EU projects threatening the position of the MIC has already hampered projects devised to enhance EUSA. The Galileo satellite system proposed by the EU in the early 2000s

intended to reduce dependency on American GPS technology – operated by the U.S. Armed Forces.⁵⁹ The U.S., fearful that Galileo would affect the companies involved in GPS, lobbied against the project in its early stages.⁶⁰ Then Deputy Secretary of State Paul Wolfowitz sent a letter to all the EU military ministries rebuking Galileo. This emboldened EU leaders to press forward with the project (ultimately activated in 2011), highlighting that American lobbying against EUSA only unites European countries in their opposition to the U.S.⁶¹

America's Soft Power Toolbox

Even with support from the EU institutions and several countries, achieving an autonomous EU will be no easy task. The United States should be a reliable partner of its European allies throughout the process. It should unambiguously and publicly call for a more cohesive and integrated common military and security framework. The United States should make it clear to EU members that it supports EUSA, including to those nations more skeptical about it. To make an autonomous EU a reality, the United States has several tools of a different nature which it could utilize, in stark contrast with the militarized, often bullying approach it has prioritized so far.

One of these tools involves, perhaps paradoxically, the MIC. As has been discussed, the main shortcoming within the EU is its lack of defense integration. Deepening integration is the goal of initiatives such as the EDF and PESCO.⁶² But while this occurs, the United States could still have a role to play. U.S. policymakers should identify the key sectors in which a pre-autonomous EU would be vulnerable and target military aid to them.⁶³ Some such shortcomings (such as military readiness and enabling systems) are already well-known.⁶⁴

Additionally, a sensible approach would be for the United States to devise a timeframe in which the different elements of EUSA (technology, enabling systems, etc.) could be realistically achieved, after which military aid should be much more limited – not least because the EU would have the capacity to defend itself. Temporary and conditional aid, tailored to address only the critical gaps in EU defense systems, would both avoid alienating European states while allowing for a gradual scaling down of American involvement in the continent (including a progressive

withdrawal of troops).

The possibility of conditional aid has been already raised with respect to other alliances in which the United States bears a similarly high defense burden, such as Israel.⁶⁵ However, with regards to the EU, conditional assistance should not consist of indiscriminate weapons transfers, as this would be incoherent with the long-term goal of a U.S.-supported EUSA, and would ultimately prolong the EU's dependency on the American MIC. Instead, American assistance should mainly take the form of knowledge transfer and training in areas where the EU is lagging.

In essence, any U.S. support for the EU should henceforward be directed towards facilitating the path towards strategic autonomy.

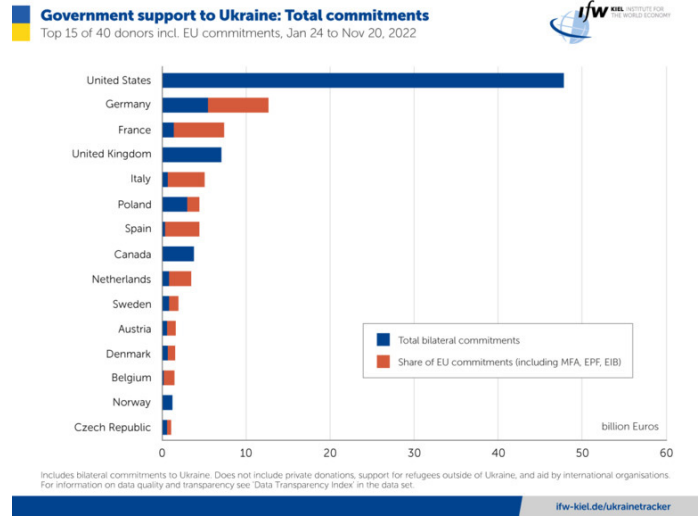
The United States should also ensure that career diplomats with little to no attachment with the MIC are at the helm of U.S.-EU relations. Figures such as former EU Ambassador Sondland, a realtor, have no formation nor deep knowledge of U.S. strategic interests. Career officials with a capacity to see the bigger picture and to understand the relevance of EUSA for American interests should be at the forefront of transatlantic relations. This should be in line with a broader effort to reposition the State Department and civilian-led bodies at the center of U.S. statecraft, which currently revolves around the Department of Defense.⁶⁶

From a diplomatic standpoint, in matters related to European security, the U.S. government should start dealing with the European Commission as the executive body of the EU. This would certainly not preclude bilateral relations between Washington and individual EU members, but it would ensure that the interests of the EU institutions (which are, by their very nature, more interested in EUSA than some of its member states) prevail over narrower national interests which would only entrench American military primacy in the Old Continent.

One specific way to realize this would be for the U.S. government to start a bilateral EU-U.S. summit in the style of NATO summits, but with the main goal of transitioning towards EUSA. EU-U.S. summits already occur yearly, but typically focus on other topics. With this, the United States would signal to its European allies that it shares its military ambitions in addition to the political-economic structure it once

supported.

The Bigger Picture: Ukraine



Source: Kiel Institute for the World Economy:
<https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>

Any discussion of the contemporary EU is incomplete without referring to the Russian invasion of Ukraine launched in February 2022.

The United States should stand against the brutality of President Vladimir Putin's regime in Ukraine by giving limited military assistance to Kyiv without risking escalation. The Biden Administration deserves some credit for the way it has navigated the conflict.⁶⁷ It has made clear that the United States will avoid being trapped in the conflict as a belligerent party, while doing its part to ensure that Russia does not subjugate Ukraine.

The United States was the second-largest supplier of arms to Ukraine (31% of total imports) from 2017 to 2021. Revealingly, the Czech Republic was, despite its small size, Kyiv's largest supplier during that period, accounting for 41% of Ukraine's arms imports, according to SIPRI.⁶⁸ This speaks volumes of the capacity of small countries to take up a bigger burden than previously thought. The 27 EU countries, plus NATO partners like the United Kingdom and Norway, have a modern, extensive military arsenal which, if properly maintained and integrated into a common defense arrangement, can constitute a credible deterrent against Russia in the future. This scenario was

played out by scholar Barry Posen, who concluded that European countries could fend off a Russian incursion in the Baltics even without American backing.⁶⁹

Having said that, the U.S. government has been by far the most steadfast supporter of Ukraine since the invasion started. The Kiel Institute for Economic Affairs estimated American military aid to be \$27.6 billion as of October 2022. Poland is the EU member committing the most military aid, but it only amounted to \$1.82 billion, while the figure for EU institutions stands at a meager \$2.5 billion.⁷⁰ When accounting for the percentage of GDP dedicated to aid, the United States leads the four EU largest members: Germany, Spain, France, and Italy.⁷¹

Actors within the U.S. military industry, aware of the potential profits from the war, have been the staunchest advocates of American deep engagement, angering EU countries in the process.^{72 73} While aiding Kyiv has been a relatively low-risk venture so far, flooding Ukraine with American weapons and equipment will only lead to its dependence on the MIC, replicating the triangle of dependencies which governs U.S.-EU relations. To avoid Ukraine's chronic dependence on the MIC, Washington should think about the long run.

This means, on one hand, to encourage the development of a Ukrainian military-industrial base. On the other hand, the United States should promote close cooperation between the EU and Ukraine in terms of defense and security – though it should not set the precise terms of their relationship.

The most positive element in this strategy is that the EU would almost certainly be on board. There is wide consensus on the need to integrate Ukraine into some sort of European community, such as President Macron's recent brainchild, the European Political Community (EPC).⁷⁴

Moreover, America should understand that its allies might not share its threat perception and its global view. Strategic autonomy is the only way to coherently translate these differing perceptions into reality. First, it would allow the EU to be the master of its own Eastern strategy and not follow American footsteps. Secondly, it would unshackle the Americans from long-term security commitments in a region less important to its national interests than to those of its

allies, allowing Washington to remain diplomatically engaged but militarily uninvolved.

The United States should learn from past episodes in which it imposed its views on its European allies. In 2008, the Bush Administration lobbied its European partners to back Georgian and Ukrainian ambitions of joining NATO, despite skepticism in Paris and Berlin.⁷⁵ Instead, a policy of backseat diplomacy should not only leave EU members to set the course of their neighborhood policy, but also encourage them to pursue it under the framework of the EU, not NATO.

Similarly, the United States should be involved in any future negotiations between Ukraine and the EU bloc and Russia if asked, though not as the main animator of diplomacy. Discreetly reaching out in private to President Ukrainian Volodymyr Zelenskyy, as the Biden Administration reportedly did to get a taste of the likelihood of future peace talks, is a step in the right direction.⁷⁶

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show that the U.S. government has a wide array of tools and measures at its disposal to promote an autonomous EU. However, one must not be naïve: EU member states have a lot to do too. It is the EU who is most interested in taking charge of its Common Defense and Security Policy, and so it is the EU who has to take the initiative in promoting its strategic autonomy. Admittedly, this goal will only be achieved if the United States does its part and incentivizes Europeans to gradually take up more of the responsibility. But the last word will be the EU's.

At the moment of writing, Germany has admitted that it is reconsidering its pledge made in February 2022 to increase the military budget until it reaches the requested 2% of its GDP.⁷⁷ This is an unfortunate development. However, Germany's hesitation should be viewed in a wider context.

The truth is that the discourse in Europe has been changing for years, and strategic autonomy is supported by all the relevant institutions in the EU. Words need to be translated into action, to be sure, but they are an unmistakable signal that things are moving. While member states undoubtedly disagree on the extent to which Europe should deepen its autonomy, the consensus within Europe is that the status quo is

unsustainable. In particular, EU governments agree that an EDTIB is key.⁷⁸

The Russian invasion of Ukraine could be a considerable setback on the way to EUSA, but it can also serve as a catalyst to consolidate it. Indeed, if both sides of the Atlantic realize that whatever the outcome of the war, it is in their best interests to set up a new security order in Europe led by the EU, the road to strategic autonomy will become smoother than it has been. A multipolar future might present complications to the transatlantic alliance, and win-win situations in which interests from both sides align might become rare. The United States should therefore embrace these instances and work together with its EU allies – keeping the MIC at bay and incentivizing Europeans to become autonomous. After that, only time will tell if the EU holds up its end of the bargain.

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