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Abel Romero Junquera

## Europe's growing concern for Defence issues. NATO as the only real option

### *Europe's growing concern for Defence issues. NATO as the only real option*

#### *Abstract:*

*The increasing global geopolitical tensions, in particular the war in Ukraine, has caused defence issues to be viewed with concern by Europeans once again. We analyse the capacity of the two main actors to address these worries, the EU, which despite speeches and ambitious declarations, only has the capacity to address crisis management tasks within . For deterrence and defence tasks within European territory, we can only count on NATO, which, after 75 years of successful history, remains a solid Alliance, despite voices talking about possible reduced US involvement with NATO, especially should Trump be elected President in November.*

*We analyse some of US geopolitical global concerns, which indicate that US should remain a reliable and committed NATO ally, the only organisation with real deterrence and defence capabilities on European territory, and we also address some of the current limitations and weaknesses of the EU on defence, identifying areas where Europe should move forward, with a view to build its own deterrence and defence capabilities, and above all to contribute, as the European dimension, to a stronger and more capable Alliance.*

#### *Keywords:*

*European Union (EU), NATO, geopolitics, Ukraine war, Trump, United States, deterrence and defence, crisis management, military capabilities, defence industry.*

**\*NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Documents** are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE) or the Ministry of Defence.

## La creciente preocupación de Europa por la defensa. La OTAN como única opción real

### Resumen:

Las crecientes tensiones geopolíticas, y en particular la guerra de Ucrania, ha provocado que los temas de defensa vuelvan a ser vistos con preocupación por los europeos. Analizamos la capacidad de los dos actores principales para enfrentar esta inquietud, la UE, que, a pesar de discursos y ambiciosas declaraciones, solo tiene capacidad de abordar tareas de gestión de crisis y no de disuasión y defensa en territorio europeo. Para esto contamos con la OTAN, que, tras 75 años de historia de éxito, sigue siendo una alianza sólida, a pesar de las voces que hablan de la posible menor implicación de EE.UU. con la OTAN, sobre todo en caso de que Trump fuera elegido presidente en noviembre.

Analizamos algunos de los elementos que nos indican que EE.UU. debería seguir siendo un aliado fiable y comprometido con OTAN, única organización con capacidad real de disuasión y defensa en territorio europeo, y abordamos las limitaciones y debilidades de la UE, identificando las áreas donde Europa debería avanzar, tanto para construir su propia capacidad de disuasión y defensa como sobre todo para contribuir, como dimensión europea, a una Alianza más fuerte y más capaz.

### Palabras clave:

Unión Europea (UE), OTAN, geopolítica, guerra de Ucrania, Trump, Estados Unidos, disuasión y defensa, gestión de crisis, capacidades militares, industria de defensa.

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## INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly convulsive strategic environment, we Europeans are feeling increasingly vulnerable, with conflicts in Ukraine, Syria, the Sahel, Gaza, and the resulting growing instability in the Red Sea, amongst other scenarios. The war in Ukraine has awakened Brussels, and has led to more and more talk of defence, of assuming our responsibilities, of rearming Europe, of providing the European Union (EU) with a military capability that Europe does not currently have, and even of creating the figure of a Defence Commissioner in Brussels.

Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of this new situation is that the concern seems to come more from Brussels, from within the European Community itself, than from the capitals of the Member States themselves.

In recent years, and particularly since February 2022, there have been continuous statements from EU elites. It is worth mentioning the President of the Commission herself, *Ursula Von der Leyen*, when she speaks of a geopolitical Europe, even of a geopolitical Commission<sup>1</sup>, of the responsibility that the Union has to assume responsibilities in defence matters, or of the challenge of working on the future of a European security architecture<sup>2</sup>. We can add statements by Council President *Charles Michel*, or by the High Representative *Josep Borrell*, who recently assessed that Europe is in danger and that Europeans are not always fully aware of this, or rather he compared Europe to a garden surrounded by an increasingly tense geopolitical environment that he likened to a jungle<sup>3</sup>. In a recent statement to the European Parliament (February 2024), *Mathieu Michel*, on Borrell's behalf, emphasised that security and defence must be Europeans'

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/meet-ursula-von-der-leyen-geopolitical-commission/>

<sup>2</sup> President *von der Leyen's* speech (28<sup>th</sup> February 2024) to the European Parliament Plenary on strengthening European defence in a fragile geopolitical environment. Available at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/speech-president-von-der-leyen-european-parliament-plenary-strengthening-european-defence-volatile-2024-02-28\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/speech-president-von-der-leyen-european-parliament-plenary-strengthening-european-defence-volatile-2024-02-28_en)

<sup>3</sup> The High Representative's speech at the College of Europe in Bruges (13<sup>th</sup> October 2022). Available: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-diplomatic-academy-opening-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-inauguration-pilot\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-diplomatic-academy-opening-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-inauguration-pilot_en)

highest priority, and that Russia's invasion of Ukraine marks a turning point in European defence<sup>4</sup>.

This situation forces us to ask whether Europe really has the capability to defend itself as a whole and on its own, and what is the truth behind the post-modern Europe that believed that wars on European soil were a thing of the past. We may also wonder what the EU's Member States have to say on the matter, especially given that the EU's foreign policy and particularly its security and defence policy are essentially intergovernmental. This is to say, they are the responsibility of the countries themselves, of their national governments, in a scenario where the Commission and the elites in Brussels play a very minor role.

As Borrell said, the Russian invasion marks a turning point in European defence; Europe must put security and defence at the top of its political agenda.

The following paragraphs are intended to reflect on how the defence situation in Europe truly stands, on the role of the EU, NATO, and particularly on the position of the different capitals, both European and non-European allies. This will allow us to assess whether we are really protected within this worrying geopolitical scenario; whether the situation in Ukraine has taken us by surprise, whether we have a reliable defence architecture, and finally, whether any circumstance could jeopardise it.

## **THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE “ALICE THINKING”**

In 1999 the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) was born in a Europe that considered wars between States (at least on European soil) to be a thing of the past, and which had internalised *Fukuyama*<sup>5</sup>'s hypotheses on the end of history and the triumph of liberal order and democracy. It was a unipolar moment in history, led by the United States as a benign hegemon, and where Russia itself was a friendly State to cooperate with.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-diplomatic-academy-opening-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-inauguration-pilot\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-diplomatic-academy-opening-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-inauguration-pilot_en)

<sup>5</sup> Fukuyama, Francis (1992), «El fin de la historia y el último hombre. La interpretación más audaz y brillante de la historia presente y futura de la humanidad», Barcelona, Planeta.

As reflected in its first European Security Strategy<sup>6</sup> (ESS) of 2003, the EU in line with Cooper<sup>7</sup>'s thesis, set itself up as an example of a<sup>8</sup> “post-modern” State, advocating a new order that does not rely on a balance of power, nor does it emphasise sovereignty or the separation between internal affairs and international relations, and which replaces traditional balances of power based on force and mistrust with a security that is built on mutual trust, transparency and common morals and principles that apply to international relations, as well as domestic affairs. This is the soft power Europe, underpinned by its constructivist discourse, and which for years has minimised the need for military power, which was in any case available via a NATO led by and with the military backing of the United States.

This soft power Europe coexists with a more realistic Europe, after all, most of the Member States have entrusted their defence to NATO. However, the situation could almost be defined as “*institutional schizophrenia*”, as the elites in Schuman Brussels are allowed and even supported<sup>9</sup> to continue building their own discourse on security and defence, when in fact there is no consensus on this. There is intense declaratory activity; there is talk of a European Army, of Common Defence, of a Europe of Defence, even of a global actor or of strategic autonomy in defence; concepts that are not always well explained, and usually interpreted differently by the parties, particularly the different national governments, usually in line with their own interests. We are more in the world of “wishful thinking”, of what should be or what we would like it to be, rather than what we can actually do; as Borrell would say, we are still living in our own garden, when the real world is a jungle.<sup>10</sup>

An example of these ambiguous statements or language is the very name of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), which since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty (2009) has been renamed, in an unfortunate way to say the least, as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The truth is that it is essentially an

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/documents-publications/publications/european-security-strategy-secure-europe-better-world/>

<sup>7</sup> Cooper, Robert (2003), «The *Breaking of Nations. Order and chaos in the 21st Century*», London, Atlantic Books.

<sup>8</sup> We have been so bold as to call it State, even though the EU is not formally a State but a confederation-like association of States

<sup>9</sup> In Brussels parlance, *Schuman* is used when referring to EU institutions, and *Evere* when referring to NATO institutions, clearly alluding to the districts of the European capital where the main institutional buildings or HQs of each of the two organisations are located.

<sup>10</sup> Borrell, *Op. Cit.* The High Representative's speech at the College of Europe in Bruges (13<sup>th</sup> October 2022)

intergovernmental policy and has very little, if any, element of "common or community". This "common" name could be framed more in terms of the desires and possible aspirations of some Member States, a small minority, and above all those of institutional Brussels itself, although, as on many occasions, all this remains in the realm of declarations and quite removed from reality.

As Professor *Baqués* points out many analyses of the EU, and we refer in particular to those relating to the construction of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and therefore also of the CSDP, to which we should add many of the declarations of EU elites, suffer from at least some, if not all, of the so-called (three) knowledge traps, namely: myopia (which is not visual but mental, preventing those who analyse reality from seeing "from afar"), *wishful thinking* or "Alice Thinking"<sup>11</sup> (the EU's original sin of utopianism, which is also independent of the ideology being defended), and overconfidence, which *Baqués* himself believes to be more a problem of conceit<sup>12</sup>.

The EU declared its intention to become a geopolitical actor, initially of a regional nature, as reflected in the ESS of 2003, although it had very little military muscle to do so. Subsequently, in 2016, and with the problem of military capabilities unresolved, the EU's vocation to become a "global geopolitical actor" was proclaimed (Global Security Strategy<sup>13</sup> 2016), in a clear example of "Alice Thinking", where Europeans mixed wishes with reality.

We should add that these are wishes of Schuman Brussels, of the European elites, rather than of the national governments themselves. Thus, by way of example, it is significant to recall that the Global Security Strategy of 2016 was simply noted, rather than approved, by the Council. This is a reflection of the fact that there is no clear consensus on the matter among the national governments, where many seek to maintain their own national agenda. As *Brezinski*<sup>14</sup> said, to be a geopolitical actor it is necessary to have will and

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<sup>11</sup> The "Alice Thinking", is the political philosophy that defends and pursues normally utopian objectives, without explaining how they will be achieved. Its name comes from the attitude of the character Alice in Alice in Wonderland. <https://www.abc.es/espana/catalunya/abci-pensamiento-alicia-200702210300>

<sup>12</sup> Baqués-Quesada, Josep (2023), «La construcción de una política exterior y de seguridad común en Europa. ¿Por qué es tan problemática?». Catarata, Madrid. Pp. 16-17

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs\\_review\\_web\\_0.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Brzezinski, Zbigniew (1998) «El gran tablero mundial. La supremacía estadounidense y sus imperativos geoestratégicos», Barcelona, Paidós.

capability, and currently in the EU there is no consensus among the Member States, so there is no real will. We should add we lack the military capabilities, at the European level, to be a significant player at the global level.

Although for more than a decade there have been clear signs of change in the global geopolitical scenario like the invasion of Crimea, the rise of China, and the US pivot to Asia, the trigger has been the Russian invasion of Eastern Ukraine, and the resulting open conflict in the region, which has definitely woken up Europe, and is behind the growing concern over security and defence issues, and particularly over Europe's own territorial integrity.

Given the logical concern over what is happening in Ukraine, and in the framework of a new global strategic scenario that goes back to competition between great powers and with a multipolar and thus more dangerous world, the question remains whether Europeans are prepared to face a military conflict in the territory of the Union, whether Europeans have a credible defence architecture in the face of a possible external aggression, with an increasingly assertive Russia and with the US seemingly distancing themselves from Europe in order to focus on their priority theatre of operations, namely, the Indo-Pacific.

## **THE TRIGGERS FOR DEFENCE CONCERNS IN EUROPE. THE OPEN CONFLICT IN UKRAINE AND *TRUMP'S* POSSIBLE COMEBACK**

Although there are a number of factors generating concerns about defence issues in Europe, two currently stand out above the rest: the conflict in Ukraine, in the far east of Europe itself, and the explosive statements by *Donald Trump*, who could win the presidential elections in November, about the future of NATO.

To analyse the impact of these two elements, it seems pertinent to begin by recalling the basic elements of Europe's defence and security architecture, and thus avoid the uncertainty that can be generated by certain statements or incomplete truths, which can lead us to a scenario that may not be entirely real.

### **Is Europe's current defence and security architecture still valid?**

Since the end of World War II and until the 1990s, the period of the so-called "Cold War", the security and defence of the Euro-Atlantic area, which logically included continental Europe, had been the responsibility of NATO.

At the end of the 1990s, in a Europe that had bled to death in the Balkans, the European Union (EU), with strong internal discrepancies and agreeing on the bare minimum, endowed itself with an ESDP, with the idea of making autonomous progress in crisis and conflict management, essentially in neighbouring territories, i.e. outside the Union.

As we analysed in previous documents<sup>15</sup>, the Saint Malo Declaration in 1998 served as a starting point and laid the foundations for this new European policy, which came into being in 1999. The basic elements contained in the Declaration were essentially that the EU was endowing itself, within the framework of security and defence, with its own autonomous (military) capability to act outside the territory of the Union and limited to crisis management operations, leaving NATO as the only organisation responsible for deterrence and defence tasks on European territory, in the territory of the Allies<sup>16</sup>. The ESDP was born with a strictly intergovernmental character, and thus it is the Council and the Member States that were to decide, thus preventing the Commission from having any kind of significant role in security and defence, as well as from claiming it in areas covered by the aforesaid Declaration<sup>17</sup>.

These principles, with minor amendments, were incorporated into the Treaty of Lisbon<sup>18</sup>, in the provisions on what is now known as the CSDP, particularly in Article 42, points 1) and 2)<sup>19</sup>. The Articles allow the CSDP to include a progressive definition of a Common

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<sup>15</sup> Romero, Abel, «25 años de la Declaración de Saint Malo, piedra angular de la Política Común de Seguridad y Defensa». IEEEE. Available at: [https://www.ieeee.es/en/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2023/DIEEEA82\\_2023\\_ABEROM\\_Declaracion.pdf](https://www.ieeee.es/en/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA82_2023_ABEROM_Declaracion.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Most EU countries have simultaneously been NATO Allies. Currently, with the recent accession of Sweden and Finland to the Alliance, 23 out of 27 Member States of the Union are also NATO Members States (all except Austria, Cyprus, Ireland and Malta), with these 23 countries accounting for almost 98% of the EU's territory and population.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, page 6.

<sup>18</sup> Signed by the Member States on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2007 and entered into force on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2009.

<sup>19</sup> The first two points of the aforesaid Article 42 on CSDP read:

1. The common security and defence policy shall be an integral part of the common foreign and security policy. It shall provide the Union with an operational capacity drawing on civilian and military assets. The Union may use them on missions outside the Union for peace-keeping, conflict prevention and strengthening international security in accordance with the principles of the United Nations Charter. The performance of these tasks shall be undertaken using capabilities provided by the Member States.
2. The common security and defence policy shall include the progressive framing of a common Union defence policy. This will lead to a common defence, when the European Council, acting unanimously, so decides. It



Defence Policy and to move progressively towards a Common Defence, if and when the European Council (Heads of State and Government) were to so decide by unanimity.

With minor nuances, which are not the subject of this analysis, we can say that the playing field was perfectly bordered. On the one hand, NATO was responsible for the defence of the territory of the EU countries that were in turn NATO Allies<sup>20</sup>, and on the other, the EU was given the capacity for autonomous action, using civilian and military means, although only for crisis management tasks, and always outside the territory of the Union. Given the intergovernmental nature of this new policy, decisions on security and defence have to be taken by the Council, in any of its formats, with the Commission having no powers nor significant role in this process.

Despite the rhetoric, and the numerous declarations from Schuman Brussels, more in the realm of wishes that based in reality, the rules of the game have remained practically unchanged for 25 years, and it is not foreseeable that they could be materially amended in the short term, as unanimity would be also required within the Council to do so.

To the first part of the question of, whether there is a security and defence framework to protect European territory, and we are essentially referring to a potential Russian attack on an ally, probably from Eastern Europe<sup>21</sup>, the answer is clearly affirmative, it is NATO, and this architecture has not changed in recent years.

However, and given the real possibility that *Donald Trump* could be elected in the November elections, his recent statements on NATO<sup>22</sup>, particularly on Allies that do not contribute enough to the Alliance, added to other actions during his past as US President,

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shall in that case recommend to the Member States the adoption of such a decision in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements.

The policy of the Union in accordance with this Section shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States and shall respect the obligations of certain Member States, which see their common defence realised in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), under the North Atlantic Treaty and be compatible with the common security and defence policy established within that framework.

<sup>20</sup> 23 of the EU's 27 Member States are NATO Allies (all except Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, and Malta, which are not covered by the Washington Treaty). These 23 Member States account for almost 97% of the Union's territory, 98% of the Union's population, and 98% of the Union's defence spending.

<sup>21</sup> Within a general concern in Europe, according to recent statements by national leaders, we can consider that the EU Member States and NATO Allies most worried about a possible Russian attack would be the three Baltic states, plus Poland, Sweden and Finland (for obvious reasons), and even Germany.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/11/world/europe/trump-nato-analysis.html>

such as the clash of views<sup>23</sup> with President *Macron* during the London Summit in 2019, have increased concern among Europeans about the real reliability of NATO, and the role of the US, which forces us to analyse the real position of this key Ally.

### **Will NATO remain reliable, and what can we expect from the United States?**

The question should be whether NATO will remain a strong Alliance in the future, and whether the US will remain an active, loyal and committed Ally of the Alliance. This question is pertinent against a backdrop of concern and some scaremongering expressed by various authors<sup>24</sup>, about the possibility that NATO could be a dead letter if *Trump* becomes President in 2024.

The main reasons attributed to *Trump* for threatening US commitment to some of the Allies, or even the very continuity of NATO<sup>25</sup>, is the lack of commitment of some of these Allies, which do not invest enough in defence, and which take advantage of US citizens' taxes. It is a somewhat dramatic rhetoric, more typical of a businessperson than a politician, but which, at the end of the day, only seeks greater involvement and commitment from NATO Allies.

While *Trump's* message can be described as populist, we should consider that a possible continuation of the *Biden* Administration would assume a similar discourse<sup>26</sup>, albeit possibly couched in more constructive and friendly terms. The underlying reasons for this discourse are not only political or related to defence spending, but also seems to have a strong geopolitical component and a review of the distribution of tasks, which has an impact on the structure itself and on the specific weight of the different Allies in the Organisation itself.

First of all, we should ask ourselves about the current need for NATO, about its relevance for the various parties, for the Allies. Considering the realist theoretical framework

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50641403>

<sup>24</sup> Such as Rohac, who argues that if *Trump* gets into the White House, NATO may be a dead letter, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2024, at: <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2024/03/07/65e1eb66fdddf8d2b8b456e.html>, or Fix and Kimmage, on *Trump's* threat to Europe; 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2024, at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/trumps-threat-europe>

<sup>25</sup> In statements made during his Presidency from 2017 to 2021, which ultimately remained mere rhetoric.

<sup>26</sup> The need for Europe to assume greater responsibility in defence matters is not a demand only made by *Trump*, but by both Republicans and Democrats. The 2% defence spending on GDP was agreed at the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, with the US under the Democratic *Obama* administration. *Biden* (Democrat) has reiterated on numerous occasions the need to meet this commitment.

provided by Steven Walt, an alliance<sup>27</sup> is defined as a commitment to security cooperation between two or more States, combining the capabilities of its members to defend their interests. It is an exclusive<sup>28</sup> institution where members engage and commit to support each other against attacks from States outside the alliance.

Based on the interests of the parties, Walt finds that alliances tend to disappear either when threat perceptions change, when credibility declines, or because of the domestic politics of their members. Conversely, they tend to be maintained when they have strong hegemonic leadership, when credibility needs to be preserved, and even for domestic political reasons (in the interest of the elites themselves)<sup>29</sup>.

In the case of strong alliances, Walt says they tend to survive even if the causes that gave rise to them change (the case of NATO), if there is a great asymmetry of power (the case of the US in NATO), and above all if the allies share political values, and if the relationship is highly institutionalised. He also argues that alliances tend to be more robust in a bipolar world than in a multipolar one, because the latter is more fluid and less cohesive at the allied level, and because the political powers are more, and have more options<sup>30</sup>.

Considering Walt's theoretical framework, there seems to be more reason for NATO to endure than to disappear, although in the current multipolar scenario<sup>31</sup> the convergence of interests may be somewhat more complicated.

While the Europeans are clearly interested in maintaining the Alliance, as it is the only solid and available defence organisation, and a Europe-only defence appears unfeasible, at least in the short-medium term. It also seems that the US is not interested in losing allies, let alone opening a front in Europe that it does not control. For more than a decade, and as reiterated in its latest National Security Strategy<sup>32</sup> (2022), the US's first priority

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen M. Walt (1997) «Why alliances endure or collapse, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*», 39:1, 156-179, DOI: [10.1080/00396339708442901](https://doi.org/10.1080/00396339708442901)

<sup>28</sup> They are about dealing with threats from outside Alliance Members, and they are never designed to solve problems between Allies.

<sup>29</sup> Walt (1997), *Op. Cit*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>31</sup> From a Western perspective, we could say that we have gone from a clearly bipolar world in the Cold War, to a unipolar time during the 1990s that has lasted until the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and has been evolving into a multipolar world, or what we could call a fragmented bipolar world, almost multipolar, where on one side is the US and its allies, and the opposite pole is made up of a sort of association of convenience of various actors, China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, against the established order.

<sup>32</sup> Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/8-November-Combined-PDF-for-Upload.pdf>

has been in the Indo-Pacific, which does not mean it wants to abandon the European theatre, where Russia, one of the poles of this new multipolar scenario, has opened a deep rift in Europe's regional security architecture.

There are strong geopolitical arguments that it is in the US's interest to maintain the Alliance. The map in Figure 1) graphically shows *Spykman's* thesis (1943), which has been the backbone of US foreign policy for the past 75 years<sup>33</sup>, that one of the main US objectives should be to prevent<sup>34</sup> a «*Heartland*» power from establishing a foothold in the «*Rimland*». These same ideas, were also advocated by *Bzrezinski*, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

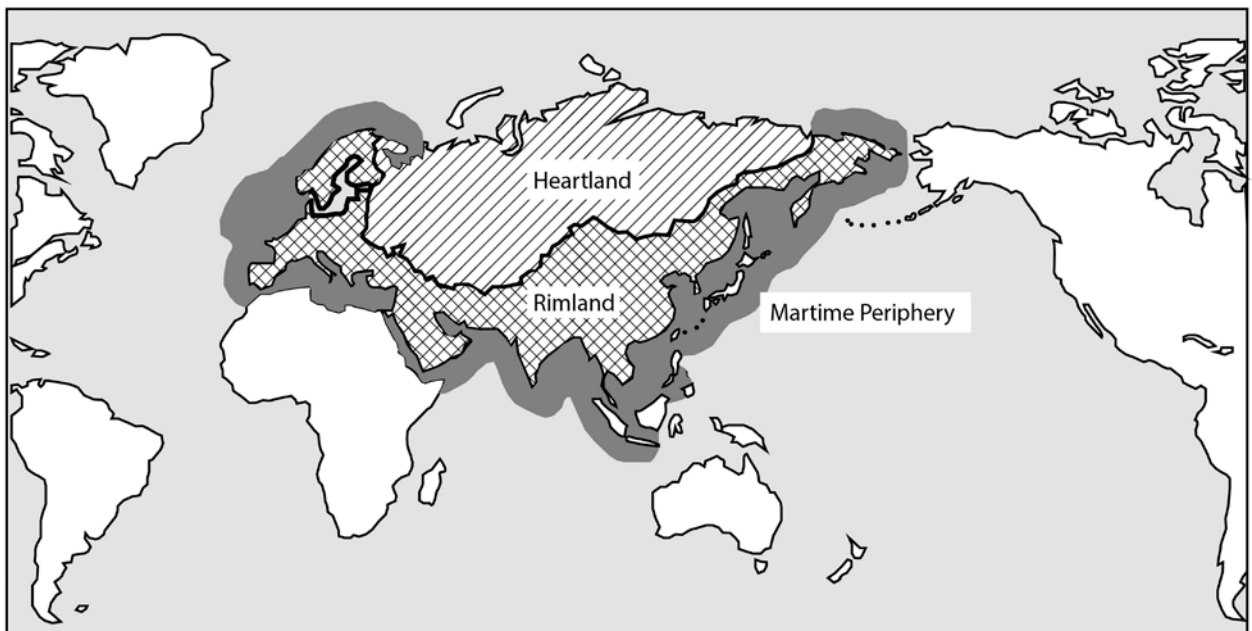


Figure 1. Spykman's interpretation of Mackinder's Island of the World from *The Geography of Peace*

Source: MITCHELL, Martin D. «Using the principles of Halford J. Mackinder and Nicholas John Spykman to reevaluate a twenty-first-century geopolitical framework for the United States», *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 39/5 2020, pp. 407-424. DOI: 10.1080/01495933.2020.1803709

Over the past 75 years, the US has controlled the *Rimland*, from Europe to Japan, on the basis of alliances, agreements and good relations in the countries of the Rim, the Arabian Peninsula, India and even Southeast Asia. The rise of China, and its status as a great

<sup>33</sup> Martin D. Mitchell (2020) Using the principles of Halford J. Mackinder and Nicholas John Spykman to reevaluate a twenty-first-century geopolitical framework for the United States, *Comparative Strategy*, 39:5, 407- 424. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01495933.2020.1803709>

<sup>34</sup> The main power in the *Heartland* would be Russia (for Mackinder the area extends to Central Europe, including Germany). It would also include northern China, as well as the Central Asian countries (which are not really powers). China is both a continental power and a Pacific *Rimland* power, which worries the US because of the need to control its ocean outlet.

power (essentially continental) located in the *Rimland*, which could cause a breach in "US control" of the Rim, has caused Washington's concern, and the shift of its foreign policy towards this area for more than a decade (*Obama's Pivot<sup>35</sup> to Asia*), to the detriment of Europe, where during the Cold War US efforts, through NATO, tried to prevent the USSR from accessing the European *Rimland*.

It seems unreasonable to think that, despite its current priority on the potential gap in Asian *Rimland*, the US would abandon the European scenario, leaving its NATO Allies alone in the face of a possible Russian threat to Europe, and thus to the European *Rimland* (notwithstanding the fact that Russia's "unlikely" real ability to invade part of Europe and reach the open seas is not assessed).

The US now faces a scenario with two possible gaps in Spykman's *Rimland* and can no longer devote all its efforts to Europe, as it did during the Cold War, and currently China is a more dangerous "gap" in relation to Russia. Thus, despite the rhetoric used at the political level, the underlying idea is that the US wants to involve and engage the European Allies in the Alliance more in helping to protect Europe's *Rimland*.

If we turn to the Pacific, Washington is demanding the same kind of effort from its allies in the region, namely, Japan, Australia and South Korea. The US, in a situation of slowly losing hegemony, in an increasingly multipolar scenario where it is no longer the only great power, needs its allies more than ever.

In addition to the theoretical arguments for alliances and the geopolitical reasons cited above, there are other fairly obvious historical, social, economic, commercial and cultural reasons that should contribute to strengthening the transatlantic link, and security and defence relations in the NATO framework. A stronger, more cohesive and more capable Alliance is in the interests of the Allies on both sides of the Atlantic and seems to be in keeping with Walt's theories.

## **WHAT DOES THE EUROPEAN UNION DO TO MANAGE ITS CONCERN FOR THE DEFENCE OF ITS TERRITORY?**

In the scenario described above, and assuming the hypothesis that the US will remain in NATO, that it will continue to be an active Ally, and that the Alliance will continue to be

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<sup>35</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/03/the-legacy-of-obamas-pivot-to-asia/>

the "insurance" for Europe's territorial defence, it seems reasonable that Europe, the European Union, should more actively assume greater responsibility for "its" defence.

The figures, to which *Trump* repeatedly refers, are that all Allies should contribute with at least 2% of defence spending in relation to their GDP. He believes that the US citizens are paying the "life insurance" contributions of the Europeans, as the differences between Allies are striking, with defence spending amounting to almost EUR 2,000 euros per US citizen, while the average for Europeans is just over EUR 500<sup>36</sup>.

The raw figures are clear: we are all members of a club where US citizens pay four times as much as the Europeans, although the interpretation of these figures is nuanced. Although we, Europeans, direct our (scant) defence spending essentially towards national interests (as we all do), we do so simultaneously and mostly towards NATO, since the use of military capabilities in the CSDP framework, which as we have seen only deals with crisis management, is no real significant to say the least. For its part, the US, as a global geopolitical actor (which the EU is not, at least not yet, despite the declaratory rhetoric of the Brussels elites and the aforementioned "Alice Thinking"), directs its spending towards military capabilities that enable it to have a global presence and act globally. In other words, not all US defence spending, and arguably not even most of it, is currently oriented towards NATO commitments or Europe.

By way of example, consider the use of its aircraft carrier groups. Of the eleven<sup>37</sup> the US Navy has, at least two or three tend to have a permanent presence in the Indo-Pacific, and the other two or so might be deployed in other theatres such as the Persian Gulf or even the Mediterranean, though not traditionally on a permanent basis. It seems reasonable then not to compare only the levels of defence spending between the US and its European Allies in absolute terms.

In any case, the most relevant factor is not the spending figure, as EU Allies spend around USD 250 billion a year on defence, which would be the second largest defence budget

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<sup>36</sup> Roughly calculated using the defence spending data included in the NATO Secretary General's Annual Report (2023), available at: [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/3/pdf/sgar23-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/3/pdf/sgar23-en.pdf), and population data for the various Allies.

<sup>37</sup> For the purposes of this analysis we can consider that of the 11 nuclear aircraft carriers the US currently has, it could have a maximum of four or five deployed simultaneously, the others being either in training or on maintenance. Having two or three deployed in the Indo-Pacific clearly shows the US's regional strategic priority.

globally, behind only the US (USD 875 billion)<sup>38</sup>. The problem is that the EU's defence capability is a chimera, as not only do the necessary military capabilities not exist, but they are also fragmented and too diverse.

In addition to the lack of capability as a whole, there is a deficiency of will among EU Allies to advance European defence in its truest sense. Differences in strategic culture, on threat perception among the different EU countries, the absence of clear leadership<sup>39</sup> accepted by all parties, the lack of consensus among national governments, and the prioritisation of national interests, amongst other reasons, have meant that the EU's progress in the defence dimension has been practically insignificant over the past 25 years.

Although, as we have seen, the security and defence architecture is clear and well defined in the Treaties, the rhetoric of Schuman Brussels<sup>40</sup>, with the support of some countries, defends the need to move towards "commonality" in foreign policy, security and defence in the EU. One of the proposals to progress on this, is to replace unanimity with qualified majorities, either by amending the Treaties (an option that is not recommended as it would open a box that might be quite difficult to close later) or without amending them, using the so-called footbridges. The reality is that unanimity, the current rule for taking decisions in this area, which in reality entails the "right of veto", is not the cause but the effect of disagreements between Member States<sup>41</sup>. It has been in force since the inception of the CSDP and unanimity would be necessary to change it.

As an example, Sweden, which recently joined NATO, opposed common defence in 1996, and (along with others) shielded its position with the aforesaid unanimity<sup>42</sup>. Its recent NATO membership, along with that of Finland, is an undeniable argument for the confidence of these two countries in the Alliance and an example of the EU's current lack of deterrence and defence capabilities.

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<sup>38</sup> Data from the NATO Secretary General's Annual Report (2023), cited in footnote above (36)

<sup>39</sup> Baqués (*Op Cit*, p. 79), emphasises that the idea that the EU can function without leadership in defence matters is nothing more than wishful thinking.

<sup>40</sup> Particularly the European Parliament, which published an interesting report on the subject in August 2023. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/740243/EPRS\\_STU\(2023\)740243\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/740243/EPRS_STU(2023)740243_EN.pdf). We recall that Parliament's real powers in defence matters are practically non-existent.

<sup>41</sup> Baqués (2023), *Op. Cit.* Pp. 130-132

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, pp....

At the moment, with a war on Europe's doorstep, which could have important implications for EU countries, St. Ignatius of Loyola's reflections on "making no changes in times of trouble" should guide Brussels' action, strengthening and consolidating the defence framework Europeans have given themselves, NATO, and overlooking or leaving for a better occasion proposals such as strategic autonomy, common defence, or even the EU's vocation as a global player.

If Europeans are not capable of ensuring their own defence within the EU, the EU will hardly have the capacity to be a global player, even if one is aware that this is more a Brussels wish than a demand or aspiration of the Member States, or of a majority of them. Do we Europeans want a global Europe, acting on behalf of the countries, or do many of these countries, particularly the larger ones (which are at best middle powers), prefer not to share with Brussels the leading role of their national governments in foreign policy and defence? The answer is quite evident.

Despite the rhetoric on the Europe of Defence, Brussels and the various national governments have for some years now been pursuing what might be called a *bottom up* approach, seeking to improve the military capabilities of European countries through cooperation (PESCO projects), and even involving the Commission to some extent, with funds to finance research and development in defence capabilities, with the idea of reducing the fragmentation and diversity of military capabilities. The idea is that the current 20% of defence spending, that the EU Member States contribute to NATO's total expenditure, should not only be increased in quantity, but that, by acting more cooperatively, efficiency, and above all effectiveness should be improved and the military capabilities of the EU's Allies, as a whole, should be increased in a real way.

These initiatives face numerous obstacles (national interests, national defence industries, competition between European countries' defence industries, and between these and those of the US, etc.), so being optimistic they could yield some results, possibly not decisive ones, in the medium or long term.

To this end, in order to organise a European Defence Industrial and Technological Base, which in some way integrates those of the nations, a very delicate balancing act given the interests at stake, it would also be necessary to have the indispensable support of the US, because if we want a capable European defence industry that contributes to



consolidating a solid European defence dimension within NATO, it seems reasonable for that the US defence industry to allow the development of European made armament, abandoning the intention to continue selling most of its products in Europe, as is currently the case (such as the F35<sup>43</sup>). The US cannot expect EU Allies to commit to contributing to more significant military capabilities, but at the same time for these to continue to be provided by US companies<sup>44</sup>.

Realistically, all these projects being built around the recently approved EU defence industrial strategy<sup>45</sup> is, as is usually the case in the Schuman Brussels bubble, very triumphalist, when the reality is that some progress may be made, even a little more than some, but not so much, as national interests tend to prevail.

By way of example, it should be noted that European countries with greater naval capacity tend to equip themselves with destroyer or frigate type ships in small series (normally between 4 and 8 units) of the same class, which are usually national built (in Spain, see the example of the F-100 (5), the F-110 (5) already under construction, and the foreseeable future F-120).

Can we expect this to change and for all European countries to opt for single models, as is the case with the US Navy, which essentially has two classes of escorts, the *Ticonderoga* and the *Arleigh Burke*? In terms of combat aircraft, the Member States are opting for the best of the available capabilities, such as the F-35 (European countries have already ordered almost 500 units, including the United Kingdom), without being able to wait, for obvious reasons, for the development of a future European aircraft, the FCAS<sup>46</sup>, which will take at least 15 years to become operational, and which, moreover, is initially being planned by France, Germany (together for the first time) and Spain, with

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<sup>43</sup> It is estimated that European countries will have more than 500 F-35 aircraft by 2030 (Germany, Italy, Belgium, Poland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland, the Czech Republic, as well as the UK, Norway and Switzerland.)

<sup>44</sup> Bergmann M. y Bersch, S, «Why European Defence still depends on America?». Foreign Affairs, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2024 Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/why-european-defence-still-depends-america>

<sup>45</sup> The recently approved (5<sup>th</sup> March 2024) "European Defence Industrial Strategy" aims to ensure that by 2030 at least 40% of defence equipment is procured in a coordinated manner amongst EU countries, with at least half of the defence procurement budget being spent on products manufactured in Europe, and at least 35% of defence products traded among EU countries rather than with third parties. Document available at: [https://commission.europa.eu/news/first-ever-european-defence-industrial-strategy-enhance-euro-pes-readiness-and-security-2024-03-05\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/news/first-ever-european-defence-industrial-strategy-enhance-euro-pes-readiness-and-security-2024-03-05_en)

<sup>46</sup> Future Combat Air System (FCAS). <https://www.airbus.com/en/products-services/defence/multi-domain-superiority/future-combat-air-system-fcas>

Italy, which seems to be opting for a joint project with the United Kingdom, among others, still missing.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The current situation of war on the EU's borders takes us back to the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, which we Europeans were unable to resolve, without US and NATO helping.

The war in Ukraine should serve as a catalyst for the EU to become fully aware of the need for Europe to equip itself with the necessary military capabilities, at least to make a significant contribution to its own territorial defence. It now has a solid and well-established defence and security architecture, NATO, a success story that celebrates its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, and which must be strengthened by a more capable and significant contribution from the European allies.

The commitment of the US as a loyal ally of NATO, ignoring *Trump's* alarmist rhetoric, with more electioneering and populist aims, seems likely to continue whoever the next US President is, for geopolitical reasons, because it is an alliance that suits all parties, in addition to other historical, economic and social reasons.

The EU has never been a military power, and despite years of rhetoric and declarations about the EU as a global actor, Common Defence, or the European Army, the current strategic situation, particularly in Eastern Europe, demands more a strengthening of NATO, which needs greater commitment and a greater contribution in military capabilities from European Allies, particularly the EU's Member States.

The idea is to build and consolidate a real European defence capability, initially within the NATO framework, and in the future, if the geopolitical scenario changes and the Member States of the Union so agree, it could have the capacity for autonomous action in deterrence and defence. This idea is not new; it was proposed some time ago, and was called the *European Security and Defence Initiative*<sup>47</sup> (ESDI), which failed due to the unwillingness of some Allies.

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<sup>47</sup> ESDI, *European Security and Defence* was developed within the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Alliance to strengthen European security engagement and, at the same time, transatlantic cooperation. The ESDI

It may be time to make a second attempt, albeit with some nuances, but always better from within the Alliance itself (by which, we should not forget, 98% of the EU's population is covered, is protected by NATO). Once we have a solid European dimension in defence, we could begin to discuss the feasibility or advisability of reopening old debates, some of which we have described as "Alice Thinking". The concept of "*separable but not separate*", much talked about in the 1990s, could regain its relevance in the future.

We have the most powerful, and the most European NATO in history (with the addition of Warsaw Pact countries and in recent months traditional neutrals like Finland and Sweden). This is a good starting point: we have more and better cards; now it is just a matter of playing them well.

*Abel Romero Junquera\**  
Naval Captain (Res.)  
IEEE Analyst

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developed alongside complementary initiatives carried out by other mutually reinforcing organisations, such as the Western European Union (WEU), which was later replaced by the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The key element in the development of the ESDI was the preparation of WEU operations, with WEU and NATO participation, based on the identification within NATO of separable, but not independent, capabilities, assets and means of support, and the development of an appropriate European multinational command within NATO to prepare, support, command and conduct WEU-led operations. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/ES/legal-content/glossary/european-security-and-defence-identity.html>, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2000/07/01/esdi-separable-but-not-separate/index.html>