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Autonomy or Decline: Europe's Future in a Brave New Trumpian World


Fondation Pierre du Bois
pour l'histoire du temps présent

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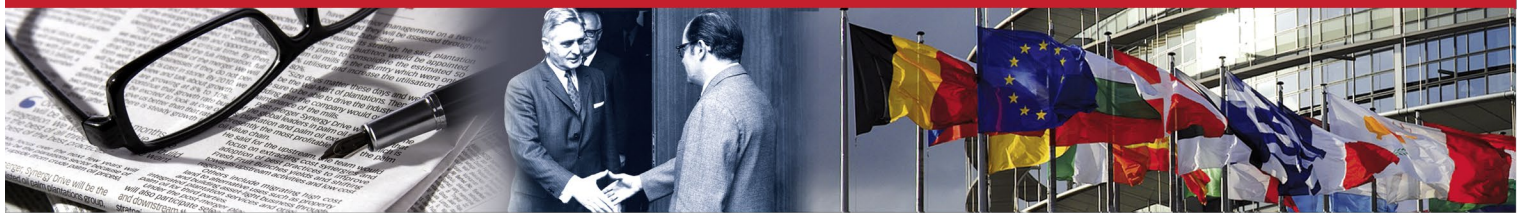
Autonomy or Decline: Europe's Future in a Brave New Trumpian World

If one had presented some of the statements issued by European politicians recently to someone in the autumn of 2024, they would likely have assumed they were responses to another aggressive move by Vladimir Putin of Russia—or perhaps to a toughening of trade practices by China. On 18 January 2026, eight European governments—Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom—[declared](#): ‘We are committed to upholding our sovereignty.’ Near-simultaneously, German Vice-Chancellor Lars Klingbeil [underscored](#) that ‘we will not be blackmailed. There will be a united and unequivocal European response,’ while President Emmanuel Macron [insisted](#): ‘Europeans will respond in a united and coordinated manner should they be confirmed. We will ensure that European sovereignty is upheld.’

The End of the Transatlantic Era

Yet these statements were directed not at Russia or China but at what used to be Europe's closest and most trusted ally: the United States under President Donald Trump. The immediate cause was his increasingly aggressive pursuit of making Greenland—the autonomous island whose defence and security fall to Denmark, and on which the US maintains a military presence (Pituffik Space Base, formerly Thule Air Base) it could expand at will—the 52nd state of the Union. Denmark's Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, [responded](#) in unequivocal terms: ‘If the United States decides to militarily attack another NATO country, then everything would stop—that includes NATO and therefore post-Second World War security.’ Europe has, of course, had serious disputes with Washington before—consider the heavily contested American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 under President George W. Bush, and recurring trade spats over decades—but a threat by a sitting American president to invade a European country in order to incorporate it into the US is unprecedented. It starkly illustrates how far back in history Trump finds his inspiration: in aggressively used gunboat diplomacy (see his actions in and against Venezuela) and the imperialist thought of the nineteenth century, with little to no regard for international law or, as he recently confirmed, [the maintenance of peace](#).

When, in January 2026, eight European countries dispatched small groups of military personnel to Greenland to assess how its security could be better protected—ostensibly against the Russian and Chinese threats Trump claims to have identified, but also, quite openly, to affirm the status quo and signal their intent to maintain it—Trump [retaliated](#) by imposing a 10% tariff from 1 February 2026 on Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the UK, with a stated rise to 25% on 1 June 2026: ‘This Tariff will be due and payable



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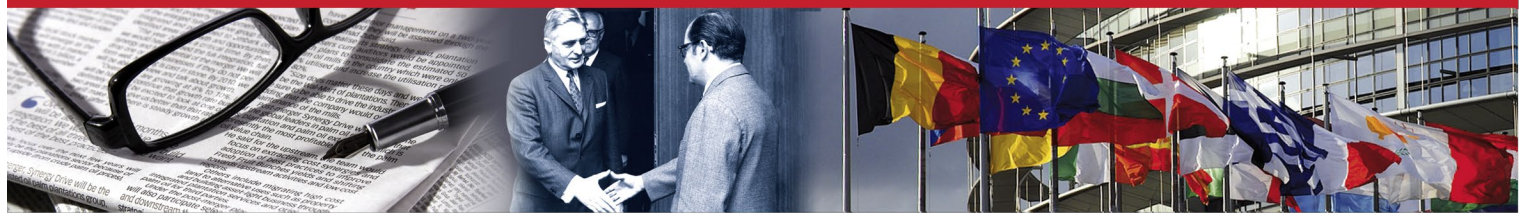
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until such time as a Deal is reached for the Complete and Total purchase of Greenland.' He clearly intends to force European countries to accept his claim to Greenland. The move also exposed the failure of Europe's policy of appeasement toward him over the past year.

Since his inauguration in January 2025, whenever Trump dropped a political bomb, European leaders have tended to charm and flatter him, offering 'deals' that conceded something but sought to blunt his most extreme proposals. This pattern appeared around NATO budgets and Ukraine and—most notably in the summer of 2025—when Trump imposed tariffs on EU members, prompting them to agree to the infamous Turnberry Agreement (Agreement on Reciprocal, Fair, and Balanced Trade). The deal somewhat reduced the tariff burden but extracted heavy, unilateral European concessions. It was clear European politicians were willing to appease him to avoid his pulling out of Ukraine or of Europe's security architecture altogether. Even so, in the summer of 2025 Trump publicly cast doubt on NATO's Article 5 (['there are numerous definitions'](#)). The Hague Summit declaration itself reaffirmed Article 5 and adopted a new 5% spending framework (3.5% core defence + up to 1.5% related) to be reached by 2035. Yet despite the declaration, the mere speculation about whether Trump would stand by NATO's core principle—that an attack on one is an attack on all—and his wavering in committing to it undermined the alliance's backbone of credible deterrence. NATO has been on life support ever since. At the same time, Trump is actively working to demolish the UN-centric international order—based, at least in principle, on international law and multilateral global governance. Most recently, for instance, he announced the United States' withdrawal from 66 international organisations and proposed the creation of a 'Board of Peace'—an all-too-obvious attempt to supplant the UN Security Council—offering membership in exchange for a USD 1 billion fee and envisioning a body that would address global issues under his presidency for life. His [overt attacks](#) on European states' internal affairs—on the state of their democracies and their adherence to human rights and pluralism—together with his endorsement of far-right movements such as the [AfD](#), reveal how far he is prepared to go against his supposed 'allies' and whom he considers his real partners. Trump is clearly no friend of Europe as it currently exists.

The current Greenland crisis goes a step further. Trump's challenge to Danish control over Greenland again displays his apparently and selective (mis)understanding of history, as when he [protested](#): 'Why do they have a 'right of ownership' anyway? There are no written documents, it's only that a boat landed there hundreds of years ago.' He might reflect on how, a few hundred years ago, white settlers arriving by boat from Europe claimed ownership over land that would later become the United States. And American interest in Greenland is not, as such, new. Historically, Greenland has been part of the Danish realm since the early modern period, with modern Danish-Norwegian colonisation beginning in 1721; in 1953, Greenland ceased to be a colony and was integrated as a county of the Danish state through constitutional reform. Greenland's path to autonomy accelerated with Home Rule (1979) and, more decisively, Self-Government (2009), which transferred extensive domestic competences and recognised Greenlanders as a people under international law, while Denmark retained authority over foreign affairs, security and defence. As part of the Danish Realm, Greenland falls within NATO's collective-defence area, so an armed attack on Greenland would be treated as an attack on Denmark, engaging Article 5 procedures. Notably, Greenland withdrew from the European Economic Community in 1985 following a referendum and has since been associated with the EU as an Overseas Country and Territory (OCT). American interest in acquiring Greenland goes back well before recent headlines: shortly after the 1867 Alaska purchase, US policymakers discussed acquiring Greenland, and in 1910 a land-exchange proposal was floated but never pursued. The most concrete attempt came in 1946, when the Truman administration formally offered Denmark \$100 million in gold bullion for the island shortly after World War II, driven by its strategic Arctic position. Although these proposals were rejected, the United States established a lasting military presence during and after the Second World War. Under the 1951 Defense of Greenland Agreement, Washington already enjoys broad basing and operational rights within agreed defence areas—sufficient to meet US defence requirements without acquiring the island. As opposed to 2019, when Trump first floated the idea of acquiring Greenland, this time he openly threatens to invade Denmark—a fellow NATO country—thereby rendering NATO, and the most basic principles of the post-war transatlantic relationship, obsolete. It is now clear that Trump's United States is no longer an ally for Europe; it might well turn into an adversary.

This leaves Europe with a profound dilemma. The US is essential—not only for military and nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis Russia, for the implementation of a Ukraine peace deal, and for ongoing support to Ukraine through equipment and intelligence, but also because US tech, AI, and cloud companies underpin many European services, with Europe lagging behind in these fields. What options do European countries,



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including the UK, have in this new post-transatlantic Trumpian reality? How can Europe respond to the brave new world Trump is so openly and aggressively implementing?

A potential short-term solution to the Greenland crisis would be to propose that Greenlanders themselves decide—by referendum—among options including becoming part of the US, maintaining the status quo, or moving toward Greenlandic independence. If Greenlanders voted against joining the United States, Trump's case would become harder to sustain. Yet this might not deter him; he might refuse such a deal, suspecting Greenlanders would not endorse US membership. Still, for Europeans, a referendum could help defuse the crisis and buy time—hoping Trump either loses interest, another crisis diverts his attention, or he emerges from the midterms sufficiently weakened to abandon this ambition. Nevertheless, Greenland is only one manifestation of a broader, existential recalibration of the transatlantic relationship—one that requires new European solutions.

Finding suitable responses is difficult, which helps explain why European leaders initially pursued appeasement—a policy that has now shattered. A complete break with the US would endanger Europe, as Putin pursues his own imperialist ambitions in the east. Economically struggling European countries also rely heavily on the American market, while many European governments are politically fragile and challenged by growing far-right parties. High public debt limits fiscal space to invest more heavily in defence and other sectors that might require bolstering amid an escalating confrontation with the US. Some in Europe may still hope that Trump—approaching his 80th birthday and facing US mid-term elections this autumn that might cost him a House majority—could prove a temporary phenomenon. But that is Russian roulette. There is no guarantee Democrats will reclaim the House; nor that any successor—should Trump become incapacitated or choose not to run again—would be more modest. JD Vance, for instance, has aggressively criticised European governments in a barely veiled attempt to support far-right parties across the continent (e.g., his speech at the Munich Security Conference on 14 February 2025 and his meeting with AfD leader Alice Weidel). He may lack Trump's charisma and thus face stronger internal party constraints, but counting on that is a gamble that may not materialise.

Given present realities—Trump's intention to pursue policies that contradict and undermine European 'allies', coupled with opinion and mood swings that can render any agreement obsolete even before it takes effect—the only viable path for European countries is de-risking and gradual decoupling (much as Europe proposes vis-à-vis China) in pursuit of European strategic autonomy. This includes pushing back when red lines are crossed. No one should harbour illusions about the impact of European responses. Militarily, Europe is no match for the US; should Trump decide to invade Greenland, a European military response is unfeasible, unrealistic, and unlikely. Economic responses would be costly for European producers (who could be hit by new tariffs) and for consumers (who may pay more for American goods under counter-tariffs). Financial responses—such as coordinated [dumping of US treasury bonds](#) held by European countries—could create short-term upheaval by flooding markets (forcing the US government to pay significantly higher interest to attract buyers), but these effects might ultimately be absorbed by the US domestic financial system or the Federal Reserve.

Europe's Options in the Trumpian Age

There is thus no single instrument that European countries can deploy to significantly affect the United States, and any response will impose costs on Europeans as well. The most sensible approach is therefore a toolbox of measures—a strategy of *needle stings* designed to raise the costs for Trump, and for his electorate, high enough for him to reconsider whether his course of action is worthwhile. At the same time, such calibrated responses can signal sufficient strength to compel him to back down, much as he partially did vis-à-vis Brazil and China during earlier tariff confrontations last year. The overarching goal is to increase the financial and political costs for Trump, strengthen Europe's independence in key sectors, and undermine Trump's domestic and global leverage, thereby enhancing Europe's profile, self-reliance and, ultimately, autonomy from Trump, his machinations, and his mood swings. What options, then, are available to Europe?

First, Europeans must finally implement the long-proclaimed agenda of unity and strategic self-reliance. This has been a truism for decades, but is now more crucial than ever in light of the dual challenges from east and west—Putin and Trump. The essential first step is to recognise



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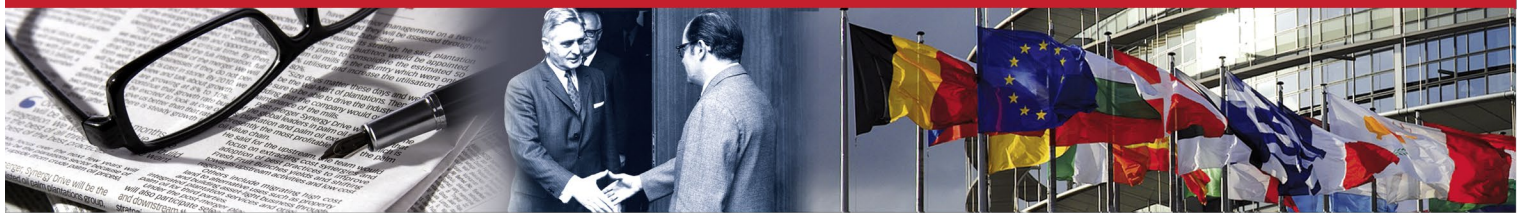
that the transatlantic alliance, as traditionally understood, is effectively dead, and that Europe must emancipate itself from the United States economically, politically, and militarily. As with policy toward China, Europe should cooperate with Washington where interests align, work to eliminate dependencies, and acknowledge the United States as a potential adversary in certain domains. This is easier said than done, given the varied political landscapes within Europe and the presence of influential far-right governments, such as Italy's. Reforms to decision-making processes and greater reliance on coalitions of the willing may prove necessary. Most importantly, Europeans must grasp the magnitude of the challenge: without unity, Europe risks becoming a pawn rather than a player on the global chessboard. No individual European state can stand up to global powers such as China or the US; only together can Europeans maintain autonomy, agency and global influence. This should also include a sped-up rapprochement between the UK and the EU, including deeper market integration (although full EU membership of the UK is, realistically, still not an option at present). Europe has historically deepened integration in moments of crisis, and this may be the most consequential such moment since the Second World War. European unity must match the scale of the challenge.

Second, Europe must cease its policy of appeasing Trump. Although understandable as a tactic to dilute his most radical ideas and buy time, this strategy has failed. Flattery, extravagant state visits and symbolic gifts have not enhanced European security, prosperity, or the predictability of transatlantic relations. Trump's open flirtations with invading a fellow NATO country have made this abundantly clear. The most dangerous reflex in Europe is to debate "what Trump really meant" after each new provocation and to seek ways of sidestepping confrontation. Europeans must recognise that he generally means exactly what he says; taking his statements at face value is essential to effective policy-making. Therefore, Europe must oppose the Trump administration when necessary, establish clear red lines, and enforce them—Greenland being a case in point. Trump's approach rests on his perception that Europe is divided, weak, dependent on the United States, and unwilling to take risks or escalate. Europeans must therefore demonstrate unity, resolve, and the credibility of their policies.

Third, Europe must leverage its strength: its market power and strategic geography. When Trump escalates tensions, Europeans must be prepared to respond—and they possess important tools. Europe is a critical market for US firms; this leverage can be exercised through robust enforcement of the Digital Markets Act (DMA) and Digital Services Act (DSA), competition cases against dominant platforms, strict General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) compliance on data transfers, and tougher environmental and tax enforcement where appropriate. Should Trump raise tariffs, Europe can retaliate using its 'trade bazooka,' the EU Anti-Coercion Instrument (Reg. 2023/2675, in force since 27 December 2023), including restrictions on US service providers. To mitigate the effects on European consumers and industries, Europe must simultaneously build alternatives to US technological dominance. The European Commission—working with non-EU partners such as Norway, the UK and Switzerland—should launch and fund a large-scale programme to establish and scale up European cloud, AI and digital-infrastructure providers. Strategic autonomy must apply to technology no less than defence; otherwise US companies can de facto veto or frustrate European independence.

In defence and armaments, Europe currently lacks the capacity to rebuild its forces rapidly after decades of neglect, and most militaries remain heavily dependent on American products. Ammunition, for instance—vital, as the war in Ukraine demonstrates—is in short supply. Europe must therefore urgently expand its defence-industrial base, overcoming national egos and coordination problems, potentially through specialisation among states. Increased European coordination, including via the European Commission with funding secured through the issuance of eurobonds, could facilitate this process. At the same time, Europe retains strategic assets that are highly valuable to the United States. Bases such as Ramstein in Germany—a central node for U.S. air operations in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East; a key logistics, medical-evacuation, and command-and-control hub; and a crucial satellite-relay station—are of strategic significance. Other important sites include the Rota Naval Base in Spain, Naval Air Station Sigonella in Italy, and the bases at RAF Lakenheath and RAF Mildenhall in the United Kingdom, all of which carry strategic relevance for the US and therefore constitute bargaining chips for Europe. Despite depending heavily on US intelligence in general, not least US intelligence technologies, European states also possess clusters of expertise and specialisation that can be leveraged to Europe's advantage. These assets should be used.

Fourth, Europeans should circumvent and isolate Trump domestically and internationally. Trump is not America. Europeans should therefore work closely with actors in the United States who still value transatlantic cooperation—civil society groups, state governments, Congress, the business community, and the military and intelligence establishments—thereby bypassing the White House wherever possible.



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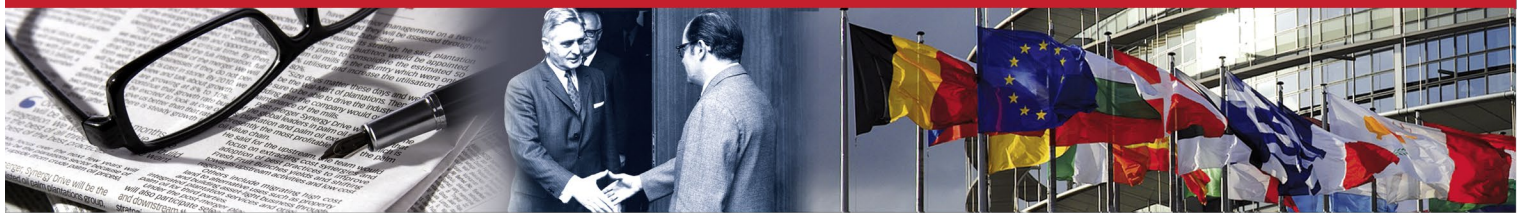
Public-relations campaigns in American media could also help: these should clearly outline how Trump's policies harm American consumers through higher prices, while emphasising that Europe remains open for business and tourism so as not to close personal channels of contact between Europeans and Americans. Public messaging must consistently distinguish Trump from America as a whole, making it harder to brand European policies as anti-American.

Internationally, Europe should deepen cooperation with like-minded partners such as Canada, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand; a larger bloc is more difficult for Trump to intimidate. If Trump escalates tariffs, these partners could further integrate their markets in response. Europe should also engage with Brazil, South Africa, India, and others to build a credible counterweight to the United States and demonstrate commitment to a rules-based international order. In this sense, concluding more trade agreements will be essential. The EU–Mercosur accord signed on 17 January 2026, for instance, can bolster free trade and help redirect economic flows away from the United States—although, of course, such agreements cannot completely substitute for the American market.

Fifth, Europe must prepare for a post-NATO future. NATO's core principle—that all allies will come to the defence of any member that is attacked—has lost credibility given Trump's refusal to commit to it unequivocally and his alleged plans to invade Greenland. As Europeans are also learning, no agreement with Trump is worth the paper it is written on; his position can change from one day to the next. Paradoxically, this unpredictability still provides some deterrence within NATO, because adversaries cannot be certain whether he would uphold Article 5. But by the same token, neither can America's allies. This creates the need to prepare for scenarios in which the United States either refuses to defend an ally, blocks NATO action, or even acts as the aggressor itself. Europeans must therefore develop a security architecture independent of NATO—drawing on NATO mechanisms where they remain effective, but making them veto-proof so that Trump cannot obstruct European efforts. This includes ensuring the flexibility to move units or cooperation formats in and out of NATO as required, or to integrate them rapidly into European structures during crises. Europeans—including Norway and the UK—should establish a permanent operational military headquarters and place rapid-reaction forces under its command. Existing formations such as the Franco-German Brigade, Eurocorps, the EU Battlegroups, or the UK–French Combined Joint Expeditionary Force could serve as building blocks. Effective operation will require harmonising legal frameworks, logistics and infrastructure—ensuring that equipment and units can move freely across Europe without excessive bureaucracy, and that bridges, roads, and rail lines can physically support such movement.

Strategic autonomy also requires joint procurement, joint development, and the expansion of Europe's defence-industrial base in ammunition, air defence, drones, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets. The most difficult gap to fill is nuclear deterrence, historically provided by the United States. Rather than individual European states pursuing nuclear weapons—a scenario that would risk sowing deep discord and, in the worst case, triggering a nuclear arms race among European countries—a joint approach based on existing French—and ideally British—capabilities, embedded within a European framework for consultation and burden-sharing, would offer the most viable path to near-immediate, albeit limited, deterrence. Europeans must also accelerate decision-making through coalitions of the willing and pre-approved contingency plans. A window of opportunity exists while Russia remains embroiled in Ukraine; however, analysts warn that Moscow could regain the capacity to threaten EU members by 2028–30, with 2029 often cited. Europe therefore only has a few years to build its own strategic autonomy and to provide for its security independently of the United States.

Finally, Ukraine is Europe's litmus test for its ability to secure the continent. Trump uses Ukraine as his primary bargaining chip to pressure European governments—whether for trade concessions or other demands—while his own policy positions on Ukraine and its future shift almost daily. Europe must therefore be prepared to support Ukraine independently, including committing forces and resources to implementing any peace agreement it co-negotiates and considers acceptable. This is almost self-evident: Trump is likely to insist that Europeans shoulder the bulk of reconstruction costs anyway, while positioning US companies to benefit most from reconstruction contracts or preferential access to resources, as various floated proposals for a settlement suggest. If Europe wants meaningful influence over any eventual agreement and seeks to reduce Trump's leverage, it must increase its commitment now in order to be able to reject any deal it deems unacceptable.



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The Road Ahead for Europe

Europe may be at its most consequential turning point since the fall of communism in the late 1980s, or arguably since the end of the Second World War. The post-war transatlantic security architecture—based on the assumption that the United States and Europe stood together, trusted one another, and that America would provide Europe's security and nuclear umbrella—has collapsed. Europeans bear some responsibility for this: for decades they remained comfortable within the security “cocoon,” as Piers Ludlow has termed it, provided by the United States while they reduced their own militaries and defence budgets. Previous attempts by various US administrations to reverse this—such as by encouraging higher European defence spending through NATO's 2% goal—were largely ignored. Europe is now receiving the bill for these decades of over-reliance on the US, and it is substantial. Worse, it arrives at a moment marked by severe budgetary constraints, the rise of populism, and the erosion of traditional governing parties. European governments face profoundly challenging times.

They may well find themselves sympathising with Frodo, who says to Gandalf in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*: ‘I wish it need not have happened in my time.’ Gandalf's reply is equally apt for Europe: ‘So do I... and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.’ Europe must confront the challenges posed by the turmoil of Trump's presidency and the brave new world he seeks to build if it wishes to shape the future rather than be shaped by it.

The emerging Trumpian global order is not in Europe's interests; it directly threatens Europe's trade, values, preferred international order, its commitment to international law, and even the integrity and sovereignty of European territory. Europe must be willing to shoulder the financial and political burden of opposing Trump when necessary and must provide for its own security through enhanced strategic autonomy. If Europeans wish to matter—if they do not want to become vassals who merely follow the dictates of Trump (or, for that matter, Putin or Xi), but instead aspire to remain players rather than pawns on the global chessboard—they have no choice but to unite, act together, and achieve strategic emancipation.

NB: This paper is an expanded and updated version of an [op-ed](#) previously published in *The Scotsman*.

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