

THE CHANGING U.S. MILITARY ROLE IN EUROPE AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN SECURITY

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Yağmur Irmak AKSU



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NATO's military planning and its ability to act in a crisis have long been shaped around the American presence. Although European countries have their own armed forces and defence industries, they still rely on capabilities provided by Washington in areas such as intelligence, logistics, air defence and nuclear deterrence. A reduction in the U.S. military presence on the continent would therefore mean more than the redeployment of a certain number of troops. It would raise the question of who would provide Europe's security, with which capabilities, and how quickly.

This makes the Pentagon's review of roughly 80,000 U.S. troops stationed in Europe, its bases and allied defence contributions important. A complete U.S. withdrawal from Europe appears unlikely, but Washington clearly expects its European allies to assume a larger share of the defence burden. This expectation is closely linked to the growing focus of U.S. foreign policy on the Indo-Pacific. The timing of the debate, however, matters. With the Russia-Ukraine war continuing and security concerns persisting on NATO's eastern flank, any change in the American presence directly affects the Alliance's deterrence.

Europe's central problem is that higher defence spending has not yet produced sufficient military capability. In recent years, many European states have increased ammunition production, launched new defence programmes and raised military budgets. Even so, Europe remains dependent on the United States for long-range transport, satellite and intelligence infrastructure, integrated air defence and nuclear protection. These capability gaps cannot be closed quickly. A smaller U.S. military presence would therefore not automatically make Europe more independent; initially, it would intensify security concerns and debates over responsibility within NATO.

European states are unlikely to respond to this change in the same way. Poland and the Baltic states view the threat from Russia as immediate and regard the U.S. security guarantee as indispensable. France argues that Europe must strengthen its capacity for strategic autonomy, while Germany is trying to balance the two approaches. Northern European countries, meanwhile, are deepening regional cooperation. These differences could reinforce security partnerships along the Nordic-Baltic line or the France-Germany-Poland axis. Without a common understanding of threats and capabilities, however, groups with different priorities may emerge within NATO.

The analysis begins with the following question: What kind of security order would a possible reduction in the U.S. military presence create in Europe? It examines whether this change will produce new defence partnerships that increase Europe's strategic responsibility and whether it will heighten tensions within the Alliance on NATO's eastern flank. Its purpose is not to discuss in the abstract whether Europe can become wholly independent of the United States, but to understand how security responsibilities would be distributed, among whom, and with which capabilities.

If European states cannot rely fully on U.S. security support, they may accelerate their search for new defence partnerships. Türkiye is an actor that must be considered in this process. Its importance to European states stems not only from its geography but also from its possession of one of NATO's largest armed forces and an advanced defence industry. The analysis therefore considers existing defence cooperation between Türkiye and European countries, as well as the areas in which such cooperation could be expanded.

The central argument is that a reduction in the U.S. military presence in Europe would not give the continent strategic autonomy in the short term. A more likely outcome is closer cooperation among European states in particular regions. Yet Europe still lacks the capacity to replace American deterrence fully. The analysis first assesses Europe's dependence on the United States for security and the risks on the eastern flank. It then examines Nordic-Baltic cooperation, the France-Germany-Poland axis, and existing or possible defence partnerships with Türkiye. The final section considers whether this change would move NATO towards more balanced burden-sharing or towards a more fragmented and fragile structure.

The U.S. military role in Europe cannot be explained solely by temporary disagreements between Washington and European capitals. The more durable driver is the distribution of resources across different threat theatres in U.S. defence planning. Published in January 2026, the U.S. National Defense Strategy prioritises homeland defence and balancing China in the Indo-Pacific. It also calls on European allies to assume responsibility for threats in their own region. The document indicates

that continuing U.S. support will be more limited and concentrated on critical areas. A possible reduction in the American presence in Europe should therefore be understood not as an abrupt break, but as the result of a long-running shift in priorities (U.S. Department of Defense, 2026).

Troop numbers matter, but they are not the only measure of this change. According to the U.S. European Command's 2025 posture statement, approximately 80,000 American troops are present in the European theatre. This is below the peak of roughly 105,000 reached after Russia invaded Ukraine. Yet the weight of the U.S. contribution does not come only from personnel on the ground. Command and control arrangements, satellite and intelligence capabilities, long-range airlift, aerial refuelling, missile defence, pre-positioned equipment and nuclear deterrence are parts of the same military network. European armed forces are strong in some of these areas, but the structure that integrates all of them simultaneously across the continent still depends on U.S. support (U.S. European Command, 2025).

The effect of a possible withdrawal would therefore depend less on the number of troops leaving Europe than on which missions were transferred. European countries could compensate for a limited reduction in combat units. Simultaneous cuts to enablers such as intelligence, air defence or strategic transport, however, would create a serious gap. These capabilities cannot be built quickly simply by increasing budgets. They require secure information-sharing arrangements and procurement programmes extending over many years. The debate should therefore ask which U.S. capabilities Europe could

replace and how long that process would take.

European states have increased their defence budgets since 2022. According to the European Defence Agency, total defence spending by EU member states reached €418 billion in 2025 and is projected to rise to €454 billion in 2026. Yet collaborative procurement accounted for only 24 per cent of equipment spending. As long as different systems, maintenance chains and training standards persist, higher budgets alone will not reduce Europe's dependence on the United States (European Defence Agency, 2026).

The European Commission identifies air and missile defence, strategic transport, ammunition and military mobility among the priority shortfalls. Financing for joint procurement under SAFE is intended to help close these gaps. Expanding production capacity and delivering orders will nevertheless take time. The new spending targets adopted at NATO's 2025 Hague Summit could also accelerate this transition. In the short term, however, American intelligence, logistics and deterrence will remain necessary (European Commission, 2025; NATO, 2025).

A reduction in the American presence would have its greatest effect on NATO's eastern flank. Poland and the Baltic states see U.S. forces not merely as military support, but as evidence that Washington would participate in NATO's collective defence during a crisis. Even a limited withdrawal could therefore create political concern about deterrence. NATO's new Forward Land Forces, which became operational in Finland in 2026, show that European Allies are assuming greater responsibility. To be effective, however,

these formations also require stronger air defence, intelligence and rapid reinforcement capabilities (NATO, 2026b).

Regional partnerships are among the first responses to a possible decline in American support. The Nordic-Baltic countries have long cooperated on joint exercises and military mobility. Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO has connected this cooperation to Alliance planning. The Weimar Triangle of France, Germany and Poland could bring together Poland's geographic position, Germany's industrial strength and France's military capabilities. Their threat perceptions are not identical. Even so, cooperation in concrete areas such as air defence, joint exercises and military mobility could help Europe share the defence burden (Swedish Ministry of Defence, 2024; Polish Ministry of National Defence, 2024).

Türkiye must also be considered in Europe's emerging security order. Its position spanning the Black Sea, the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean, together with its defence industry, makes it particularly important on NATO's southeastern flank. The Black Sea Mine Countermeasures Task Group established by Türkiye, Romania and Bulgaria, as well as Türkiye's contributions to KFOR and EUFOR Althea, show that Ankara can provide a practical link between NATO and European security structures (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2025).

Defence-industrial partnerships could broaden this role further. The Eurofighter agreement between Türkiye and the United Kingdom and the Baykar-Leonardo joint venture in unmanned systems show that cooperation is not limited to arms sales. Air defence, ammunition, unmanned

systems and military training are the most suitable areas for joint work. Political disagreements, export restrictions and EU procurement rules may slow progress. Lasting results require joint production and long-term maintenance programmes rather than one-off purchases (UK Ministry of Defence, 2026; Leonardo, 2025).

These developments indicate that NATO's European pillar will strengthen in the short term. As European countries increase their budgets, production and regional defence responsibilities, the United States will remain decisive in areas such as nuclear deterrence, strategic intelligence and long-range transport. Such an arrangement would not deliver full strategic autonomy, but coordinated burden-sharing could make NATO more balanced. If regional initiatives diverge from Alliance planning, the same process could instead lead to fragmentation (NATO, 2026a).

The argument set out at the beginning therefore remains valid: a reduction in the U.S. military presence would not automatically make Europe independent; it would primarily accelerate regional and bilateral partnerships. The success of this transition should be measured not only by defence budgets, but also by the share of collaborative procurement, ammunition delivery times, the speed at which forces can be moved to the eastern flank, and the continuity of production programmes with partners including Türkiye. If these indicators improve, the changing American role could produce a more balanced distribution of responsibility within NATO; otherwise, uncertainty surrounding European security will grow.

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+90 216 310 30 50



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Merdivenköy Mah. Nur Sok. Business İstanbul
A Blok Kat:12 No:115, Kadıköy/İstanbul

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yağmur Irmak AKSU is pursuing her undergraduate degree in Political Science and International Relations at MEF University alongside a minor in Law. She is currently conducting research on European security and transatlantic relations as part of DİPAM's internship programme. Her research interests include NATO, European security and defence policy.