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European Forum Alpbach 2025**Europe in the World Days – Security Track Report**

Leonie Kristina Trebeljahr

Geopolitical Realignment: Asserting Europe's Role in a Contested World of Power Politics

The following report summarises the key debates that took place from 23 to 26 August during the Security Track of the Europe in the World Days at the 2025 European Forum Alpbach. Discussions centred on reordering European security, integrating the fragmented European defence ecosystem towards a European Defence Union (EDU), the necessity of embracing a multi-speed Europe in terms of both EU enlargement and integration, and the interplay between security and democracy.

As the post-Cold War global order fragments, giving way to a world in which international law is increasingly replaced by force, global politics are shaped by power rather than co-operation and the rule of law. Multilateral institutions that set rules, such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), are struggling to remain relevant, while the United States is retreating from its role as guarantor of the global economic and security order. There is a growing acknowledgement that multipolarity is the defining feature of the 21st century. The sessions of the security track of the Europe in the World in Alpbach explored how, in this emerging landscape, Europe should invest in its capacity to act, establishing itself as a credible security actor and a bridging power in a multipolar world.

Toward a new European Security Architecture

In retrospect, the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia marked the end of the old European security architecture. Today, the outcome of the war in Ukraine will be central to determining its future shape. Russia's full-scale invasion of the country has finally shattered the post-Cold War illusion that Russia could become an integral part of a European security order. It has also inextricably linked Ukraine's defence to European security and the credibility of Europe as a security actor. Long-term European strategic autonomy and leadership is required to foster greater regional cohesion and enable rapid collective action. This would entail integrating Europe's disparate militaries – eventually also including Ukraine's – so that Russian forces would not be met by a loose collection of individual states, but deterred by a collective and united Europe.

Despite the mantra “nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine” and consensus that Europe must prevent a new Yalta arrangement for the continent, instances such as the Trump-Putin Alaska Summit – that took place only days before the European Forum Alpbach convening – suggest that Europe is merely a spectator in the reordering of its own security with little scope for action and leverage at this point. Once again, external powers are attempting to decide the continent's fate by effectively dividing it into spheres of influence and buffer zones. A dictated peace like that would not represent a sustainable solution and would mean a significant blow to sovereignty and democracy in Europe as well as to the credibility of the international rule of law. Ukraine's victory is thus not only pivotal for Europe's credibility and strategic identity as a security actor, but also as a global actor that upholds the rules-based order.

NATO and the US in European Security

US support for Ukraine as well as its contributions to NATO are politically fragile making Europe's dependence on the US for defence increasingly unsustainable. In the war's first year, US aid to Ukraine was pivotal, but by 2025, Europe has overtaken the US in total

military assistance, now doing the "heavy lifting" via mechanisms like the European Peace Facility (EPF) financial instrument and the military assistance mission EUMAM Ukraine, institutionalizing support beyond ad hoc measures.

Nevertheless, NATO – and for now the US – remain indispensable to European security and defence for the foreseeable future. Notwithstanding the significant increase in defence budgets and funding, at least in the short- and medium-term Europe faces significant capability gaps with regard to strategic enablers, such as command and control systems, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR). Similarly, it lacks the necessary research and development (R&D), as well as the industrial capacity, to produce cutting-edge weapon systems in the large numbers currently in demand and required.

For NATO to remain a cornerstone of European security and defence, the European pillar of the alliance must be strengthened by growing European capabilities and European allies taking on more key NATO responsibilities within the command structures, including, eventually, a European Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR). What is required is a gradual and mutually agreed-upon Europeanization of NATO that shifts burden and responsibility without facilitating a US political and military retreat from the alliance and Europe in the process.

EUrope as a Security Actor

At the same time, the EU, which has long been underrepresented in defence matters because those were considered the prerogative of member states and NATO, is becoming another cornerstone of European security and defence. It acts as a major driver of defence investment and industrial integration in Europe, using a growing toolkit of funds, regulations, and coordination mechanisms to push states and firms towards joint projects and a more unified market.

Moreover, the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) provides established structures such as the Military Committee (EUMC) and the Military Staff (EUMS) that could be reinforced and leveraged for a Europeanization of defence. With the recent appointment of General Seán Clancy of Ireland as chairman of the EUMC, succeeding Robert Brieger of Austria, the EU confirmed that its highest military body will continue to be led by a general from a non-allied country. While this should not be interpreted as Europe deprioritizing NATO, it emphasizes European strategic autonomy and acknowledges that European security and defence must extend beyond NATO structures. However, to build functional and effective European defence structures and avoid unnecessary duplication, NATO and the EU must cooperate and share information more closely, particularly with regard to military planning and capability targets.

In the meantime, an increasing number of mini-lateral formats are emerging and becoming more important. Examples include but are not limited to the E3, the Weimar Triangle, the Rammstein Format, the Nordic Baltic 8, and the Franco-British-led 'Coalition of the Willing'. In the short and medium term, these formats could effectively complement EU and NATO structures by facilitating the agile, ad hoc cooperation that is currently required but not supported by the existing structures of the EU. In addition, these formats also enable European cooperation beyond and across EU and NATO membership. This is particularly pertinent regarding the UK, which is no longer an EU member and not formally associated with EU defence tools but remains a key European security actor. Similarly, such mini-lateral coalitions can exclude unwilling and reluctant countries thereby speeding up and facilitating the development of robust European capabilities and functional structures over the next five to ten years. However, care must be taken to not create an inherently

fragmented security architecture in the process, as this would hinder Europe's long-term development into a more united, integrated – and thus more credible – security actor.

Defence Integration

Despite the Commission's integration efforts and the much-vaunted ambition of a European Defence Union, European defence remains highly fragmented and member states remain reluctant to move towards pooling their sovereignty in security and defence matters. Rather than pursuing isolated national approaches – which only breed fragmentation, duplication, and inefficiency – security in Europe must become a genuinely shared task and responsibility, built on trust, collective investment, and integration. Pooling sovereignty in terms of security and defence should not be viewed as detrimental to national security, but as a form of leverage, where giving up certain prerogatives ultimately leads to greater security for all – and at much lower cost. Consequently, the only realistic way for Europe to establish an effective defence independent of the US is through the bold integration of security and defence matters at the EU level.

This would require to overcome lack of trust and to gather political will at the level of the member states to reshape how security and defence in Europe is provided. Needless to say, a first step would be switching to some form of qualified majority voting for decisions on security and defence in the EU. Beyond that, a significant and representative group of countries would have to take the first step and act as frontrunners, demonstrating that further integration in the areas of security and defence policy is possible and desirable. One option to incrementally integrate security and defence at the EU level would be to use enhanced cooperation under Article 20 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which allows at least nine member states to use the Union's institutions to deepen integration among themselves in a certain policy area when acting together among all member states is not an option. However, authorization still requires unanimity in the Council. Another option would be to bolster and improve efforts of the permanent structured cooperation framework (PESCO) and leverage its platform to promote and implement further integration.

Integrating defence industries and markets, aligning standards, consolidating procurement, and making strategic use of EU budget tools are all necessary steps to boost efficiency, maximize the impact of investments, and move beyond simply spending more to spending smarter. Clinging to outdated principles of the Westphalian model of sovereignty will prevent Europe from becoming a united and effective security actor that is able to cope with today's threat landscape. European security and defence can only become sustainable and comprehensive for the next generation by pooling sovereignty, thereby boosting efficiency and integration.

EU Enlargement

EU enlargement has always been a geopolitical project but has now become a crucial matter of security and credibility. With its two rounds of eastward enlargement in the 2000s, the EU evolved from an economic union into a political one. However, in light of today's challenges, enlargement is not only about prosperity and democracy, but also about security emphasizing the question of whether the EU can evolve into a security union.

Institutional reforms, up to treaty change, are considered necessary for the EU to absorb Ukraine, Moldova, and the countries of the Western Balkans. This could be an opportunity to align EU governance with the requirements of a new European security architecture,

beginning with steps below the threshold of treaty change. As touched upon above, at this point it is imperative to embrace a multispeed Europe. This means utilizing enhanced cooperation formats and other avant-garde models as a pragmatic and flexible way of driving necessary integration for those willing to participate. On the other hand, it means developing a staged accession process to move forward with enlargement, which could include a non-voting membership phase and a non-veto power membership phase.

Moving forward with EU enlargement now is crucial for the credibility of the enlargement process as such and the EU's credibility as a regional (and global) actor. The Copenhagen criteria, conceived and designed for a different time, require careful modernization – taking into consideration the changed geopolitical landscape as well as the significant cases of democratic backsliding in some member states. Today, we need a set of criteria and an enlargement process that balance speed with rigorous standards. The accession of the frontrunners Montenegro and Albania, as well as possibly Moldova, by 2030 would reaffirm the EU's commitment to the process and its credibility.

Defence of Democracy

Undermining democracy in Europe has become a key strategy of Putin's war – underlining how inseparably questions of security and democracy in Europe have become. The Russian aggression threatens not only Europe's territorial integrity but also its democratic values and system. The "hybrid" front of this conflict should not be considered secondary – because if trust in democracy collapses, there may soon be nothing left to defend. Meanwhile the lesson from across the Atlantic is clear: democracy can never be taken for granted. The EU's founding values, laid down in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, must be defended every day and resilience cultivated continuously.

Disinformation has become one of the main threats to democracy and extends far beyond Moscow's influence. It has become a global industry, one that subjects democracy in Europe and beyond to an ongoing hybrid assault – from both in- and outside. This must not be countered by imposing censorship but by building resilience. Trust and public participation remain the foundation of Europe's democratic model. To strengthen these, tailored toolkits are needed – ranging from media literacy and journalist training to hybrid rapid-response teams, as seen for instance in Moldova. France and Sweden have established dedicated institutions to address foreign digital interference and disinformation and the Baltic states also offer valuable experience in this area. On EU level, the Commission is currently establishing a "democracy shield" that should not be limited to EU borders but also include an external dimension that helps defend and strengthen partners in facing hybrid attacks and the disinformation industry.

Europe in the World

In the short run, Europe must accept that the world is currently more power- than rules-based and adapt accordingly to remain relevant. However, the objective must remain to promote a rules-based international environment. Europe's value as a global actor lies in its firm commitment to a rules-based order, and sustained investment in this area will ensure Europe's long-term relevance. It must invest in strategic partnerships and take the lead in preserving multilateral global governance. The EU must now also look beyond internal and regional integration and establish itself as a true global actor capable of acting as a bridging power that connects regions, promotes democratic governance of new technology, and inspires its citizens with a renewed sense of common purpose.

Only by integrating sovereignty with shared security can the EU move beyond the limitations of Westphalian fragmentation toward genuine collective responsibility. Reforming and enlarging the EU is indispensable for strategic depth and global credibility. This requires institutions that adapt in tandem with new members and shifting challenges. Defending democracy requires a daily commitment anchored in resilience, trust, and civic engagement because these are the true foundations of lasting security and autonomy. Ultimately, Europe's future depends on its ability to act as a bridging power, shaping the global order through purposeful, values-driven connections and leadership in a multipolar world that must be managed through inclusive and cooperative arrangements. Throughout the European Forum Alpbach one thing became clear: Europe can either limp along as a fragmented continent or recharge and invest in the strength and unity necessary to act and secure peace for generations to come.

Leonie Kristina Trebeljahr
is Research Assistant to the
Director of SWP.



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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und
Politik
German Institute for
International and
Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org