

# Can Europe rise to the US challenge?

Published: January 18, 2026, 7:38 am

---

Recent statements by Trump's regime in the USA concerning territorial claims on Greenland, backed now with threats of tariffs on all states that object to his plan that this country, which is the sovereign territory of another NATO member, become a part of the USA, represent a significant shift in the history of international relations in the post-War era, and most especially in relationships between Europe and its supposed NATO ally. There is, then, an obvious question to ask, which is what can Europe do to manage the very clear physical threat it now faces from US forces, which all European NATO members have undertaken to defend Greenland against?

The US threat is an unprecedented challenge to its European allies to seize territory legally recognised as European by force, not least when NATO was built on the assumption of mutual respect for territorial integrity. The challenge to this assumption creates massive uncertainty in strategic planning and diplomatic relations, at least in the modern era. That, in itself, does, however, indicate what the appropriate response to this challenge is. It is not that a direct military response is required, not least because US military strength might make that look futile. Instead, the reaction must be at a strategic and diplomatic level and requires a total reassessment of the relationship with the USA.

Even this, however, poses real challenges. European security planning has developed around the practical assumption of there being deep integration with the US system. These integrations come from:

- \* Sharing military bases, or simply letting US forces have sole access to bases in European sovereign territory, as happens in the UK.
- \* Intelligence sharing partnerships.
- \* Defence procurement relationships, and
- \* Diplomatic coordination.

This integration has, within the neoliberal power framework that has sought to defend

globalisation and its interests, broadly worked to date, but has now created very clear asymmetric dependencies, with the apparent balance of power almost always resting with the USA.

That being said, the relationship has not been unidirectional. The US has always benefited from European cooperation over US bases (most especially when they have been used for US operational purposes unrelated to NATO), intelligence gathering, the creation of defence markets for US armaments and the provision of political legitimacy for US military action. These US dependencies do, in fact, create potential leverage that Europe has historically been reluctant to acknowledge or utilise. The time to reappraise this dimension of the relationship would appear to have arrived. Doing so suggests that Europe is not nearly as powerless as it might appear.

As usual, there are several required actions.

Firstly, a broader range of European leaders should issue a coordinated statement clarifying that the territorial sovereignty of European states is non-negotiable and that any coercive actions or credible threats would necessitate a fundamental review of security cooperation frameworks. The statements issued to date have been too limited in scope, embracing too few states. Unity matters here. Differences will be exploited.

Secondly, the European NATO states need to undertake assessments of their dependencies across defence, intelligence, economic, and technological domains, with the urgent goal of determining how to address them. The need here is to address realities, not politics: the situation requires that.

Thirdly, the obvious necessity is to expand European defence cooperation to reduce dependency on US defence procurement. This must establish European alternatives for critical capabilities and ensure that European defence industries can sustain operations independently if necessary.

Fourthly, Europe must enhance its own intelligence-sharing mechanisms. Such a move is vital. Sharing intelligence with a hostile power, as the US now is, cannot be considered wise.

Fifth, amongst all this analysis, the political will to create appropriate responses should the US resort to aggression has to be developed. Such responses must include:

- \* Potential adjustments to the right to access US bases.
- \* Changing intelligence cooperation levels.
- \* Revising procurement decisions, and
- \* Reconsidering trade relationships, not least in the light of current tariff threats.

Once decided, the resulting decisions will need to be communicated, and time might well be of the essence here.

Sixth, European defence spending needs to be re-orientated toward capabilities that enhance European autonomy when too much to date has been undertaken to support US-dictated goals. The detail will take time to work out; creating the strategy does not need to do so.

Taken together, these suggestions do not, at least as yet, imply complete abandonment of cooperation with the USA, but they do reflect prudent risk management in response to current uncertainty. If defence alliances require mutual respect and shared interests, the failure of those conditions demands a reasoned response, and that is what is vital now, not least to ensure that the remaining partnership (which might be called the East Atlantic Treaty Organisation, or EATO) rests on solid foundations.

The goal in all this is not European isolation, but European agency with the aim of producing a Europe capable of independent action, when necessary, if that proves to be the case. This principle should have always applied, and its absence is, in retrospect, a clear policy failure that needs to be addressed now.

The question then becomes, is this achievable? There are conditions for this to happen.

First, there is a need for a genuine political consensus across major European states, and most particularly France, Germany, the UK, Poland, and Italy, whose combined capabilities and political weight are necessary for meaningful action.

Second, this requires a commitment to sustained expenditure over the course of decades.

Third, there would need to be a willingness to accept near-term costs before these arrangements can be put in place, but there is no reason to think those costs might be worse than the costs of current US aggression.

Fourthly, there remains the question to answer, [which I posted here recently](#), which is just what is Europe defending by acting in this way? With fracturing politics across Europe, most especially because of the rise of the far-right, this might be the hardest goal of all to achieve.

That said, unity will be essential, and there will be strong resistance to any of these measures. That will come from:

- \* The USA.
- \* Defence contractors who benefit from current arrangements.
- \* Security establishments that might be quite comfortable with existing structures, and

\* Political leaders who are reluctant to accept near-term costs.

The question to ask is, what is the alternative? The answer is that these options provide Europe with negotiating tools that are otherwise absent, especially when the only other option might be unmanaged vulnerability.

In that case, unlikely as it might once have seemed, threats to Greenland create an opportunity for necessary strategic reassessment and redefinition of the reasons for any defence strategy. Will the opportunity be taken? That is an entirely different question that can only be answered if common grounds for sharing defence systems and costs can be established, which is why I ask, yet again, what we are defending.