ORION FORUM

Sharing the Burden, Surrendering the Benefits

NOVEMBER 12, 2026

As America's allies assume greater responsibility for their defense, Washington risks losing the influence that comes with leadership

For decades during the Cold War, the United States was willing to bear enormous costs to keep countries around the world aligned with its aims. It saw these expenditures as investments in its own security and believed it benefited from keeping itself at the center of international decision-making. The isolationism embodied by the "America First" movement, energized by President Trump, rejects the logic of these efforts. Its proponents have worked for the last decade to reduce American commitments around the world. The American left has also grown increasingly skeptical that America benefits from its foreign policy expenditures. The value of America's dominant international position is being questioned domestically by both sides of the political spectrum.

The belief that the U.S. has limited interests in the world is a far cry from the post-World War II idea that the country had a responsibility to shape the global environment and underpin global security. The shift in domestic opinion and the corresponding change in American rhetoric are causing a reaction among America's traditional allies that isn't entirely negative but won't benefit the United States in the long run. Whether the U.S. maintains its current approach to foreign relationships or returns to something resembling the pre-Trump status quo will have profound implications for the nation's security and the future of countries around the world.

Even if the U.S. changes its approach, it won't be possible to quickly recreate the relationships that existed prior to the Trump administration. Trust takes time to build, and many of America's traditional allies feel betrayed by the rhetoric and policies of the current administration. What is possible, however, is to begin a long-term process of restoring

relationships and reasserting America's leadership in the world. This renewal can incorporate some of the positive developments driven by the Trump administration.

For decades, America tried and failed to get European powers to spend more on their defense and take greater responsibility for their security. President Trump achieved this aim. The U.S. should welcome Europe's increased defense expenditures and the growing seriousness with which Europeans approach security. America would be wrong, however, to encourage the trend toward European strategic independence. What the U.S. should want are capable European militaries that are responsive to U.S. interests and complementary to U.S. capabilities. What's happening instead is a strengthening of European military capabilities alongside Europe's growing desire to achieve strategic autonomy from the United States.

Ongoing discussions in Europe about expanding the role of France's nuclear deterrent to cover other European nations are a powerful example of this trend. French nuclear weapons have long been under independent French control, but new security arrangements could extend their role across Europe in ways that reduce American influence over European nuclear security. This could make the world less stable and more unpredictable than it was when Western security was collectively guaranteed under American leadership.

The independent use of French nuclear weapons in defense of other European nations is difficult to imagine today, but circumstances change and are changing. If relations between Europe and America continue to drift, it's possible to imagine a time when France makes a truly independent decision to employ nuclear weapons in defense of its European allies. If this moment arrives, the decision will be influenced by the structures and agreements being contemplated today. It's in America's interest to reverse the trend toward greater European strategic independence, especially when this trend encourages long-term security arrangements that could diminish the role of the United States. A Europe that feels capable of acting on its own is a Europe less responsive to American influence.

This trend toward greater European capability may afford some fiscal benefits to the United States. A more capable and credible French nuclear deterrent could reduce the demands on America's nuclear arsenal and lead to a commensurate reduction in American defense expenditures, a welcome development at a time when the U.S. is facing a $40.5 trillion

national debt. Any savings would be hollow, however, if they came at the expense of American security and diminished American influence. The U.S. can and should continue to encourage the development of European military power, but it must also find ways to keep that power closely tethered to the United States. History indicates that a multipolar world isn't necessarily a safer world, and allowing Europeans to reassert themselves as independent strategic actors would be a mistake.

Europe isn't the only region drifting away from American influence. In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia is hedging against American unpredictability by developing new defense relationships with Turkey and Pakistan. The United Arab Emirates has deepened its defense ties with Israel, especially on missile defense, amid concerns about the ability of the United States to protect the country from Iranian attacks.

These developments, along with the rise of China and the emergence of an increasingly assertive Russia, mark the end of the Pax Americana that defined much of the previous century. Countries that once existed comfortably in America's orbit are busy considering how to diversify their strategic partnerships. The longer this trend toward strategic independence continues, the stronger these new relationships will become, and the less influence America will exert in the world.

When the U.S. decided that Western Europe should stand united in opposition to the Soviets, the Europeans generally complied. When it decided the British and French should end their assault on Egypt during the Suez Crisis, these formerly great powers accepted the inevitability of America's position. When the U.S. was attacked on September 11, 2001, Western Europe pledged immediate support and augmented our political and military operations against the Taliban. When we wanted to punish Russia with strong sanctions after its invasion of Ukraine, a substantial portion of the world followed our lead.

American strategic hegemony never meant that every country reliant on U.S. power for protection reflexively complied. Part of America's appeal was the relatively benign nature of its power. Unlike powerful nations of earlier eras, the U.S. never required universal obedience as the price of its friendship. There are striking examples of allies refusing to support American objectives, even as American money continued to prop up their defense. The refusal of France,

Germany, and several other European allies to back the 2003 invasion of Iraq is perhaps the most notable. In general, however, the U.S. was able to count on allies in Western Europe and elsewhere to fall in line with its most critical positions. This provided the U.S. an advantage in its competition with the Soviet Union and could once again provide an advantage in today's competition with Russia and China. America's ability to marshal unified action will diminish, however, if it continues to reduce the contributions and guarantees it offers to others.

The U.S. under the Trump administration was right to push its allies to play a larger role in their own defense. Too much of a productive thing, however, can become counterproductive, and the U.S. should reverse the trend toward strategic independence on the part of its allies. For decades, Europe couldn't act on its own, a situation that kept it strategically tethered to the United States. The decoupling now underway might one day lead to a Europe capable of acting independently and choosing to minimize consideration of American priorities. The U.S. should want Europeans to develop more effective and better-resourced militaries, but only if these forces act in ways that are agreeable to the United States. There is a difference between sharing the burden of global leadership and surrendering the benefits of that leadership. The U.S. may come to regret the day it chose to surrender its dominant strategic position in favor of a more multipolar world.

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