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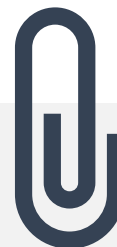
THE SQUARE



REGIONAL SECURITY WITHOUT DEMOCRATIC ALIGNMENT? EUROPE- TÜRKIYE DILEMMA BETWEEN RULE OF LAW AND PRAGMATIC COOPERATION

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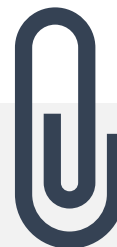
The liberal international order as we know it is undergoing significant restructuring, with great power competition once again at the forefront. Among other signals, this shift was emphasized by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio in an interview just weeks after the new administration took office, when he stated, "*So it's not normal for the world to simply have a unipolar power-that was an anomaly.*" In this changing multipolar and asymmetric landscape, Europe looks both determined and forced to rise as an independent key player. However, it struggles to assert a decisive geopolitical role due to internal divisions, uncertainty in responding to Russia's invasion of



Ukraine, and long-standing structural and decision-making challenges. The crisis of legitimacy surrounding Europe's international role is hindering its ability to respond effectively in an increasingly unstable global environment shaped by the divergent interests of the three main centers of power: the United States, Russia, and China.

At the Munich Security Conference, U.S. Vice President JD Vance escalated the debate by accusing Europe of betraying democratic values, restricting freedom of expression, and trying to exclude the far-right from power. His comments shocked the European audience, particularly his claim that the fight against disinformation amounts to an assault on democracy. Vance also discussed transatlantic security, stressing the need for greater European contributions to defense and advocating for a "reasonable agreement" between Ukraine and Russia. This aligns with Trump's earlier position, where he urged NATO partners to significantly increase their military spending, cautioning that failure to do so might lead to the US withdrawal from the Atlantic security architecture. He further criticized Europe's selective rhetoric regarding democracy, pointing out perceived inconsistencies between European policies and their stated values. His speech represented a direct and intrusive challenge to European democracies.

In this context, Washington's recent signals of disengagement from the Ukraine conflict—initially reflected in the Trump administration's cuts to aid and intelligence-sharing, and later resumed support to Kyiv—have resurfaced with renewed complexity. The U.S. establishment's willingness to propose a ceasefire to Moscow without fully accounting for Ukraine's position or Europe's role places Brussels in a difficult position. This underscores the urgent need for the European Union and its member states to develop an autonomous defense and security architecture—flexible and resilient enough to respond to an evolving international order shaped by asymmetric multipolarity.

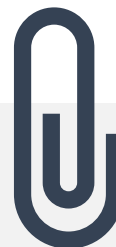


The Erosion of Transatlantic Security Guarantees

The cooling of relations with Washington is evident in the context of the Ukraine war and the growing perception—whether justified or not—that the U.S. intends to scale back its commitment to European defense. Given that European security is largely structured around NATO and dependent on U.S. guarantees, the Ukraine conflict has exposed the EU's difficulties in providing coordinated and sustainable long-term military support against Russian aggression. The Trump administration's peace proposal, which was strongly criticized and rejected by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, was formulated without European input, sparking political backlash in EU capitals.

By taking stock of a changing reality, initial signs of a strategic shift are emerging, accompanied by a renewed political will to engage the EU and European nations in resolving the Ukraine conflict, even without Washington's backing. Statements from key leaders—including UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, French President Emmanuel Macron, and German-elected Chancellor Friedrich Merz—reflect a growing European willingness to take decisive action. Notably, these leaders have expressed openness to deploying troops in Ukraine to guarantee peace following a potential Moscow-Kyiv agreement. This signals a renewed approach wherein European countries voluntarily commit resources and forces to ensure Ukraine's stability and avoid further escalation triggered by Russia in the aftermath of a possible peace deal.

In early March, European leaders took significant political moves to strengthen the continent's security posture. Following a first attempt by the French President, on March 2, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer hosted the "Securing Our Future" summit in London, bringing together eighteen European leaders to discuss increased military and economic support for Ukraine. Interestingly, there seemed to be an agreement that sustainable and long-term security could not be achieved without the inclusion of critical regional partners, such as Turkey, Norway, and, in a wider scenario, Canada. The meeting resulted in the formation of a new "Coalition of the



willing," with participants agreeing on a four-point plan: maintaining military aid to Ukraine, ramping up sanctions on Russia, ensuring post-ceasefire security for Ukraine, and formalizing the coalition as a forum for continued strategic coordination. On March 27, the second meeting of the France- and UK-led "coalition of the willing" to enhance support for Ukraine concluded with limited progress, particularly regarding the deployment of reassurance forces on Ukrainian soil. This reveals a crucial reality: Europe needs to build regional partnerships and develop diplomatic and political management mechanisms beyond the EU framework—bringing to light an initial point of tension.

The Obsolescence of Multilateral Frameworks and the Shift Toward Bilateralism

From a decision-making and foreign policy perspective, existing multilateral frameworks are proving increasingly obsolete and incapable of swiftly responding to a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape and the evolving challenges of European security. Recent developments in military agreements and defense cooperation highlight this trend. For instance, Turkey's rising role and a growing preference for bilateral mechanisms over multilateral ones underlines this shift. Bilateral engagements involving both EU member states and regional partners enable more agile responses to political and bureaucratic constraints in Brussels while delivering tangible security benefits.

In a period when even the EU is compelled to act faster than its own political and diplomatic mechanisms typically allow, bilateral relations, especially in defense and security, remain one of the few instruments available to states to address rising insecurity. This situation also creates opportunities to explore new avenues of cooperation, which—although situated within specific bilateral frameworks—can ultimately generate broader benefits at the European level.

Commentato [LMI]: Qui riferimento alla Turchia sembra un po' out of the blue



Reflecting these concerns, the Paris, London, and Brussels summits have demonstrated a newfound European determination to act independently from Washington. The United Kingdom's reassertion of its security leadership post-Brexit and France's vocal push for European sovereignty indicate that Europe is stepping up with concrete commitments rather than mere rhetoric.

Within this broader strategic shift, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has launched the Re-Arm Europe initiative, an ambitious €800 billion plan aimed at strengthening the EU's independent defense capabilities. This initiative reflects Europe's increasing recognition of the need to develop strategic autonomy, particularly as security threats mount on its eastern and southern peripheries, including the ongoing instability in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Despite the challenges posed by managing an investment of this scale—especially in terms of public acceptance—the decision appears to have set Brussels on a new path, driven by crisis-induced pragmatism. The key challenge ahead will be institutionalizing these mechanisms and managing critical regional partnership.

Turkey's Strategic Role in European Defense

In this overall framework, Turkey's rise as a strategic defense partner for Europe has gained considerable momentum, driven by shifting geopolitical conditions and the rapid expansion of its domestic defense industry. Turkey's unique geographical position enables it to serve as a diplomatic intermediary between Europe and Russia. It is exemplified by Ankara's previous mediation efforts to keep Ukraine-Russia diplomatic channels open while securing grain-export agreements amid the conflict. Additionally, Turkey's involvement in regional conflicts, notably in Syria and Libya, has proven essential in managing migration flows and countering extremism—both key European strategic concerns.



Alongside the political rhetoric, tangible commitments from EU member states drive new public-private defense sector partnerships. Turkey has emerged as a key player, exemplified by the recent joint venture between Italy's Leonardo and Turkey's Baykar in the UAV sector. Turkey's defense exports reached approximately \$7.1 billion in 2023, highlighting its technological competitiveness and increasing relevance as a European security partner. Another significant indicator of deepening defense cooperation is France's approval of air-to-air Meteor missile sales for Turkey's Eurofighter's fleet, as well as an agreement allowing Turkish defense firm Repkon to establish a facility in Germany by 2027 for the production of 155mm artillery ammunition.

The emergence of this pragmatic and strategic approach must, however, contend with a Turkey that continues its steady authoritarian drift. The arrest of Mayor İmamoğlu on March 19 on corruption charges—viewed by most observers as influenced by political considerations in light of ongoing concerns about lack of transparency and judicial independence from the government—raises a number of pressing questions. The EU's response to İmamoğlu's arrest reflected both concern and internal divisions. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called the arrest "deeply concerning," while High Representative Kaja Kallas and Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos issued a joint statement urging respect for the rule of law and fundamental rights. Commissioner Kos later reiterated these concerns in a separate statement, warning that detentions, deportations, fines, and broadcast bans undermine press freedom and contradict Turkey's obligations as both a Council of Europe member and an EU candidate.

The European Parliament took the strong stance. It unanimously voting to postpone the upcoming Joint Parliamentary Committee meeting and called for future EU-Turkey cooperation to prioritize human rights and democratic principles. On April 1, a plenary debate in Strasbourg titled "Crackdown on Democracy in Türkiye" brought further attention to the issue. Commissioner Kos emphasized the seriousness of İmamoğlu's case and subsequently canceled a



scheduled meeting with Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hakan Fidan. While MEPs from across political groups expressed solidarity with the Turkish people, the Parliament's forthcoming report, led by Nacho Sánchez Amor, is expected to place a strong focus on Turkey's democratic decline. Despite this wave of criticism, the EU recognizes the necessity of keeping diplomatic channels with Ankara open. Ultimately, the NATO meeting of foreign ministers in Brussels on April 3rd and 4th, along with the uncertain participation of EU and notable European diplomats and policymakers in the Antalya Diplomacy Forum (ADF) in mid-April, will clarify whether Turkey's internal democratic turmoil poses an insurmountable obstacle for the EU and its member states in deepening security collaborations with Ankara.

Challenges to European Defense Cohesion

While bilateral initiatives offer a promising path toward deeper defense collaboration, significant obstacles persist within Europe. Greek opposition exemplifies the ongoing challenges, as demonstrated by Athens' discontent over France's Meteor missile sales to Turkey and Baykar's acquisition of Italy's Piaggio Aerospace. Already in February 2024, previous discord within Europe materialized in Greece's veto, supported by Cyprus and France, against an EU-funded sale of Turkish drones to Ukraine. In light of Trump's recent initiatives, some foresee a deepening rift between Washington and Europe. In contrast, others believe that by enhancing its security commitments in line with U.S. expectations, Europe can mend transatlantic ties and secure a role in shaping Ukraine's future.

These episodes highlight the immediate benefits of bilateral cooperation but also underscore the EU's most pressing challenge: constructing a truly unified and coherent defense vision resilient to external shocks and shared but not dependent on external actors. Overcoming national security divergences is essential to developing a continental strategy that is both consistent and sustainable in the medium to long term. At the political level, the EU must also consider



how its emerging pragmatic defense approach aligns with the historical principles guiding its foreign policy. Striking a balance between strategic imperatives and foundational democratic values remains crucial as Europe navigates its evolving security landscape.

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