

If Europe wants peace, it must plan for war

But none of its major governments seems ready to face the future



THE SECURITY of Europe is entering a perilous and enduring decline. In 2025 Russia will have the upper hand in Ukraine. America, looking towards Asia under President Donald Trump, will become viciously transactional. **Not since the 1930s have European leaders so urgently needed to summon the courage to face reality and the statesmanship to take action.** Unfortunately, Europe's leaders are weak and distracted by their problems at home. Instead of standing up they are more likely to bury their heads deeper in the sand.

The danger begins in Ukraine. It comes not only from Russia's slow, relentless advance in the east—though, as the Ukrainian army is hollowed out, that looks ever more likely to cause the front to collapse. The real problem is that Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, knows the West has been unwilling to give Ukraine enough money or weapons to defend itself.

What is more, Mr Putin knows the West has failed to stop Russia, even though doing so would avoid the costly, dangerous alternative of defending the frontiers of northern and eastern Europe instead. He will rightly surmise that Europe is too weak-willed and complacent to face the changing geopolitical reality. If he concludes that he has more chances to disrupt NATO, his behaviour will become yet more aggressive.

The election of Mr Trump multiplies the threat. Ukraine has shown how much European security still depends on American hard power, 30 years after the end of the cold war. But the United States is globally over-extended and needs Europe to take more responsibility for its own defence. Even under a Democratic president, America's attention would have been drifting towards Asia.

Mr Trump will accelerate this process. Although unpredictability will be a central feature of his foreign policy, some of his beliefs are fixed. These include the idea that alliances are nothing more than contracts in which America provides security as a service.

No matter that America also gains from its alliances diplomatically and militarily, in ways that Mr Trump ignores. If America is to continue to back Europe, Mr Trump will want something tangible in return, whether on trade, military contracts or direct

payments. He could even do a deal with Mr Putin, over the heads of European leaders, to carve up Ukraine.

Either way, as members of an explicitly transactional NATO, European countries will no longer feel they can depend on America's cast-iron promise to fight alongside them if they are attacked. Mr Putin knows this, too, and that will be a further incentive for him to destabilise and attack the places to his west.

His motive is simple, but existential—at least in his eyes. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia discovered that it could not thrive in the ordered, democratic, American-led world. The only way for Russia to claim its place as one of the great powers is to destroy the foundations of that order, including NATO, the European Union and the credibility of Western democracies. For Europe, therefore, the stakes are existential, too. You would never know it. Although frontier states feel the bear's breath on their necks, many others are absorbed in their own dramas.

It is hard to say which is in shorter supply: money or leadership. Germany, under the small-thinking Olaf Scholz, is tearing itself apart. In France a minority government survives at the behest of the pro-Russian Marine Le Pen, while the political classes position themselves ahead of the presidential election in 2027. An inexperienced Labour government in Britain is absorbed by fumbling efforts at domestic reform.

None of them is ready to face the future. The possibility of Mr Trump's return has long been clear, but Europe has been unable to draw up a coherent plan if he pulls the plug on Ukraine, as he has threatened to. Though Brussels will redirect a chunk of EU money to defence, Europe has suffered persistent shortages of arms, despite warnings that its defence industry is underpowered. National budgets will have to rise, too.

The task of making Europe safe is immense, and will take years. All the more reason to start work now. Leaders must be clear to their people about the dangers ahead, starting with the idea that Russia wants to destroy the EU and NATO, not just Ukraine.

Another requirement is for European countries to forge a common front. Both Mr Putin and Mr Trump will strive to divide them. For Mr Putin division is an end in itself; for Mr Trump it is a means to undermine Europe's leverage in negotiations. Britain's departure from the EU is an obstacle to industrial mobilisation. But it is a member of NATO and the Joint Expeditionary Force, a northern European partnership.

The last requirement is to start building a deterrent to Mr Putin. Europe needs larger armed forces. They need to be equipped by a defence industry with greater capacity. They need a command structure, in case Mr Trump refuses to let America fight. It will not come cheap. Europe has been unable to muster enough will-power to prevent a Ukrainian defeat. In 2025, does it have the resolve to avert something even worse? ●

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