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The European Union

Successes and Failures of a Peace Project

Time Bridge. Peace and Cross-Cultural Dialoge, hg. v. Mühlbauer, Stoev, Swoboda, 2026, S. 37–63
https://doi.org/10.25364/978-3-903374-67-6_4

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Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Europäische Union als Friedensprojekt in einer zunehmend fragmentierten und multipolaren Welt. Er zeigt, wie Europas historischer Erfolg bei der Überwindung von Nationalismus und Krieg durch politische und wirtschaftliche Integration heute durch geopolitische Rivalitäten, den russischen Angriffskrieg, transatlantische Unsicherheit, wirtschaftliche Abhängigkeiten und neue Militarisierung herausgefordert wird. Eine europäische Friedensstrategie muss daher glaubwürdige Verteidigungsfähigkeit mit Diplomatie, Rüstungskontrolle, Abrüstung, internationalem Recht und Konfliktprävention verbinden. Zugleich gilt es, wirtschaftliche und technologische Souveränität zu stärken und Klimawandel, soziale Ungleichheit und Migration zu bewältigen. Der Beitrag plädiert für einen pragmatischen „wertebasierten Realismus“: Europa sollte weder Großmächten untergeordnet sein noch deren Machtpolitik reproduzieren, sondern als verantwortungsvolle Mittelmacht durch Kooperation, flexible Bündnisse und Dialog mit dem Globalen Süden handeln.

Schlagwörter: Europäische Integration, Peacebuilding, Strategische Autonomie, Internationale Ordnung

Abstract

This article examines the European Union as a peace project in an increasingly fragmented and multipolar world. It argues that Europe’s historical success in overcoming nationalism and war through political and economic integration is increasingly challenged by geopolitical rivalry, Russian aggression, transatlantic uncertainty, economic dependencies and renewed militarisation. A European peace strategy must therefore combine credible defence and deterrence with renewed commitment to diplomacy, arms control, disarmament, international law and conflict prevention. At the same time, Europe must strengthen its economic, technological and energy sovereignty while addressing climate change, social inequality and migration. The article advocates a pragmatic form of “value-based realism”: Europe should neither subordinate itself to great powers nor seek to reproduce their power politics, but act as a responsible middle power through flexible coalitions, multilateral cooperation and dialogue with the Global South. European peace requires both the capacity to defend itself and the political courage to pursue cooperation, reconciliation and a sustainable international order.

Keywords: European Integration, Peacebuilding, Strategic Autonomy, International Order

Introductory Remarks

This article is the result of my experiences as a politician working primarily in Europe, as well as my reading of and engagement with the writings of social scientists and commentators on current events. As such, the article reflects an inherently subjective perspective shaped by my personal experiences and choices. From the early stages of my engagement with political thought and practice, the prevention and resolution of conflict have been central concerns. My approach has not been guided by illusions, but rather by a combination of realism and hope. When Martin Wolf, chief economist of the Financial Times, who has Austrian roots, was asked to name the summer "that made him who he is," he replied:

> *My choice of life-changing summer is 1946. I was born in August of that year (…) it was the first year after the end of the Second World War." He elaborated: "So many men and women in my parents' generation chose life because they trusted in a better future. They were right to do so: their children have lived in a golden age of peace and plenty. My life began with optimism. We need such optimism again (Financial Times 2026).*

I, too, was born in 1946 and grew up with the same sense of optimism. Although the present moment makes optimism difficult, it is precisely optimism what we need—tempered by a strong dose of realism. This approach serves as the guiding principle of my contribution.

From War to Peace and Back

The history of the European continent can largely be understood as the history of war. Wars fought on European soil, but also wars waged by Europeans in foreign territories. As Margaret MacMillan writes in her book How Conflict Shaped Us: "Greed for what others have, whether it is food for survival, women for servitude or procreation, precious minerals, trade or land, has always motivated war". Greed was at the origin of many wars in European history. In connection with curiosity and Christian missionary ideology, it also led also to colonialism around the globe. European countries were involved in violent competition to gain a large share of foreign territories, natural resources, and even slaves. (MacMillan 2020)

Again and again, efforts were undertaken to establish peace, especially when countries and their armies were exhausted. Emperors, kings, queens, dukes and their ministers tried to agree on the borders of 'their' territories in Europe as well as on foreign continents. Sometimes they decided even on the religion of 'their' people. But basically, the greedy interests of leaders and delegated entities like the

Dutch and British East India Companies were the main issues they pursued. Only secondarily were they interested in the economic and social conditions their subjects had to live with. And so, the agreed peace treaties were overthrown when the monarchs or their prime ministers, chancellors etc., feared losing relative power and influence or when they expected to gain new territories and resources by starting a war.

The Paris Peace Treaty

The last century had two World Wars starting in Europe, with devastating effects for its societies. After the horrible consequences of World War I, H.G. Wells called this war the "War that ends all Wars" a phrase later adopted by US President Woodrow Wilson. Unfortunately, however, World War I was not the end of all wars. And it was President Woodrow Wilson who—despite many good intentions—was part of a group of 'peacemakers' who, unintentionally, laid the ground to the next war. At least, that was the conclusion of John Maynard Keynes in his analysis of the Paris Peace Conference. (Wells 1914; Keynes 1919)

The famous economist wrote a detailed analysis of deliberations in Paris and the probable consequences of what had been agreed upon. He argued that the dismantling of the empires and the demand for extremely high reparations from the losers had disastrous consequences. In The Economic Consequences of Peace, published in 1919, he concluded: "Those who controlled the Conference may bow before the gusts of popular opinion, but they will never lead us out of our troubles" (p. 215). And in Chapter VI, he stated: "The Treaty includes no provisions for the economic rehabilitation of Europe - nothing to make the defeated Central Empires into good neighbors, nothing to stabilize the new States of Europe, nothing to reclaim Russia; nor does it promote in any way a compact of economic solidarity amongst the Allies themselves, no arrangement was reached at Paris for restoring the disordered finances of France and Italy, or adjust the systems of the Old World and the New"(p. 218). (Keynes 1919, 215, 218)

The basic ideas of the 14 Points presented by Woodrow Wilson concentrated on the right of self-determination of the different European peoples but did not include ideas of a new cooperative Europe. Wilson himself proposed establishing a League of Nations; however, as the United States was not ready to join the League, it was weak from the very beginning. Moreover, the European leaders who won the war were not interested in designing a new Europe. They struggled to preserve their own power, including by resisting any form of decolonization. They rejected the idea of granting sovereignty and independence to the colonized peoples. Regarding

the European continent, it was a dangerous illusion to believe that the destruction of some empires and creating a multitude of independent small states would, by itself, lead to peace. Leaders did not envision that small and weak states could hardly maintain their independence in the neighborhood of larger, greedy, and expansionist states. As a result, small states often became the first victim of their aggressive and more powerful neighbors. Wilson's instance on breaking up some existing empires—without creating a cooperative framework—met the interest of the major victorious powers in Europe, which sought to maintain or even extend their spheres of influence. (Wilson 1918; League of Nations 1919)

New Ideas for a European Community

It was rather inside the United States administration that one could find several officials who developed interesting and forward-looking concepts for a renewed Europe. One of them was the diplomat William Bullitt, who underlined the necessity of constructing a Europe capable of overcoming narrow-minded nationalism. In his letters to President Roosevelt he reiterated: "An integrated democratic Europe, pacific but armed, is a vital element for the creation of world peace". And: "Europe is to be organized as a democratic unit which will take place along with the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and China as one of the great guarantors of world peace". However, neither the US nor European powers listened to rational arguments presented by some American experts. Germany's right-wing forces—as had been foreseen by John Maynard Keynes—used the severe peace conditions to gain support for a revanchist policy, a policy which lead to war. (Bullitt 1946)

William Bullitt and some of his colleagues also pleaded that the Western powers should develop positive relations with the new government in Russia. However, the predominantly European Western powers feared the export of the Russian Communist Revolution to their own countries. One cannot know whether a more cooperative attitude towards Russia would have resulted in common efforts to establish a peace-oriented Europe. However, it was certainly not helpful to leave it to a revanchist Germany to initiate military cooperation with Russia. This very cooperation culminated in the shameful Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. It sought to define and divide Europe into German and Russian spheres of influence before Nazi-Germany, driven by its extreme greed for expansion, attacked the Soviet Union.

So, the 'Road not Taken' after World War I was the road towards a united Europe. It required another terrible war and the Holocaust to give more Europeans the

courage and the strong conviction to build a united Europe, or at least to begin laying the foundations for peace on the continent and to contribute to world peace. However, we remain far from Immanuel Kant's concept of 'perpetual peace' (Kant 1795/2006). Even today, when the differences between a Europe shaped of nationalism—which led to war—and a common Europe committed to peace can be clearly seen, some on the extreme right continue to long for a Europe consisting of sovereign, independent nations. Some even view the Russian leadership, which destroyed peace through its clear aggression against Ukraine, as an ally for their extreme nationalist aspirations. Similarly, the greedy ambitions of the US President Donald Trump have received considerable sympathies, at least until he started his war against Iran and demanded to acquire Greenland.

New Ideas for a European Community

The main question in 1945 was if Europeans, especially their leaders, could learn from the disastrous consequences of the failed Paris Peace Treaty. As Tony Judd wrote in Post War: A History of Europe Since 1945, some conditions of the political landscape were different in comparison to 1918: "At the conclusion of the First World War it was borders that were invented and adjusted, while people were on the whole left in place. After 1945 what happened was rather the opposite: with one major exception boundaries stayed broadly intact and people were moved instead." (The exception was—again—Poland). Tony Judd continues: "There was a feeling among Western policymakers that the League of Nations, and the minority clauses in the Versailles Treaties, had failed and that it would be a mistake even to try and resurrect them". (Judt 2005)

The main question was rather the question "which history had placed upon the agenda in 1945, and which had quietly but insistently dislodged or outlived all other claims upon Europeans' attention. What future was there for separate European nation-states? Did they have a future"? The answer given by most European leaders in 1945 was: yes, there is a future for European nation-states—but only if peace in Europe could be maintained. This, however, required European steps towards integration to overcome the extreme nationalism that had led to war.

But how far should this integration go? Again, the idea of constructing the 'United States of Europe' was promoted. But basically, there was no strong popular support for that idea. And one should not forget that the United States of America were founded by a colonial expansion in connection with expulsion and cleansing of the native population. Europe, on the other hand, was and is a continent of different countries with different and often contradicting historical experiences. The partly

antagonistic history of the different European countries, together with the respective ideologies and prejudices, cannot be wiped out and just simply be forgotten. As Brendan Simms explains in The Return of the Grate Powers: "The European Union has deep historical roots because it is so recent. It was founded against its own past". (Simms 2019)

Rebuilding Europe After Catastrophe

It is a principal question—in personal life as well as in relations between nations—how to begin a new future after a brutal and violent aggression 'ended'. Should the victorious powers after 1945 have waited until the defeated aggressors had shown repentance and paid more or less full compensation for all the damage caused? Would that have even been possible? And who was the aggressor? Was it only Hitler and Mussolini and their immediate followers? To what extend were those who voted for them and those who executed their orders responsible for the war crimes committed? And what about the collaborators in occupied territories?

Yes, in relation to some perpetrators, the legal situation was clear. A few were sentenced to death and some others to long terms of imprisonment. But justice can never be complete. Even today, there are discussions in Poland about if and to what extend Poles were actively involved in the killing of Jews.

All these issues should and must be addressed, given the atrocious crimes that were committed. However, justice and reconciliation must always be complemented by a forward-looking perspective. The courageous decisions made by leaders after World War II to establish a new European reality made a decisive contribution to peace among former adversaries. A perpetual pursuit of revenge and reparations poisons a shared future and lays the groundwork for new conflicts. Naturally, the total defeat of Nazi and Fascist regimes and their armies served as the essential prerequisite for true reconciliation. (Judt 2005; Mazower 2013)

That will mark a fundamental difference in how Russian aggression ends—whenever that day comes. At the end of World War II, Nazi Germany was not only military defeated, but its domestic fascist regime also collapsed. Conversely, negotiations with Putin to end his aggression against Ukraine might only consolidate his hold on power. In any case, the European Union and its leaders must draw lessons from the aftermath of both World Wars. They must avoid repeating past mistakes and actively open pathways toward a shared future—however difficult that may be.

The Role of Economic Integration

The initial steps of post-World War II integration focused on the economy, beginning with the integration of the European steel and coal industries. Many argue that these early steps prove the European Union is a predominantly economic organization, with critics on the left contending it demonstrates a fundamentally capitalist nature. However, one must recognize that integrating the production of key resources necessary to wage was fundamentally an essential political necessity. In the wake of two devastating European wars fueled by competing power interests, pooling these economic resources was paramount—not only to prevent future conflict, but also to strengthen the economic foundation of a cooperative Europe. Indeed, John Maynard Keynes had already emphasized the necessity of a sound economic basis for lasting peace in Europe. (European Coal and Steel Community 1951; Monnet 1978)

Indeed, even during World War II, thinkers and statesmen were envisioning a postwar Europe that would not repeat the mistakes of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and the aftermath. One of them was Jean Monnet. On August 5, 1943, he declared in front of the French Committee of National Liberation:

"There will be no peace in Europe if the States are reconstituted on the basis of national sovereignty, with all that that entails in terms of prestige politics and economic protectionism. The countries of Europe are too small to guarantee their people the prosperity that modern conditions make possible and consequently necessary. Prosperity for the States of Europe and the social developments that must go with it will only be possible if they form a federation or a 'European entity' that makes them into a common economic unit."

Across the arguments of thinkers from Keynes to Monnet, there is a clear thread linking the preservation of peace and overcoming of nationalism by economic cooperation and social well-being. Peace cannot be simply wished into existence, nor does it emerge purely through the goodwill of enlightened leaders. Where coal and steel were once necessary to wage war, today it is primarily new technologies which are necessary to building an effective defense. Furthermore, sustainable energy has become a vital resource for all modern economic activity. Consequently, sound energy and technology strategies—including securing critical natural resources—are essential assets that a strong political entity must cultivate. In this regard, the European Union must step up its efforts, as the United States remains a formidable competitor and China presents a rising rival with a clear competitive strategy. (Monnet 1978; Keynes 1919)

Neoliberal Europe

Turning to the European economy, it is also worth examining the role of the European Union as a vast single market and a participant in the global neo-liberal transformation. Because the European Union is not a traditional sovereign state with direct regulatory authority over a defined population, its primary task was to establish a common market for business. This step was essential to prepare Europe for international competition, as economic interdependence and market scale remain vital prerequisites for global competitiveness. Indeed, during the initial phase of constructing the Common Market, the regulatory framework served precisely this purpose.

Furthermore, liberal trade relations were seen as instrumental to fostering peace by diverting countries away from nationalistic policies. Rather than securing public support through aggressive foreign policies, governments could deliver economic prosperity and also social welfare for their citizens. Francis Fukuyama clearly articulated this philosophy in "The end of History?", arguing that permanent peace and the global rise of liberal capitalism were inextricably linked:

"The triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism (…) What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post war history, but the end of history as such: the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government (…) there are powerful reasons for believing that it is the ideal that will govern the material in the long run." (Fukuyama 1989)

In some way, this faith in a liberal ideal and order defining both the economic and political relations served as a foundational pillar of the European Union's philosophy.

What was overlooked, however, is that liberal economic and trade policies do not benefit all citizens equally. Such relations inevitably produce winners and losers, both globally and domestically. While globalized trade helped lift millions out of poverty—most notably in China—it has left other regions vulnerable. On the flip side, this means that relative welfare gains in China are closely connected with losses in Europe. For too long, these domestic costs and strategic risks were neglected, resulting in eroding public support for the European Union. This declining support, in turn, compromises the Union's global standing and its capacity for international peace-building. (Rodrik 2011; Milanovic 2016)

What Europe requires today is a Union capable of invigorating its economies, particularly in key technological sectors. Two high-level reports to the European Commission—the Letta report and, most notably the Draghi report— have laid the groundwork for a rejuvenation of Europe's Single Market. Without strengthening the competitiveness of European companies, Europe risks lagging behind the major economic competitors. (Letta 2024; Draghi 2024)

In his speech to the European Parliament on September 17, 2024 Mario Draghi stated:

"The core problem in Europe is that new companies with new technologies are not rising in our economy (...) The innovation gap is at the root of Europe's slowing productivity growth relative to the U.S. So we must bring back innovation to Europe."

But the report also underpins the necessity of decarbonization and frames it rightfully as an opportunity for Europe's industry. Draghi also supports Europe as a peace project: "Peace is the first and foremost objective of Europe, at home and abroad. And we must continue in these steadfast efforts. But security threats are rising and we must be prepared." The report asks for securing and diversifying critical value-chains for materials which underpin the European industry and a genuine 'foreign economic policy' in which security interests, European values, and support for middle and low-income countries should be reconciled. In addition, the report argues that Europe needs to step up investments into science and education, the infrastructure, and defense. An innovative, decarbonized, and internationally competitive economy is the backbone necessary to overcome economic crises and coercion. Only with an innovative, competitive, and balanced economy Europe can sustain its agency when it comes to upholding peace in the world. (Draghi 2024)

Besides economics, political and ideological interests may create new conflicts or reopen old ones. It was again Francis Fukuyama who feared himself, that there could even large-scale conflicts evolve in which "large states still caught in the grip of history" will be involved. Today, we can see how the 'post-historical' Europe is confronted by an aggressive Russia which is in the grip of its imperial past. In support, right wing forces inside the European Union also express a "powerful nostalgia for the times when history existed". In addition to these disruptions, the mixture of economic threats – especially concerning the supply of energy and critical materials such as rare earths – and political disruption by major powers like Russia, the U.S., and China are an enormous challenge for Europe and worldwide peace.

Smaller States are the Main Beneficiaries

In many circumstances, peace is closely linked to sound economic development and robust institutions. But one has to recognize the importance of people's perception of an economically efficient and just society. What is often neglected is the fact, that economic cooperation is helping to achieve that condition for all nations regardless the strongest ones. Especially smaller and middle powers are profiting—economically and politically—of being part of a bigger community. All too often, they have been the victims of expansionist policies of big powers. These do not hesitate to launch military operations against smaller states when it is of use for gaining an advantage in their competition with other regional or world powers.

Even to declare neutrality did in many cases not prevent such an attack. There were many cases in Europe which testify the fragility of the concept of neutrality in preventing an armed aggression. Sometimes opponent big powers agreed to divide small countries between themselves as in the case of Poland and the Baltic countries. Also, bilateral alliances were not efficient in preventing an attack by a big neighbor in comparison to multilateral organizations like NATO and communities like the European Union—at least this is the experience so far.[KS3.1]

Of course, the role and influence of small states and even middle powers inside a community of states depends on the legal construction of the community. The European Union is built on a voting system based on proportionality, combined with additional rights for smaller states. This concerns the voting procedures in the Council but also the distribution of seats in the European Parliament. Citizens of smaller states are 'overrepresented' in relation to citizens of bigger states. This is often criticized as unfair and in contradiction to key principles of democracy. However, also the United States have an equal number of representatives of the individual states in the Senate, unlike in the House of Representatives.

The granting and protection of minority rights can, in itself, be seen as a violation of a purely numerical interpretation of democracy: one person, one vote. However, democratic communities need such minority protections to function effectively. And given the experience of European history, in which large states have repeatedly misused their power to occupy and absorb small and middle powers, this advantage given to small states can be justified. One could even argue that this balance between majority rule and minority rights contributes to the maintenance of peace.

Peace Strategies Without Common Foreign and Defense Policy?

The foundations for the development of a common Europe were laid through several successful treaties. In 1951, Belgium, France, Western Germany, Italy,

Luxemburg, and the Netherlands founded the European Coal and Steel Community. The same six countries established the European Economic Community with the Treaty of Rome. The European Union was created with the Maastricht Treaty, which entered into force in 1993. The Treaty of Lisbon, which entered into force in 2009, gave the European Union a more constitutional structure. (European Coal and Steel Community 1951; European Economic Community 1957; European Union 1992, 2007)

Two questions remained unresolved in all the discussions about strengthening the European Union's capacity to act. The first was—and is still—whether the European Union can contribute to peace without an agreed foreign and security strategy and a designated representative who can speak and act on its behalf. The second concerns its capacity for military deterrence and defense.

With regard to foreign and security policy, there were several attempts to establish a common European Foreign and Security Policy and to create the position of a European 'Foreign Minister'. All these attempts had limited success, although the Lisbon Treaty created the position of High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who leads the External Action Service and acts also as Vice-President of the European Commission. However, the President of the European Council and the Commission President also speak and act on matters of European foreign and security policy. In addition, there are the individual foreign ministers of the Member States. Furthermore, most foreign policy decisions must be taken unanimously by the Member States, although certain forms of abstention are possible. (European Union 2007)

Defense as such was never a competence of the European Union. NATO was seen by most EU member states—which are at the same time NATO member states—a prerogative of NATO. This was also shared by the United States. Nevertheless, there was one attempt by former rivals and enemies on the initiative of the French Prime Minister Pleven to establish a defense cooperation outside of NATO. The European Defense Community Treaty was signed in Paris in May 1952. However, just two years later, in August 1954, the French National Assembly failed to approve the establishment of a European Defense Community. (Pleven 1950; European Defence Community 1952)

The recent efforts to give the European Union—even in a limited capacity—a role in defending European countries such as Ukraine cannot compensate for the missed opportunity to establish a European defense structure. Such a Defense Community could have given the European Union additional support and strength. The relationship between the European Union and the United States would be much

more balanced if the Defence Community had been accepted by the French Parliament. Trump's aspirations concerning Greenland might never have been expressed or could have been rejected immediately and convincingly.

Such a defense community could have been a separate organization but closely linked to the 'civilian' European Union. Neutral or non-aligned countries could still have joined the European Union, but they would have had to accepted that its defense counterpart would play an important role in the integration process. The growing importance of defense for European integration must also be recognized today, even without the existence of a parallel European Defense Community. The idea of a Defense Community allied with, but not identical to, the European Union was recently taken up by the German economist Hans-Werner Sinn in his book "Trump, Putin und die Vereinigten Staaten von Europa".

Yes, European countries had the opportunity to benefit from the collapse of the Soviet empire and its military alliance, the Warsaw Pact. But the peace dividend could only be enjoyed as long as peace was neither threatened nor brutally violated. With Russian aggression, that is now the case. It is therefore a fundamental misunderstanding of defense and deterrence to equate them with militarism or an eagerness to go to war. Defense is about preventing wars—even if this can be very costly. Yet the most expensive and destructive option is war itself. Effective defense should and must not preclude a willingness to engage in disarmament negotiations and pursue arms-control efforts. The Cold War demonstrated how these two approaches could be combined and how the risk of a hot war could be drastically reduced. (Schelling 1966; Freedman 2003)

Breakdown of Soviet Union and the Eastern Block

The development of the European Economic Community (EEC), including its Southern enlargement through the accession of Greece, Spain, and Portugal and its Northern enlargement through the accession of the United Kingdom and Denmark, took place against the backdrop of Europe's political and ideological division between East and West. European integration was therefore largely a Western European project, with only a minority in West Germany continuing to envisage reunification as a distant political possibility.

The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and the subsequent establishment of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) represented, for many participating states, an attempt to consolidate the existing European security order while creating limited opportunities for improving civil and political liberties in the Eastern Bloc. Western states emphasized the commitments of communist

governments to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, while the Soviet Union and its allies valued Western recognition of the existing territorial order and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states. (OSCE 1975)

The Helsinki process contributed significantly to European stability by providing a framework for dialogue, cooperation, and conflict management. Yet civil resistance movements and dissidents in Eastern Europe were not primarily concerned with preserving the existing political order; they sought to transform it. They increasingly used the principles and commitments of the Helsinki Final Act as normative and political resources in their struggle for civil liberties and human rights. Their persistence, combined with growing political and economic support from the West, contributed to the erosion of communist rule. (Thomas 2001; OSCE 1975)

The transformation of the political systems of Eastern Europe nevertheless did not result in a major military confrontation between East and West. Although the upheavals challenged the political status quo established during the Cold War, neither side had a clear interest in escalating the transformation into a direct war. Even when Soviet-led Warsaw Pact forces intervened militarily in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 to suppress political reforms and popular resistance, Western governments ultimately refrained from direct military intervention.

Following the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and, subsequently, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, however, the question of how to construct a new European security order became unavoidable. Considerable controversy remains over what Western governments and Soviet representatives actually discussed or agreed upon concerning the future security architecture of Europe and, in particular, the future role of NATO. What is less contested is the asymmetry of power between the Western states and the Soviet/Russian leadership during this period. The Western governments could draw on substantial political, economic, and institutional support from the newly independent states and the former Soviet satellites.

Countries such as Poland and the Baltic states strongly advocated NATO membership, viewing the Alliance primarily as a source of security and protection against potential future Russian domination. Their strategic orientation was shaped profoundly by historical experiences of Soviet occupation and political subordination. At the same time, these states also sought membership in the European Union. However, EU accession required compliance with extensive political, economic, and institutional criteria and was therefore a more demanding and protracted process. NATO membership, by contrast, offered a comparatively

immediate security guarantee, particularly through the presence and military capabilities of the United States. (Sperling and Webber 2017)

This raises a fundamental question for the subsequent evolution of the European security order: Could the long-term consequences of NATO enlargement have been anticipated, and could an alternative security architecture have provided the security guarantees sought by the Central and Eastern European states without reproducing a division between insiders and outsiders?

The issue can also be understood from the perspective of smaller states seeking security through multilateral institutions. Having experienced domination by a great power, many Central and Eastern European states sought to embed themselves within institutional frameworks that would constrain unilateral power and provide collective security. Their decision to seek protection under the NATO umbrella was therefore not simply imposed from the outside; it was also driven by their own security preferences and historical experiences. The subsequent deterioration of relations between NATO and Russia demonstrates, however, the enduring dilemma of European security: measures perceived by one group of states as defensive and stabilizing can simultaneously be perceived by another great power as threatening and destabilizing. NATO, and subsequently the European Union, provided the security guarantees and institutional frameworks that the Central and Eastern European states had sought. For a considerable period, these arrangements appeared to provide a relatively stable basis for the European security order.

In his "Homelands: A Personal History of Europe", Timothy Garton Ash offers an important perspective on the relationship between the West and Russia. He argues that, properly understood, the enlargement of the West did not necessarily entail the political or strategic marginalization of Russia. Rather, the Western states made considerable efforts to accommodate post-Soviet Russia within the institutions and norms of the liberal international order. The 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, for example, envisaged extensive cooperation, an aspiration that was subsequently institutionalized through the NATO-Russia Council, inaugurated with Vladimir Putin's participation. According to Garton Ash, it was only during the second half of the 2000s that Russia's relationship with the West shifted decisively towards confrontation. (Garton Ash 2020; NATO 1997)

Nevertheless, an important question remains as to whether NATO and the European Union could have developed more substantial mechanisms for integrating Russia into a cooperative European security architecture. The Charter of Paris for a New Europe, adopted in 1990, and the 1994 Budapest Memorandum

already articulated principles of cooperation, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and a common European security order. Yet these commitments remained largely declaratory and were not translated into a sufficiently robust institutional framework capable of accommodating the divergent security interests of Russia and the expanding Euro-Atlantic community. (Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe 1990; United States et al. 1994)

At the same time, it is necessary to question whether a substantially different relationship would ultimately have been acceptable to the Russian leadership, particularly under Vladimir Putin. The political system that emerged under Putin, characterized by increasing executive centralization and authoritarian consolidation, as well as an economic system marked by the concentration of wealth and political influence among powerful oligarchic networks, increasingly diverged from the political and economic principles underpinning European integration. Consequently, even extensive economic interdependence between Russia and individual European states—including Germany and Austria—proved insufficient to prevent the deterioration of relations and, ultimately, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. (Galeotti 2020)

What is particularly important is that there was no immediate military threat to Russia that can reasonably be regarded as providing a legitimate justification for its aggression against Ukraine. Russian security concerns and perceptions of strategic encirclement may help explain the Kremlin's threat perception, but they do not constitute a legal or moral justification for the use of force against a sovereign state.

At the same time, the ambiguity surrounding NATO's 2008 Bucharest Summit was strategically problematic. The declaration that Ukraine and Georgia "will become members of NATO" at some unspecified point in the future created a form of strategic uncertainty: it offered neither an immediate security guarantee nor a clear pathway to membership. This ambiguity arguably contributed to an unstable security environment in which expectations, commitments, and deterrence signals were insufficiently aligned. (NATO 2008)

More broadly, both NATO and the European Union underestimated the complexity of managing their relationship with a resurgent and increasingly revisionist Russia. A more coherent, sophisticated, and forward-looking European security strategy might have reduced some of the risks associated with this deteriorating relationship. At the same time, such an alternative cannot be assumed to have prevented Russian aggression.

The failure of NATO and the European Union to develop a more effective long-term strategy towards Russia must therefore be critically examined. However, these

failures should not be conflated with responsibility for Russia's decision to wage war. Whatever the shortcomings, ambiguities, or strategic mistakes of Western policy, they cannot serve as a justification for Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The US: an Obstacle or an Amplifier of EU Peace Efforts?

The construction of a common political, economic, and military order in the Western Hemisphere after the Second World War rested fundamentally on two pillars: the predominance of the United States and the gradual political and economic integration of Western European states. The United States emerged from the war as the pre-eminent Western economic and political power and assumed a leading role in the emerging transatlantic order. The establishment of NATO in 1949 institutionalized this asymmetrical relationship. While the European allies retained political sovereignty, their military security remained heavily dependent on American capabilities and, above all, on the U.S. commitment to collective defence. The United States thus became the principal security guarantor of Western Europe vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. (NATO 1949; Lundestad 2003)

This transatlantic security relationship, however, should not be understood exclusively as a burden imposed by the United States on Europe. It also served important American strategic interests. The U.S. military presence in Europe provided Washington with substantial influence over European security policy while simultaneously anchoring the European allies within a broader U.S.-led international order. At the same time, European states benefited from the American security commitment and consequently had comparatively weak incentives to develop fully autonomous defence capabilities. The failure of the European Defence Community in the 1950s further constrained the development of an integrated European defence structure. Although European defence cooperation subsequently developed in various forms, it never produced a military capability capable of replacing the central role of the United States within the European security architecture.

This structural dependence became increasingly apparent after the end of the Cold War. With the disappearance of the Soviet threat, European states had even fewer incentives to develop independent strategic and military capabilities. The resulting situation created a persistent asymmetry: Europe possessed considerable economic and political resources, but remained dependent on the United States for key elements of strategic deterrence, intelligence, logistics, force projection, and advanced military capabilities.

The gradual reorientation of U.S. strategic priorities towards the Indo-Pacific therefore generated concern among European allies. The Obama administration's so-called "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia signaled that the strategic importance of Europe within U.S. grand strategy could no longer be taken for granted. During the Trump administration, these concerns intensified. Trump's repeated questioning of aspects of the transatlantic relationship, including the U.S. commitment to European allies, contributed to growing uncertainty regarding the reliability of the American security guarantee. His statements concerning Greenland, including his refusal to exclude the use of coercive measures to acquire the territory, further illustrated the extent to which Washington itself could become a source of strategic uncertainty for European actors. (Obama 2011; The White House 2022)

Nevertheless, the transatlantic security relationship cannot easily be dismantled. European armed forces remain deeply integrated with U.S. military capabilities, command structures, intelligence systems, logistical networks, and defence-industrial supply chains. European states also rely extensively on American technologies and weapons systems, particularly in areas such as satellite intelligence, strategic airlift, missile defence, precision-guided systems, and advanced information and communications technologies.

Consequently, European strategic autonomy cannot be achieved simply by replacing American weapons systems with European alternatives. It would require the development of a broader European capacity for independent strategic assessment, technological innovation, defence production, intelligence, logistics, and military power projection. The central challenge is therefore not merely whether Europe should remain dependent on the United States, but whether it can develop sufficient capabilities to exercise meaningful strategic agency while preserving the benefits of transatlantic cooperation.

The fundamental question for the future of European security is thus whether the transatlantic relationship can evolve from a structurally asymmetric security dependency towards a more balanced partnership—or whether Europe's historical reliance on American power will continue to constrain the development of a genuinely autonomous European security architecture.

A Changed Global Environment

The European Union has endured successive regional and geopolitical crises without disintegrating. Its transatlantic alliance contributed significantly to this resilience, but European stability also depended on an international order that, despite frequent violations by major powers, provided a framework of rules,

institutions, and legal commitments. Russia's aggression against Ukraine represents a fundamental challenge to this order. At the same time, the return of great-power competition, the transactional approach of the Trump administration, and China's increasingly assertive regional policy indicate that the previous liberal order can no longer be taken for granted.

The central question is therefore what kind of international order is emerging and how the EU should respond. Maurizio Molinari (2026) identifies three possible trajectories: renewed great-power conflict, a new division into spheres of influence, or the gradual erosion of international norms into a more Hobbesian order. Brendan Simms similarly describes the "return of the great powers" while emphasizing Europe's continuing lack of political and military independence. The challenge for the EU is therefore not simply to become a "great power", but to acquire sufficient strategic capacity to shape its external environment. (Molinari 2026; Simms 2019)

This requires moving beyond the ambition to design a comprehensive global order. As Mark Leonard argues, Europe should develop greater adaptability and resilience, acting as an "artisan" rather than an architect of international order. Alexander Stubb and Mark Carney likewise advocate flexible, issue-based coalitions and a form of "variable geometry". Such an approach could enable the EU to cooperate more effectively with middle powers such as Canada and to build pragmatic coalitions around specific challenges. (Leonard 2021; Stubb 2024; Carney 2024)

However, strategic pragmatism requires internal capacity. The EU's ability to act internationally remains constrained by fragmented decision-making, national sovereignty, divergent strategic interests, political polarization, and the rise of Eurosceptic movements. Moreover, great powers possess forms of military, economic, and political leverage that the EU cannot easily reproduce. European strategic agency therefore depends not on emulating great-power politics, but on combining greater capacity with the EU's distinctive normative and institutional resources.

The same logic applies to sanctions. Their effectiveness is context-dependent: sanctions contributed to international pressure against apartheid and played a role in the diplomatic process surrounding Iran, while their effects in relation to Russia remain contested. Sanctions can be an important instrument of coercive diplomacy, but they cannot substitute for diplomacy itself. Conversely, diplomacy does not eliminate the need for coercive measures. A credible European foreign policy therefore requires a differentiated combination of diplomacy, sanctions,

economic incentives, development cooperation, peace building, and, where necessary, deterrence. (Pape 1997; Hufbauer et al. 2007)

The decisive criterion should be effectiveness in achieving clearly defined political objectives, applied consistently and without selective double standards. If the EU claims to defend international law and human rights, its responses to violations must be sufficiently coherent to retain normative credibility. The contrast between European responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and to Israeli policies in Gaza and the West Bank illustrates the political and normative difficulties created by perceived inconsistency.

Europe therefore faces a strategic dilemma: it must become more pragmatic without abandoning the principles that constitute its political identity. Strategic autonomy should not mean isolation, militarization, or the imitation of great-power politics. It should mean developing sufficient political, economic, diplomatic, and security capabilities to act autonomously where necessary, cooperate where possible, and contribute credibly to conflict prevention, peace building, and the preservation of international law.

Defence and Disarmament

Europe's future role requires a reassessment of its military, economic, and normative capacities. Although the EU is not a military alliance, its support for Ukraine and efforts to strengthen European defence capabilities increasingly give its foreign policy a significant security dimension. A credible European peace strategy therefore requires both sufficient defence capabilities and renewed commitment to disarmament, arms control, and nuclear non-proliferation. Europe must also adapt to a more contested international order. The erosion of the post-1945 security architecture, renewed great-power rivalry, and blurred boundaries between war and peace challenge the assumption that European peace can be taken for granted. Ivan Krastev, drawing on Jürgen Habermas's observation that "we are all children of May 8, 1945," identifies Europe's greatest achievement as having made war "unthinkable"—but also as having thereby created a strategic vulnerability. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated the fragility of European peace and the increasingly blurred boundary between war and peace. As Herfried Münkler argues, the clear legal distinction between war and peace characteristic of the European order of the past is increasingly obsolete. Europe must therefore reconcile its post-1945 commitment to peace with the need for credible capabilities of deterrence and defence. (Krastev 2017; Münkler 2023)

A second dimension of Europe's transformation concerns its economic model. Sustainable energy, digitalization, responsible applications of artificial intelligence, and deeper financial integration should form the basis of a European innovation strategy. Economic openness should be combined with measures against unfair competition, while climate policy and social cohesion remain central. At the same time, trade, development policy, labour-market policy, and migration require greater coordination at the European and multilateral levels.

Europe must also learn to exercise power responsibly. It will not match the material capabilities of the United States or China, but it can develop a distinctive role as a middle power. Gallip Dalay argues that middle powers can influence global order by reshaping priorities and norms through collective action. This requires Europe to engage the Global South not by exporting European standards, but by participating in their reciprocal construction. (Dalay 2024)

Such an approach corresponds to Alexander Stubb's concept of "value-based realism": maintaining commitments to freedom, fundamental rights, and international rules while recognizing cultural, historical, and geopolitical diversity. European influence should therefore rely increasingly on persuasion, cooperation, and compromise rather than coercion. (Stubb 2024)

Europe's political maturity also requires a consistent engagement with its past and present. "Never again" must apply universally: combating antisemitism and historical injustice must go hand in hand with opposing contemporary discrimination, war crimes, and violations of international law, irrespective of the actor responsible. Historical memory should inform present action rather than substitute for it.

Finally, Europe needs a broader public debate about its global role. Defence and peace building, economic openness and social protection, technological innovation and cultural identity should not be treated as mutually exclusive objectives. A sustainable European strategy requires connecting external action with citizens' interests and demonstrating that European security and prosperity are inseparable from peace beyond Europe's borders.

Intellectual and Political Background – Final Remarks

Our political opinions and analytical perspectives are shaped by a multitude of personal, historical, and intellectual influences. Reflecting on these origins can be valuable both for the author and for readers, particularly when analytical arguments lead to political conclusions. In my case, these conclusions have been

shaped by my upbringing, by encounters with political actors ranging from presidents and prime ministers to activists and ordinary citizens across Europe, particularly in Austria, and by extensive engagement with the work of social and political scientists. Throughout my career, I have not regarded political engagement and political analysis as mutually exclusive. Rather, I have sought—sometimes successfully, sometimes less so—to combine critical analysis with political practice.

I was born in the year following the end of the Second World War. Its consequences remained tangible throughout my childhood, particularly because I grew up near the Czechoslovak-Austrian border, close to Bratislava—a border that subsequently became part of the Iron Curtain. At one point, following an invitation from the local Soviet forces, I crossed the Danube by boat on the Caucasus. I still remember that journey with remarkable clarity.

My family had roots in Hungary and Bohemia, a heritage of which I was proud. I valued the fact that my country had historically been embedded within a broader Central European community. This was not incompatible with a strong sense of patriotism, which was firmly shaped by an explicitly anti-Nazi outlook. The narratives of the Second World War that I encountered as a child included the experiences of relatives who opposed the war and were killed during its early days, as well as the evacuation of our village from the war zone, which my father, a medical doctor, was responsible for organizing.

Soviet troops were a visible presence in our village. They sometimes sought medical treatment from my father and, on one occasion, invited us as primary-school children to attend a Russian circus. Later, as a student—and particularly during my tenure as Secretary-General of the United Nations Student Association (UNSA)—I developed close contacts with Russian and other Eastern European students. I understood these relationships as a modest personal contribution to peaceful coexistence. Nevertheless, I experienced the collapse of the Iron Curtain with profound enthusiasm.

As a Vienna City Councillor responsible for urban development and planning, I immediately established contacts with counterparts in Bratislava and Budapest. Shortly before the political transformations of 1989–1990, I had also been involved in preparing a World Exhibition that Vienna was planning jointly with Budapest. The project was ultimately abandoned following the political changes in the region and a negative referendum in Vienna.

My eighteen years in the European Parliament were likewise guided by the objective of building political bridges. Supporting European Union enlargement

was a central priority of my work in the Foreign Affairs Committee. I served as the European Parliament's first rapporteur for what was then officially known as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and later as rapporteur for Croatia's accession to the European Union. My engagement with the Western Balkans repeatedly brought me into contact with the consequences of conflicts in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. I was similarly involved in the Parliament's relations with the South Caucasus.

I also worked to strengthen parliamentary and social-democratic relations with Russia and Ukraine. Over time, however, I came to recognize the limits of these efforts. Neither the Russian political party Just Russia nor Ukraine's Party of Regions was prepared to embrace a genuinely social-democratic orientation. More broadly, I concluded that Russia was unlikely to develop into the kind of "strategic partner" that I had envisaged when I began preparing my report on Russia for the European Parliament.

My engagement with the Middle East provided another important dimension to this experience. I visited Israel and Palestine on numerous occasions and held discussions with political representatives, including Shimon Peres and Yasser Arafat. Their political positions were far apart, but I believed that an agreement might have been achievable under sufficiently strong and sustained international support, particularly from the United States and the European Union. Crossing checkpoints controlled by Israeli soldiers, I was repeatedly struck by the patience of ordinary Palestinians confronted with restrictive and often humiliating conditions. I also witnessed developments that, in my assessment, progressively undermined the viability of a two-state solution, particularly the expansion and political support of Israeli settlements.

I was similarly engaged in strengthening relations between the European Union and Turkey and in promoting dialogue between the Turkish authorities and Kurdish representatives, including Kurdish mayors in eastern Turkey. The Turkish authorities were frequently unwilling to pursue a meaningful path towards reconciliation, while some Kurdish representatives were themselves insufficiently prepared to compromise. I strongly supported Turkey's aspiration to join the European Union, a position that at times brought me into conflict with my own party leadership. At the same time, independently of President Erdoğan, whom I met several times in Ankara and Brussels, I increasingly recognized the difficulties posed by Turkey's reluctance to fully embrace and respect fundamental European principles and political standards.

Across these experiences, I repeatedly encountered the same fundamental problem: opportunities for reconciliation and peace were often available but remained unrealized. Responsibility lay primarily with the actors directly involved, but also with the limited unity, political courage, and consistency of the international community. The European Union itself frequently struggled to reach agreement on whether and how to act. Initiatives developed by European parliamentarians across political groupings often failed to achieve their intended objectives, as did some initiatives undertaken by the European Union as an institution.

Nevertheless, political engagement can create opportunities for those struggling for human rights, social justice, and peaceful transformation. Such efforts require patience and should not be evaluated exclusively according to their immediate outcomes. Political action should remain consistent with one's principles even when success cannot be guaranteed. I have therefore tried to follow the spirit of Václav Havel's well-known insight: we should act not because we are certain that our actions will succeed, but because we believe that they are meaningful and necessary in themselves, regardless of their eventual results.

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