

ARENA Policy Brief 2/2026



The Limits of Commitment: Four U.S. Defence Futures and the Meaning of Europe's Security Guarantees

Jeremy Shapiro, Research Director at the European Council on Foreign Relations

Key points

- Europe should assume that American readiness to use force in its defense will vary by crisis and depend on future American leadership, and the perceived escalation risk.
- European states should build the capability to deter and, if necessary, defend against aggression in the opening phase of a conflict without relying on immediate U.S. intervention
- Europe should seek to assume the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) position as part of a broader rebalancing of alliance roles, aligning leadership with Europe's growing responsibility while preserving the U.S. role in nuclear deterrence and strategic enablers.
- Europeans should move from fragmented national procurement toward sustained production, stockpiling, and surge capacity, particularly in munitions, air and missile defense, long-range fires, drones, and sustainment through both the EU and cooperative projects involving interested states.
- European governments should improve their ability to decide and act quickly in a crisis, recognizing that unity lowers escalation risk and makes U.S. involvement more likely. They can do so in part through the mechanisms of the EU, but you should be willing to use other institutional and ad-hoc formats.
- A Europe that can act credibly on its own reduces the risks and costs of U.S. engagement, making American action more politically and strategically sustainable almost regardless of developments in the United States.

It began just after 03:30 on a winter morning in March 2029. Fishing vessels off the northern coast of Norway in Finnmark reported GPS disruptions severe enough to force them back toward shore. Within hours, Norwegian authorities confirmed widespread jamming across parts of the High North, affecting civilian navigation systems and disrupting some military communications. Shortly afterward, an unmanned undersea cable linking northern Norway to the mainland went offline, cutting data flows to several Arctic installations.

As Oslo scrambled to assess the damage, attention shifted further north. On Svalbard, Norwegian officials reported unusual activity near Longyearbyen. A group of Russian “scientific personnel,” already present under the provisions of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, began moving equipment toward areas close to critical infrastructure. Russian officials insisted the activity was civilian and lawful. At the same time, Russian naval vessels conducted what Moscow described as routine maneuvers in the Barents Sea, operating just outside Norway’s exclusive economic zone. A Russian patrol aircraft crossed into Norwegian airspace before turning back.

None of the incidents caused casualties. None involved an overt use of force. Each could be explained away individually. Taken together, they formed a pattern that Norwegian officials found impossible to ignore.

Oslo invoked consultations under [Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty](#) and quietly reached out to Washington with a question that felt uncomfortably familiar: “What will the United States do if the Russians are indeed making a move?”

The initial American response was cautious. The U.S. State Department called for calm and urged restraint on all sides. Privately, some voices in Washington pointed to Svalbard’s unique legal status as a reason to tread carefully. The U.S. president made no public statement.

For Norwegian officials, the concern was not that the United States had abandoned NATO’s northern flank. It was that the meaning of American support seemed less certain when a crisis combined legal ambiguity, escalation risk, and territory far from Europe’s political center of gravity.

That uncertainty points to the central dilemma of European security today. The credibility of the U.S. security commitment does not rest primarily on treaty language, defense spending targets, or even the number of U.S. troops in Europe. It rests on something more fragile and more political: American willingness to use force in defense of Europe, especially to confront and potentially escalate against a nuclear armed Russia.

The United States retains massive military power as well as formal commitments under the North Atlantic treaty. But an army is only as good as the

willingness to use it. And a security guarantee only protects if American leaders are ready to act when confronted with ambiguity, risk, and competing priorities. Political will is not automatic or fixed. It is shaped by how Washington interprets Russian behavior, how it judges European capability and resolve, and how it weighs the costs of escalation against the perceived stakes of a given crisis.

This uncertainty is reinforced by the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS). The document does not show the type of disinterest in Europe that many had feared. Since the Obama presidency, the U.S.' European allies have worried that the U.S.' pressing priorities elsewhere, particularly in Asia, would erode the U.S. force posture in Europe. The NSS does contain some hints of possible re-deployments but mostly reaffirms the importance of Europe to the U.S. and the value of alliances. Instead, it raises a more fundamental concern: an emerging cultural divide between liberal Europe and a populist U.S. It teases the possibility of a significantly different U.S. approach to Russia, based on more on U.S. business interests and civilizational concerns than on European security needs or treaty obligations.

The Norwegian episode illustrates how these dynamics might converge in practice: a Russian probe calibrated to exploit ambiguity; a European ally seeking clarity; and an American response shaped as much by culture and caution as by commitment.

The question for Europe, therefore, is no longer whether the United States is committed in principle, but under what conditions, in what manner, and with what urgency the United States would use force in Europe's defense?

There are four plausible U.S. futures, each defined less by global military commitments than by American attitudes toward Russia, Europe, and escalation. Each implies a different meaning for U.S. security guarantees not in theory, but in practice.

Scenario One: Strategic Accommodation

In the first scenario, the United States adopts a fundamentally accommodative posture toward Russia. Washington does not withdraw from NATO or formally renounce Article 5 but increasingly views Russian actions through a lens of cultural grievances with Europe, legitimacy and geopolitical realism. Russian claims about NATO expansion, historic spheres of influence, or Western provocation find receptive audiences in Washington.

Russia is not treated primarily as an aggressor, but as a civilizational ally of the United States that is reacting to European provocations. U.S. leaders emphasize stability, escalation avoidance and negotiated arrangements over deterrence by confrontation. Military escalation with Moscow is seen as reckless and unnecessary unless unmistakable U.S. core interests are at stake.

The US government sees Europe, especially the eastern and northern allies, as strategically anxious and historically conditioned by the national equivalent of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). US officials often emphasize that they are exaggerating the Russian threat. Meanwhile, Western European caution reinforces the American belief that restraint is the responsible course.

In this scenario, the U.S. security guarantee becomes largely symbolic. In crises like the one involving Norway, Washington urges calm on all sides, presses allies to avoid escalation, and treats Russian actions as negotiable rather than punishable. Military force is effectively off the table except in cases of overt, large-scale violence.

Article 5 survives legally but collapses politically. Deterrence fails because American willingness is absent. Russia can easily coerce smaller European allies while remaining below the threshold for US response. Moscow understands that limited aggression will not trigger a U.S. military response.

Scenario Two: Conditional Deterrence

Here, the United States continues to see Russia as hostile and revisionist but is deeply selective in its use of force. Washington is not sympathetic to Moscow but is reluctant to fight over ambiguous or limited objectives, especially at NATO's periphery.

Russia is dangerous but declining. In the U.S. view, deterrence matters, but so do

the specific facts of the case. Not every provocation warrants military response.

The US government sees Europe as wealthy but underprepared. There is growing frustration in Washington that Europeans demand ironclad guarantees without having built sufficient capability to defend themselves.

Under this scenario, Article 5 remains intact, but its application becomes contingent. In a crisis, Washington debates whether the stakes justify intervention or whether it might better serve as wake-up call to spur greater European capability and responsibility. Responses are incremental and calibrated, leaving grey zones that Russia may exploit.

This uncertainty creates a dangerous feedback loop in which Russian probes are specifically calibrated to exploit ambiguity. If Moscow perceives American hesitation as a permanent green light, it may gamble on the assumption that limited aggression will never trigger a military response. Such a miscalculation risks inadvertently crossing an invisible U.S. red line, forcing a major confrontation that both powers initially sought to avoid

In sum, the guarantee continues to exist, but its credibility is blurred by hesitation.

Scenario Three: Escalation Aversion

In the third scenario, the United States remains committed to NATO but is highly averse to escalation, particularly amid simultaneous crises or domestic political constraints. More important US

commitments elsewhere, particularly in East Asia and the Western Hemisphere (the Americas and Greenland), limit maneuver in Europe.

Russia is viewed as a serious threat but also an unpredictable nuclear power with no direct clashes of interest with the United States. Avoiding uncontrolled escalation becomes a central objective.

Europe remains strategically important but is perceived as operationally slow and politically fragmented. The U.S. cannot count on Europe to contain the Russian threat, but neither can it count on all of its individual states to avoid an escalation that would drag the United States into conflict.

In the event of calibrated Russian aggression, the United States intends to act, but not immediately. Diplomacy precedes force. Reinforcements arrive late. Compromises are sought to avoid direct conflict. The guarantee functions, but its timing may be strategically insufficient. It is a guarantee that is thus vulnerable to *faits accomplis*.

Scenario Four: Shared Deterrence

The final scenario is the most stable and the most demanding for Europeans. Here, U.S. willingness to use force in defense of Europe is reinforced because it is shared, not unilateral. European rearmament in the years since the re-invasion of Ukraine has shifted the balance of capability and responsibility toward Europeans.

The US view of Russia is less relevant because it is the European view that

guides alliance planning. That means, NATO treats Russia as a serious military threat that must be deterred decisively. Escalation risks are real but manageable if deterrence is clear and collective. The US sees Europe as capable, ready, and sufficiently unified. European forces can fight immediately, reducing U.S. exposure and risk, even if they still require US enablers and, in higher end contingencies, U.S. reinforcements.

Under shared deterrence, U.S. guarantees are strongest and clearest. Moscow understands that aggression triggers immediate European action backed by U.S. power. U.S. willingness to act is sustained by confidence in partnership and by a desire to reinforce strength and momentum.

What These Scenarios Reveal

Across all four scenarios, one conclusion is unavoidable: the U.S. security commitment to Europe is only as good as its willingness to exercise force on the continent. That willingness is neither fixed nor binary. It exists on a sliding scale that Europeans can influence.

These scenarios are not forecasts. Elements of several could coexist or emerge sequentially.

They also differ in plausibility. Strategic accommodation represents a sharp break with long-standing U.S. alliance practice, but it is the direction the Trump administration is signaling it will take. Its likelihood depends heavily on future US political leadership and crisis context. It

is most plausible in ambiguous, legally complex cases such as the High North.

Conditional deterrence is the most familiar and therefore the most plausible baseline. It reflects enduring U.S. instincts to calibrate risk and avoid unnecessary wars and risks gradual erosion of deterrence rather than sudden rupture.

Escalation aversion becomes more likely in a crowded international environment marked by overlapping crises. It does not imply abandonment but creates dangerous gaps between promise and practice.

Shared deterrence is the most stable outcome, but also the least likely. It depends less on U.S. intent than on European performance. Where Europe delivers capability and unity, U.S. willingness is reinforced; where it does not, shared deterrence remains aspirational and European security lapses into one of the other scenarios.

The danger for Europe lies not in preparing for the wrong scenario, but in assuming that everything depends on developments in US global force posture and US domestic politics. Of course, America's trajectory matters a great deal, but Europeans can, especially over the next several years have a critical influence.

Hedging in an Uncertain Alliance

The four scenarios together lead to a single strategic lesson: reliance on an ally whose willingness to act is uncertain is never a prudent foundation for defense

planning, even if outright abandonment remains unlikely.

In the coming years, the United States may defend Europe. It may act decisively in a crisis. But Europe cannot base its security on assumptions that depend on US elections, leadership preferences, crisis sequencing, or contested judgments about escalation risk. Partial hesitation or delayed response is enough to weaken deterrence if Europeans themselves are unprepared to act.

The appropriate response is hedging.

Hedging means ensuring that Europe's security does not hinge on instantaneous American action. It means building the capacity to deter and defend independently long enough to shape the strategic environment in which U.S. decisions are made. That capacity strengthens deterrence across all four scenarios: it compensates for accommodation, narrows vulnerability under conditional deterrence, buys time under escalation aversion, and makes shared deterrence sustainable.

This implies a clear direction.

Europeans should assume primary responsibility for conventional territorial defense, backed by deployable forces and credible reinforcement plans. They should seek to reduce political fragmentation because unity lowers the cost and risk of American involvement, both through the EU and through smaller coalitions of the willing. They should treat defense industrial capacity must be

treated as a strategic asset, not a national jobs program.

This shift should be reflected institutionally. Europeans should actively seek to assume the [Supreme Allied Commander Europe \(SACEUR\)](#) position as part of a broader Europeanisation of responsibility within NATO. There is opposition in the United States, particularly in the U.S. Congress to giving up the SACEUR, but the Trump administration considered the idea before appointing the current SACEUR in July 2025. A concerted push by the Europeans, married to greater European contributions to defense, would not meet implacable U.S. opposition. To the contrary, [a European SACEUR would not weaken the alliance](#) or exclude the United States; it would align leadership with operational reality while leaving the U.S. its important role in providing strategic enablers and nuclear deterrence

EU states should look to expand EU defense initiatives but also look for opportunities through other institutional or ad-hoc forms, in part to include non-EU states including the UK and Norway. Europeans should also normalize minilateral coalitions of the willing or functional groupings focused on air defense, long-range fires, or maritime security. These coalitions could complement NATO, not replace it, providing speed and decisiveness where consensus-based institutions move slowly.

Europeans cannot control how Washington interprets Russia, weighs escalation risk, or prioritizes regions. But it can control whether its own security depends on those judgements. Together, these actions together would essentially force the United States into the shared deterrence scenario almost regardless of U.S. domestic developments or plausible leadership decisions.

In an uncertain alliance, hedging is not pessimism. It is the foundation of credible deterrence.

Recommendations

1. Plan for uncertainty in U.S. willingness to use force.

Europe should assume that American readiness to use force in its defense will vary by crisis and depend on future American leadership, and the perceived escalation risk

2. Take primary responsibility for conventional territorial defense.

European states should build the capability to deter and, if necessary, defend against aggression in the opening phase of a conflict without relying on immediate U.S. intervention.

3. Europeanize responsibility within NATO.

Europe should seek to assume the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) position as part of a broader rebalancing of alliance roles, aligning leadership with Europe's growing responsibility while preserving the U.S. role in nuclear deterrence and strategic enablers.

4. Treat defense industrial capacity as a strategic asset.

Europeans should move from fragmented national procurement toward sustained production, stockpiling, and surge capacity, particularly in munitions, air and missile defense, long-range fires, drones, and sustainment through both the EU and cooperative projects involving interested states.

5. Reduce political and operational fragmentation.

European governments should improve their ability to decide and act quickly in a crisis, recognizing that unity lowers escalation risk and makes U.S. involvement more likely. They can do so in part through the mechanisms of the EU, but you should be willing to use other institutional and ad-hoc formats.

6. Normalize coalitions of the willing.

Groups of capable European states should develop standing arrangements to provide speed, flexibility, and operational depth, complementing NATO where consensus-based processes are slow.

7. Build capability to shape U.S. choices, not replace the United States.

A Europe that can act credibly on its own reduces the risks and costs of U.S. engagement, making American action more politically and strategically sustainable almost regardless of developments in the United States.

Further reading

- Belin, C., Ruge, M., & Shapiro, J. (2022). *Brace yourself: How the 2024 US presidential election could affect Europe*. European Council on Foreign Relations. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/brace-yourself-how-the-2024-us-presidential-election-could-affect-europe/>
- Belin, C., Ruge, M., & Shapiro, J. (2024). *Imagining Trump 2.0: Six scary policy scenarios for a second term*. Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/imagining-trump-2-0-six-scary-policy-scenarios-for-a-second-term/>
- Shapiro, J. (2025). Letter from Washington: What Trump won't like Europe's Ukraine plan. European Council on Foreign Relations. <https://ecfr.eu/article/letter-from-washington-why-trump-wont-like-europes-ukraine-plan/>

This policy brief forms part of the project [TransatDefence](#) – Changing Transatlantic Security Relations: Implications for Europe and Norway, funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Defence.