



“In fact, the issue is always between two points”

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Prepared by: **Hakan Çalışkantürk**

2twoblackdots@gmail.com

<https://www.2blackdots.com>

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EUROPE AT A NEW DECISION-MAKING STAGE

Leadership Problem in Europe

Following the tension between Zelensky and Trump in the Oval Office, Europe is facing existential questions about its security future. After the Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky’s argument with U.S. President Trump at the White House, European countries declared their support for him. However, this dispute has placed them in the position of Kyiv’s primary backers, bringing with it critical challenges.

One of the main reasons for the Oval Office dispute was Zelensky's insistence on security guarantees linked to any peace agreement. While President Trump argued that U.S. commercial involvement alone would serve as a guarantee, European leaders and Zelensky demanded more.

However, the defense gap on the continent is deeply rooted, and Europe's overreliance on the U.S. continues. This is because the crisis over Ukraine’s future security guarantees is also a crisis for Europe’s future security. To resolve this crisis, Europe needs effective leadership and a strong cadre of leaders. All European leaders are aware that stepping in as Ukraine’s main defense sponsor, at a time when the U.S. is more broadly withdrawing its support, would be extremely costly.

French politician Raphaël Glucksmann has called on the EU to seize more than 200 billion euros of frozen Russian assets to finance Ukraine's defense. However, the European front opposing the seizure of Russian assets is finding it increasingly difficult to develop a stable and consistent policy. European capitals fear that depleting the seized assets could undermine Europe’s credibility as a safe place for investment, and there is neither a political cadre nor leadership capable of managing this concern.

U.S. military bases and sites, 2024

- ▲ U.S. controlled base in operation for at least 15 years
- ▲ Other base or site with U.S. military presence



Note: Locations of U.S. bases and sites are based on unclassified sources and do not include all bases and sites in the region.

Source: Congressional Research Service.



Military Relations with the U.S.

According to the United States European Command (EUCOM), at the beginning of 2025, approximately 84,000 U.S. troops were stationed in Europe. This number fluctuates due to planned exercises and the regular rotation of troops entering and leaving the continent. After Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, around 20,000 additional U.S. troops were deployed to neighboring countries of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine to support Ukraine and contain the conflict. Throughout the war, the total number of troops has ranged between 75,000 and 105,000, primarily from the Air Force, Army, and Navy.

More than 40 U.S. military bases are spread across the continent, extending from northwestern Greenland to Turkey’s border with Russia. The majority of these bases are concentrated in Central Europe, particularly in Germany, Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom. EUCOM is headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany, alongside the

U.S. Africa Command. Many of these bases also function interoperably with NATO, ensuring alignment between U.S. forces and alliance member states in terms of processes, technology, information networks, and personnel.

The U.S. executes these operations through:

- Permanently assigned forces
- Long-term rotational forces
- The National Guard State Partnership Program
- Temporary forces for training exercises in the region. In short, European defense without the U.S. is virtually nonexistent.

What Could Change After a Peace Agreement with Ukraine?

The outcome of the Trump administration's efforts to negotiate a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine remains uncertain. Key figures in the Trump administration have repeatedly expressed interest in reducing U.S. military presence in Europe to focus on China in the Indo-Pacific region. The fact that America's military presence will not last "forever" has caused panic among European allies regarding the future of the transatlantic alliance.

If the Trump administration decides to drastically alter the U.S. security presence in Europe, decades of military integration would need to be unraveled. Even if the U.S. does not completely abandon its bases, the Trump administration could demand that Europe pay more for U.S. protection—currently, European countries cover about 34% of the operational costs of U.S. bases. Fearful of a potential U.S. withdrawal, European countries have significantly increased their military spending. The newly appointed German Chancellor, Friedrich Merz, recently stated in an interview that he aims to strengthen Europe and achieve independence from the United States as soon as possible.

Some experts argue that the withdrawal of U.S. troops would also weaken the credibility of NATO's Article 5, which commits member states to collective defense in case of an armed attack. The question of how U.S. withdrawal would affect its nuclear weapons stationed in Europe remains open. The removal of the so-called "nuclear umbrella" would leave a significant gap in Europe's collective nuclear arsenal—one that Russia could easily exploit.

What Are the Possible Consequences of U.S. Withdrawal and the Leadership Crisis in the EU?

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Europe and the leadership crisis within the European Union (EU) could have far-reaching and multi-layered effects on the continent:

- ❖ **NATO's Future:** A reduced U.S. military presence could weaken NATO, making Eastern European countries more vulnerable to Russia without American deterrence.
- ❖ **EU Defense Policy:** U.S. withdrawal would force Europe to enhance its own military capacity. However, given the lack of progress in forming a common EU defense policy, this transition would be difficult.
- ❖ **Russia's Expanding Influence:** Countries like the Baltic states, Poland, and the Balkans could face increased Russian influence. The question remains whether France and Germany can effectively counterbalance this threat.
- ❖ **Growing Influence of China and Russia:** China and Russia may attempt to fill the power vacuum left by the U.S. China's Belt and Road Initiative could significantly enhance its economic influence over the EU, shaping the broader strategic landscape.
- ❖ **France-Germany Rivalry:** Germany, with its economic strength, and France, with its defense and foreign policy vision, both seek leadership in the EU. However, their lack of coordination could create difficulties in setting the EU's direction.
- ❖ **Fragmentation of Central and Eastern European Countries:** If countries like Poland and Hungary lose U.S. protection, they may shift toward more nationalist and authoritarian policies, potentially weakening EU cohesion.
- ❖ **Europe's Search for Strategic Autonomy:** Without the U.S., the EU will need to forge a more unified foreign policy. However, existing internal divisions and the lack of strong leadership may slow this process and lead to crises.

Conclusion;

The withdrawal of the U.S. from Europe and the deepening leadership crisis within the EU could create security vulnerabilities, economic difficulties, and geopolitical isolation for Europe. If the EU fails to unite internally, the continent may become more exposed to global powers like Russia and China. However, this situation could also accelerate Europe's path toward strategic autonomy and lay the foundation for a new security architecture. In this process, Europe will either succeed in standing on its own feet or face the risk of fragmentation.

Where U.S. Forces in Europe Are Located

Estimated number of U.S. troops in countries with a major troop presence, 2024



Note: As of 2024, the U.S. had 7,000 troops in the North Sea and 4,500 troops in the Mediterranean Sea.

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies.

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