Conscious Uncoupling

How Europeans can achieve a more balanced transatlantic relationship

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About the Author

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In September 2025, Russian forces wandered or probed multiple times into NATO airspace. On the night of 9 September, nearly two dozen Russian military drones crossed into Polish airspace. Polish and allied aircraft scrambled; some drones were shot down; and Warsaw asked for consultations within NATO's North Atlantic Council in a show of alarm. A few days later, Romanian jets scrambled to respond to another Russian drone breach. Just days after that, three Russian MiG-31 fighter jets violated Estonian airspace, flying with their transponders off and in radio silence, lingering for twelve minutes before being intercepted by NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission. The reasons for these Russian incursions remain a subject of much dispute among Western experts.

It is easier, however, to agree on what did not happen. The President of the United States, Donald Trump, offered no reassurance to his rattled allies. There were no tweets, no press conferences, no declarations that America would defend every inch of NATO territory. For several days, the President would only speculate that "it could have been a mistake" while a perfunctory Pentagon statement that it would "track the situation closely." A couple of weeks later, the President clarified his lack of interest in the episode, by noting that NATO members should shoot down Russian aircraft violating their airspace but the US would only support them "depending on the circumstances."

The silence and equivocation arguably cut deeper than a few Russian incursions. Russia is in the provocation business after all, so there wasn't too much new there. Russian conventional forces pose little threat to Europe if it is defended by America. But Trump's reticence raised (yet again) the question of whether the United States still sees the defence

of Europe as an automatic commitment. Meanwhile, the Trump National Security Strategy's prioritisation of the Western Hemisphere, the administration's military operation in Venezuela, and the China focus of much of the foreign policy establishment imply that the US may be occupied elsewhere, no matter what Russia does.

Defence expenditure in non-US NATO has doubled in the last six years and reached $607 billion in 2025 (compared to Russian spending of approximately $145 billion). But most analysts and officials agree that the continent still lacks the assets to defend itself against Russia without the United States. For worried European statesmen, Trump's silence sounded like the prelude to abandonment. It called into question that which must not be questioned: whether Europeans could rely on America to defend them.

This episode reveals that Europeans have a fundamental security dilemma. They are dangerously dependent on an increasingly capricious and distracted ally for their security, but they do not believe that they can achieve defence autonomy any time soon. To square that circle, Europeans need a new bargain with the United States that can reduce European dependence on the United States but also sustain the necessary degree of US commitment to Europe. This piece explains how to do that through the concept of "conscious uncoupling".

The Old Bargain

For decades, the transatlantic bargain had been a study in asymmetry. The United States provided security—troops, nuclear weapons, global reach—while Europe provided loyalty and investments in the US economy. This was never an even trade, but it was sustainable. Americans liked to complain about free-riding Europeans and Europeans liked to complain about overbearing Americans. But in practice both sides found the arrangement convenient. For Americans, it bought influence and leadership at relatively low cost. Europeans, meanwhile, could spend on welfare states and integration projects while sheltering under the American security umbrella. Everyone knew the deal, and everyone understood that the occasional spat over burden-sharing would not undermine the whole.

That deal, it turns out, was largely sustained by the presence of a common enemy. Without one, it is now dying as transatlantic priorities grow ever more disparate. The United States has turned decisively toward the Western Hemisphere and Asia, while Europeans feel a renewed Russian military threat to Europe. US burden-sharing complaints now reflect genuine shifts in American strategic priorities and US domestic politics rather than simply efforts to get Europeans to contribute more.

The strategic pivot to Asia began under Obama, accelerated under Trump, continued under Biden, and shows no sign of reversing. The second Trump administration has added a strong emphasis on the Western Hemisphere defence. Worse, American domestic politics, under Trump's tender guidance, has embraced an openly transactional logic that treats alliances as deals to be constantly renegotiated rather than institutions to be cherished.

European policymakers who still cling to the notion of the alliance as a community of shared purpose find themselves caught between two equally unattractive options. Building more autonomous European capability, as Trump demands, demonstrates initiative but it is enormously expensive and risks encouraging budget-conscious US strategists to conclude that Europe can fend for itself. At the same time, continued dependence on the US reassures European publics in the short term but risks provoking yet more long-term resentment in Washington. This is the semi-autonomy dilemma: abandon hope of independence and risk contempt or seek independence and risk abandonment.

At difficult moments like these, we naturally look to our sages for the wisdom to see us through. I'm referring of course to Gwyneth Paltrow, the renowned actress and Goop entrepreneur. When she and her husband Chris Martin of Coldplay separated in 2014, she refused to call it a divorce. Instead, she offered the concept of a "conscious uncoupling." The idea was not to end the relationship but to reshape it: to make it healthier, less dependent, more equal.

The Old Bargain

Perhaps coincidentally, the term captures Europe's predicament remarkably well. The European allies and the United States are not ending the relationship. NATO remains indispensable to US power in the world and the US security guarantee is still the foundation of Europe's defence. European retains assets, including US military bases in Europe and its international relationships, that are useful to Washington and which the United States cannot or does not want to replicate.

But the transatlantic relationship cannot go on as before. It has become too unequal, too co-dependent, too vulnerable to the vicissitudes of US domestic politics. Like Paltrow and Martin, Europe and America need to consciously uncouple: to change the nature and terms of the relationship in a way that allows it to survive.

The precise content of such an uncoupling is subtle. As Paltrow later explained, she and Martin did not want to disappear from each other's lives. "We did not want to fail. … We didn't want to lose our family … Was there a world where we could break up and not lose everything? Could we be a family even though we didn't want to be a couple? We decided to try."

In the transatlantic context, conscious uncoupling implies that Europe should not aim for full independence. It cannot afford to completely destroy the transatlantic family. The nuclear umbrella, the dollar system, and certain key aspects of American military power all remain beyond Europe's reach for at least a decade. But nor can it remain as the loyal dependent in the transatlantic couple. Conscious uncoupling is a joint responsibility, but given the current asymmetry, the Europeans will need to be proactive and do most of the work.

To consciously uncouple, Europe must build selective capacities that give it leverage and bargaining power, while continuing to cooperate with American structures. The point of conscious uncoupling is not to liberate Europe from America, but to create a more balanced relationship in which Europe brings assets Washington values. Conscious uncoupling is not an escape from the alliance, but a way of making it sustainable under changing priorities and circumstances.

It will encourage Europeans to develop capabilities and contributions that make the US better off inside the alliance than outside it. It requires Europeans to stop thinking of themselves as dependents or rebels and start thinking of themselves as partners who also bring something to the table.

In practical terms, it requires achieving greater coordination within Europe, particularly among the "Big Four" of the UK, France, Poland, and Germany. And means building capabilities in three interconnected areas: defence, economics and technology, and global reach.

Security and Defence

Security is the most obvious area for reform. As noted, there has been a massive spike in European defence spending in the last few years. As recently as 2023, only 7 out of 30 NATO allies met the alliance's benchmark of spending 2% of GDP. All are expected to reach it in 2025. At the Hague NATO Summit in 2025, all agreed to a higher 3.5% of GDP target for the future, as well as spending an additional 1.5% on "other defence and security related spending".

But all of this spending, while important, does not equate to independence or even conscious uncoupling. For too long, Europeans have approached burden-sharing as a kind of moral debt, something they do to pay back America for its protection. They buy US weapons at high-markups and participate in US-led missions that aren't central to their security as the implicit price of their protection. Such protection payments cannot be part of the new bargain.

Meanwhile, when Americans talk about European burden-sharing, the conversation usually devolves into a tired sermon about the lack of European contributions. It is a sermon designed to produce guilt rather than capabilities. Europeans nod solemnly, mumble about fiscal constraints, and then carry on spending what they were going to spend anyway.

Meanwhile, Americans go home convinced that their allies are freeloaders. No one is satisfied. The idea that the bargains on increased spending targets of 5% of GDP will end this dynamic seems fanciful. Europeans will soon miss their targets and Americans will soon resume their lectures (or just ask for more).

The key to breaking this pattern is to understand that defence spending should not be about appeasing Washington's moral outrage or paying for Europe's protection; it should be about shaping Washington's strategic calculus. The only way to change the transatlantic balance is to create defence assets that Washington actually values.

Instead, Europe seek to buy loyalty by buying US weapons. As a June 2025 analysis shows, nearly 60% of Europe's recent arms procurement comes from the United States, and less than 20% of major projects are jointly European. France, Italy, Spain, and Sweden sustain indigenous production, but most others European countries, especially Central and Eastern European governments turn overwhelmingly to American suppliers. By 2022–2023, Europe accounted for 35% of total US arms export by value, even surpassing the Middle East in US weapons sales

Rather than buying expensive American weapons, Europeans should invest in capabilities—for example, strategic mobility, logistics, missile defence—that relieve US pressure and buy American flexibility elsewhere. The United States does not need Europe to replicate its carrier strike groups or stealth fighters. It needs Europe to plug holes that constrain US global flexibility. Air and missile defence, drone walls, secure logistics corridors, and the ability to move troops rapidly across the continent are the kinds of capabilities that would convince Washington that Europe is a genuine security asset rather than a liability. Instead, as of 2024, European countries have some 668 F-35 fighters on order from the United States at a cost of some 100-120 billion dollars (author calculation).

Take mobility. One reason Russian sabre-rattling in the Baltics is so disturbing to alliance military planners is that NATO still struggles to move reinforcements quickly. A credible European investment in road and rail networks, pre-positioned stockpiles, and rapid-deployment brigades would directly reduce US risk. Likewise, integrated air defence systems

would lessen America's fear that any confrontation with Russia will immediately overwhelm NATO's front-line states.

The point is not to fully replace the United States in European security. At base, conscious uncoupling implies Europe, for example, can credibly respond to any Russian provocations and only needs US assistance if a broader war breaks out or nuclear threats begin. By credibly promising to lead small(ish) military responses without American participation or cover the first phase of a crisis, Europe can both reassure itself and demonstrate its indispensability to Washington.

This is what conscious uncoupling in defence looks like: Europe does not fully free itself from America, but it creates bargaining power to rebalance the relationship. By developing capabilities that America values, it ensures that US leaders see transatlantic engagement as useful to them, not just to Europeans. That is leverage, and leverage is the currency of alliances in a transactional age.

Economics and Technology

Economics and technology form the second pillar. Here the EU already has considerable autonomy, because of its sizeable market, its more unified decisionmaking on economic issues, and its regulatory power. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Digital Services Act (DSA), the Digital Markets Act (DMA), the AI Act, and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) all shape global standards.

For Americans, this is often a source of irritation. Tech executives fly to Brussels to be scolded by bureaucrats; lobbyists moan about the burdens of GDPR; Washington officials quietly fume when new acronyms—DSA, DMA, AI Act—threaten to constrain U.S. firms. But irritation is not the same as irrelevance. In practice, American companies comply because they cannot afford to ignore a market of 450 million relatively wealthy consumers. And once they comply, the standards often become global.

The Trump administration sees all this regulatory power as an abuse of Europe's position as a security consumer. Why, they ask, should Europeans "enjoy" a trade surplus with the United States in manufactured goods when they depend on US protection. Under the old transatlantic bargain, trade and security ran on separate tracks: the United States provided security, Europe ran trade surpluses and neither side thought to link the two. That compartmentalisation has now collapsed. By weaponising allied security dependence in the trade war, Washington has turned protection into an instrument of economic power.

Europeans are (slowly) trying to respond in kind — with their own industrial-policy tools, local-content rules, and new supply-chain partnerships stretching from Asia to the Middle East. The result is a more transactional, politicised trade order in which political alignment no longer guarantees bilateral trade openness.

Accordingly, manufacturing trade — industrial goods, cars, steel, and machinery — have become a front line in the transatlantic struggle for leverage. Trump's new tariffs on European exports, rolled out under his April 2025 "Liberation Day" trade agenda, have ended what was once a nearly tariff-free relationship. They have fallen hardest on Europe's automotive and green-tech industries, as well as Europe's ability to bargain collectively in the realm in which it is supposedly most united.

The Trump administration has clearly learned that nothing divides Europe faster than a differential tariff. A few percentage points off the tariff rate for London here, a threat against German cars there, all in the service of securing a more advantageous deal for the United States. Overall, the American shift away from the old bargain compels Europe to treat trade policy as security policy, a domain where influence depends not on market virtue, but on leverage.

In this new bargain, Europeans are finding that regulatory power alone does not translate into geopolitical leverage, particularly in security crises. Washington cares far more about whether Europe can defend the Baltics than whether it can fine technology companies. The value of economic coordination lies not only in using it to challenge American firms but also

in presenting it as a complement to shared strategic goals. If Europeans present market access and regulations not only as weapons but as a way of creating common Western standards, they turn a source of friction into a source of leverage.

The debate over the US Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) provides a case in point and the most vivid example to date of what "conscious uncoupling" looks like in practice.

On paper, both sides were pursuing the same goal: accelerating the green transition. In practice, they are subsidising their own industries and weaponising regulation. The IRA's $369 billion in clean-tech subsidies, announced in 2022, blindsided European capitals by luring green investment across the Atlantic with "Made in America" incentives. Brussels saw in it the mirror image of Trump-era protectionism wrapped in green packaging. Europe's response was not a trade war but a bargain. The European Commission fast-tracked its Net-Zero Industry Act, loosened state-aid rules, and began pressing Washington for exemptions that would treat EU firms as domestic producers.

The turning point came in 2023, when both sides quietly acknowledged that decoupling their green industries would doom them both. Negotiations produced a transatlantic "critical minerals" understanding, effectively allowing European-sourced lithium, nickel, and cobalt to qualify for IRA tax credits, and a joint working group on carbon pricing. At the same time, the EU refused to back down on CBAM, whose phased rollout began in 2024 and now covers imports of steel, aluminium, and fertiliser. For Washington, CBAM looks like a tariff; for Brussels, it is leverage.

Together, CBAM and IRA show that Europe and America are learning to bargain through interdependence rather than ideology. Each wields its regulatory power to shape the other's market, and both are discovering that economic sovereignty in a globalised world is negotiated, not declared. This is conscious uncoupling in miniature: not an acrimonious split but an agreement to disagree inside a shared house, complete with carbon-adjusted walls and subsidised solar panels.

For Europe, the lesson is strategic. Regulatory power over carbon, data, and competition is one of the few assets Washington actually notices. Used intelligently, it can create leverage and greater balance in the relationship. The CBAM-IRA episode shows that semi-autonomy does not mean isolation; it means using interdependence to one's advantage.

The next test will come in digital policy. Europe's Digital Services Act and AI regulation already aspire to set global benchmarks. But to turn rules into leverage, Brussels will have to move beyond moralism. If Europe can couple its regulatory power with technological investment — a coordinated industrial policy, data-sharing infrastructure, and credible digital-defence tools — it could become the indispensable broker between open societies and closed systems.

This requires finesse. In a Trump administration, regulation can easily be cast as anti-American, feeding Washington's narrative of European obstruction. To create buy-in for a shared agenda that Washington could also commit to, Europeans should present regulation as a complement to transatlantic cooperation, that is as the rules that make Western capitalism more sustainable and the standards that legitimise Western technological leadership.

In this area, China presents a particular challenge for US-European conscious uncoupling. The United States increasingly views great power competition with China as its defining challenge and expects allies to choose sides. Europe, by contrast, sees China as simultaneously a competitor, partner, and systemic rival. Such categories permit considerable flexibility.

More to the point, even as China presents a massive economic and strategic challenge to European, it is also a source of potential diversification and leverage vis-à-vis the often-overbearing United States. When Washington demands that Europe restrict technology transfers, follow US tariffs on China, or reduce dependence on Chinese supply chains, it is asking Europe to sacrifice immediate economic interests, its green transition (which depends on Chinese technology) and a key source of European diversity in geostrategic relations.

The dilemma is acute. If Europe maintains deep economic ties to China, Washington will question its value as a strategic partner. If Europe fully decouples from China to satisfy Washington, it loses leverage and risks excessive dependence and economic damage that undermines the very capabilities—fiscal capacity, industrial strength, technological innovation—that make it valuable to the alliance. There is no easy resolution.

What Europe can offer is selective alignment. On certain issues—technology controls for advanced semiconductors, security screening of Chinese infrastructure investment, coordination on forced labor standards—European and American interests overlap enough to permit genuine cooperation. As Paltrow instructs, "it's OK to stay in love with the parts of your ex that you were always in love with." These areas of alignment should become the focus of transatlantic economic coordination. Europe demonstrates reliability where it can, creating political capital to maintain flexibility where it cannot.

This will not fully satisfy Washington, but it is more honest than pretending alignment exists where it does not. Conscious uncoupling requires acknowledging that the transatlantic partnership has limits, particularly when European economic prosperity and strategic autonomy conflicts with American strategic preferences. The alternative is to promise full alignment with the US on China while at the same time maintaining dependence on the Chinese market. This would only breed the resentment and distrust that conscious uncoupling is meant to avoid.

In a world of intensifying US competition with China, the ability to coordinate where interests align is no small offer. Conscious uncoupling in economics and technology means that, rather than reflexive opposition to American domination, Europe provides assets—rules, standards, and resilience—that the US cannot easily generate on its own. It is another form of leverage, and one that matters as much as tanks or planes.

Global Reach

The third pillar is global reach. Europeans remain far less powerful than the US globally, but they do have assets Washington cannot or does not want to replicate. Americans often dismiss these assets as minor, but it provides something Washington increasingly lacks: legitimacy and access. Development aid, trade networks, and diplomatic presence in Africa, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific all serve these functions. Europeans can use these assets to help rebalance their relationship with the United States, offering Washington entry points in regions where it is less welcome. Conscious uncoupling here means acting as a force multiplier for US strategy where transatlantic alignment exists.

Consider Africa. The United States has little appetite or credibility in the region. Europe, by contrast, has deep economic ties, extensive aid programs, and a residual colonial legacy that, while problematic, still creates channels of influence. The same is true in parts of the Middle East and even in the Indo-Pacific, where European trade agreements and diplomatic networks complement US military power and help Asian countries diversify their diplomatic relationships.

These assets are not decisive in themselves. But they allow Washington to operate in places where it is less welcome or less trusted. When the EU and Japan launch a connectivity partnership, it gives American initiatives like the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment a more multilateral sheen. When Europeans lead on sanctions against Russia, it amplifies US coercive power.

Again, this is not independence but leverage. By offering Washington assets it cannot easily provide—development aid, trade deals, diplomatic networks—Europe positions itself as a force multiplier on issues of mutual interest. In a transactional environment, that is precisely how one creates equality: not by matching capabilities one-for-one but by offering complementary strengths.

Conscious Uncoupling in Practice

Implementing conscious uncoupling will require more than just investments in assets and leverage. Europeans need to change the way they exercise statecraft to more effectively coordinate bargaining strategies and to forge a narrative that frames autonomy not as independence but as contribution.

More specifically Europeans need to embrace cross-domain bargaining and recognise that nothing is negotiated in isolation anymore. Defence contributions can be traded for regulatory concessions; regulatory cooperation can be exchanged for support on sanctions; global deployments can be linked to industrial subsidies. US interference in European domestic politics can be countered by denying the US access to Europe's global reach.

This is messy, but it is the reality of modern interdependence. The challenge is to orchestrate the bargaining so that Europe presents itself not as 27 cacophonous voices but as a coherent actor. Without coordination, France will trade autonomy for prestige, Poland will trade independence for reassurance, and Germany will trade everything for time. The result will be incoherence.

Conscious uncoupling therefore requires a new European statecraft: the ability to weave together defence, economics, technology and diplomacy into package deals. The essence of that new bargain implies not independence in each realm, but the orchestration of assets across them. With coordination, Europe can present package deals that strengthen its leverage.

Cross-domain bargaining means disputes spill across issue areas. A quarrel over tech regulation can sour defence cooperation; a clash over defence spending can stall trade talks. But it also creates opportunities. As Dwight Eisenhower often said, "if a problem can't be solved, enlarge it." The more entangled the issues, the more incentives both sides have to compromise. Interdependence breeds leverage, but only if one knows how to use it.

When the EU aligns with the US on sanctions against Russia, it strengthens its claim to regulatory leadership. When Europeans invest in defence production, they strengthen their case for industrial concessions from Washington. When Europeans can defend themselves against Russian provocations, they will be stronger in trade negotiations. To make things even more arduous, in the new alliance, all of this orchestration needs to happen on a transactional basis. American politics, especially under Trump, has become unapologetically transactional. Alliances are not communities of shared values but deals to be constantly renegotiated.

Europeans, meanwhile, remain committed to the idea of partnership, long-term commitments and institutional trust. Anti-transactionalism is built into the EU institutions. Its political cultures and systems were deliberately constructed to constrain power, to lock actors into rules, and to make long-term trust the currency of politics. The European Union is, at its core, an anti-transactional project which is determined to make agreed rules the currency of international relations.

Of course, the European institutions have often struck transactional deals when they had to. But they are at a considerable disadvantage in moving toward transactionalism, particularly when it comes to the United States. For Europeans, the basis of the uneven relationship with the United States has always been “shared values”, which is a subtle way of saying the alliance doesn’t need to prove its value proposition on a transactional basis.
Europeans have two instincts in response. One is to recoil, insisting that alliances are about shared values and institutional trust. The other is to play the game, entering into tit-for-tat bargains that buy short-term peace. Neither is sufficient.

To make the transition, Europeans must learn to operate on both levels. They need to be credible transactional bargainers, able to strike issue-by-issue deals that Washington respects. But they must also frame those deals as part of a longer-term partnership. Pure transactionalism leads to fragmentation; pure partnership rhetoric risks irrelevance. Conscious uncoupling provides the middle path: autonomy provides assets for transactional bargaining, while dependence ensures those assets are integrated into the long-term alliance.

In practice this means Europeans need to embed bargains in institutions. If every negotiation is purely transactional, the alliance becomes brittle. Deals expire, leaders change, and resentment festers. The way to avoid this is to lock bargains into institutional frameworks—NATO, the EU-US Trade and Technology Council, G7 coalitions—so that they become habits rather than one-off transactions. This is the way to reconcile transactionalism with partnership: each deal is negotiated transactionally but then institutionalised as part of the alliance. It is also, coincidentally, a key concept in the construction of European integration.

Finally, Europe needs a narrative strategy. The new bargain should be framed not as separation but as conscious uncoupling. Europeans must tell a story about how their investments and bargaining are not aimed at freeing themselves from America but at creating a more balanced partnership. The key phrase here is equality, not independence. Europe does not seek to end the relationship; it wants to make it work better for the new circumstances (and maybe see other people in Asia).

European public opinion will likely support such a narrative. In a 2025 European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) survey, majorities in every EU state polled described the US not as an "ally" but a "necessary partner". Even in Poland, only 31% used the word ally. The democratic mandate is therefore not to abandon the U.S., but to prepare for its unreliability. Conscious uncoupling reflects this mood.

If Europe succeeds in this effort, the alliance will look different than in the past. It will be less hierarchical, less automatic, and more contentious. Bargaining will be constant; disputes will spill across domains; transactionalism will become normal. But it will also be more balanced, and more resilient. Conscious uncoupling is not about harmony but about sustainability.

The US will remain an important ally, but it will no longer be the unquestioned leader. Europe will remain dependent on US nuclear deterrence and the US financial markets, but it will also possess assets that Washington cannot ignore. The relationship will be less comfortable but more equal.

Out of many, several

If all that sounds difficult, it is time to admit that we haven't yet talked about the hardest part. Conscious uncoupling cannot be negotiated in Brussels alone; indeed, it must be forged primarily in the national capitals that shape Europe's voice on the transatlantic relationship. Yet here lies the paradox: a degree of unity is the essential precondition for a new bargain with Washington, both within the EU and between the EU and the UK, but, when it comes to the United States unity is precisely what Europe lacks.

Nothing divides Europe so reliably as the United States. China and Russia can only dream of such a capacity to split the EU. Indeed, when it comes to transatlantic relations, it is not really clear that, from a strategic standpoint, Europe even exists. For some European countries, America is a protector whose commitment must be cultivated at all costs; for others, it is a fickle hegemon whose dominance must be hedged against or and for a few, it is a source of diversity to be leveraged alongside other partners, a means of balancing rather than of belonging. In many ways, this is a continuation of old intra-European argument between Euro-Atlanticists and Euro-Gaullists that has simmered along for decades. But it has new salience because of the much realer threat of US abandonment.

These divergent instincts—loyalty, rebellion, and fear—help explain why Europe struggles to present itself as a coherent partner to Washington, and why conscious uncoupling is as much an intra-European project as a transatlantic one. Indeed, nearly every European country likes to think it has a special bilateral relationship with the United States and prizes that relationship above the more abstract US-European alliance. As long as this continues, the new bargain described above cannot exist.

Luckily, turning cacophony into chorus doesn't require aligning some 30 fractious partners. It just requires getting the four leading voices (the UK, France, Germany and Poland) on roughly the same sheet of music.

The United Kingdom: The Anxious Spouse

Britain is Europe's paradoxical outlier: outside the EU but still central to European security. Since Brexit, London has taken every opportunity to prove its continuing relevance, particularly by doubling down on its devotion to Washington. As Trump's grandiose second state visit to the UK in September 2025 demonstrated, the mythical "special relationship" remains the foundation of British foreign policy. This is less because it delivers tangible influence (American policymakers rarely adjust their strategy to suit London) than because it offers psychological reassurance. Britain, shorn of its EU role, clings to the United States as the last guarantor of its global significance.

This posture translates into a kind of strategic obedience. London participates in US-led interventions, signs up to initiatives like AUKUS, and makes itself conspicuously useful in NATO's forward deployments. These moves are designed to signal loyalty, not leverage. The British wager is that by proving itself America's most faithful ally, it can secure Washington's continued attention.

Yet loyalty is not the same as influence. Washington welcomes British contributions but doesn't treat London as a privileged counsellor. In transatlantic bargaining, Britain's instinct to side reflexively with Washington undermines Europe's collective leverage. When Brussels talks of balancing dependence with autonomy, London plays spoiler by casting the alliance as a sacred covenant. For the EU, Britain's role is thus deeply ambivalent: it strengthens the military balance against Russia but weakens Europe's ability to present a united political front. Conscious uncoupling requires leverage; Britain offers devotion.

France: Romantic Rebel

If Britain undermines European unity by clinging to America, France does so by pushing it away. Paris insists that Europe must achieve strategic autonomy and end its reliance on Washington. Numerous French presidents, up through Emmanuel Macron, have made this argument their calling card, continually urging Europeans to take their destiny into their own hands. French rhetoric casts America as a capricious partner whose dominance must be resisted, if not replaced.

This is, to be fair, the language of leverage, but French practice rarely matches French rhetoric. Paris remains embedded in NATO structures, reliant on American intelligence, and quietly grateful for US logistical support in Africa. France possesses nuclear weapons, but not enough to guarantee continental security. And its calls for autonomy are often perceived by partners as thinly veiled bids for French leadership. To Washington, it sounds like a combination of betrayal and crude industrial policy.

Nonetheless, France plays an essential role in the European debate. Its insistence on autonomy forces others to confront uncomfortable realities. Without France, the conversation would default to dependence; with France, Europe is at least compelled to consider alternatives. Arguably, France, with the (uncoordinated) help of Donald Trump, Xi-Jing Ping and Vladimir Putin, has been winning the debate over autonomy, particularly since Trump's second inauguration.

But that debate is not over. The difficulty is that French romanticism often alienates precisely those it seeks to persuade. Britain sees French ambitions as self-serving, Germany sees them as destabilising, and Poland sees them as suicidal. France is the rebel in the European family: visionary at times, infuriating at others, but impossible to ignore. Conscious uncoupling requires delicacy; France prefers declarations. If only the French language had a word for "finesse".

Poland: The Fearful Believer

Poland approaches the United States with the fervour of a true believer. For Warsaw, America is not just an ally but a saviour. A somewhat mis-remembered history explains this instinct: partition by great powers, abandonment in 1939, Soviet domination after 1945. In Polish memory, France and Germany have consistently betrayed, but America has redeemed. That conviction makes Poland the most pro-American big state in Europe, across all parties and governments. Poland welcomes US troops on its soil, not as reassurance but as insurance. And it dismisses talk of European autonomy as a dangerous fantasy.

Since 2022, Warsaw has reinforced this role with material commitments. It spends more than any other European state on defence, buys American weapons in bulk, and courts Washington relentlessly. In 2023–25, it signed contracts for US Abrams tanks, HIMARS rocket launchers, and Patriot systems worth tens of billions of dollars. Over 80% of Poland's recent procurement is American, making Warsaw the most US-armed state in Europe. This reinforces bilateral credibility in Washington, but at the expense of European industrial autonomy.

In private, Polish officials do express skepticism about the American commitment, and part of their increased military spending does represent a quiet hedge against US abandonment. But Poles express even more skepticism about the reliability of their European partners. So, their public stance remains that only loyalty to America can guarantee Poland's survival.

This posture makes Poland a darling of Washington. It delivers what others only promise, and it speaks America's language of deterrence and strength. But it also deepens Europe's divisions. Polish devotion alienates Paris, irritates Berlin, and locks Warsaw into a bilateral embrace that sidelines Brussels. Unity requires balance; Poland insists on absolutism. For the transatlantic relationship, Poland provides credibility, but for intra-European politics, it provides discord. Conscious uncoupling requires collective leverage; Poland prefers unilateral faith.

Germany: The Wealthy Dependent

Germany sits at the heart of Europe geographically, economically, and politically. But when it comes to security, it is more often the heart of the problem than the solution. For decades, Berlin outsourced its defence to Washington while focusing on prosperity and integration. The *Zeitenwende* proclaimed in 2022 promised a historic break: 100 billion euros for defence, a renewed commitment to NATO, a new seriousness about power. Three years on, Germany has progressed a little, but much of the *Zeitenwende* promise remains trapped in procurement bottlenecks, coalition disputes, and political hesitancy.

Berlin knows it must do more, but it rarely acts decisively. It fears American abandonment but also fears that French-style autonomy will fracture Europe. It wants reassurance without confrontation, protection without responsibility. Despite its *Zeitenwende* pledge, Germany has committed billions to US-made F-35s while delaying investment in European missile defence and mobility projects. The result, as the Guardian notes, is that even record spending reinforces dependence: Germany is better armed, but not much more self-reliant. Overall, Germany drifts, promising more than it delivers and hoping others will fill the gaps. For Washington, this is exasperating; for its European neighbours, nearly all of whom envy Germany's fiscal resources, it is a source of resentment.

Germany's reluctance is perhaps the most destabilising of all the European instincts. France at least pushes for change, Britain at least commits wholeheartedly to America, and Poland at least delivers rapid spending. Germany vacillates. Given its size and centrality, that hesitation shapes the entire European debate. Where France pushes too hard and Britain clings too tightly, Germany dithers—and dithering, in the end, is as divisive as rebellion or devotion. Conscious uncoupling requires initiative; Germany prefers procrastination and hoping for the best.

Taken together, these four instincts illustrate why Europe struggles to present itself as a coherent partner. An analysis of European procurement by SIPRI show in numbers what the politics reveal in rhetoric: money is the not the fundamental problem. Europe is already spending an extra $150 billion year relative to 2021, more than the entire defence budget of Russia. But it is spending it apart – that is either nationally or with non-European partners. Fragmentation and dependence are the twin enemies of conscious uncoupling.

These divergent instincts weaken Europe in two ways. First, they prevent Europe from negotiating effectively with Washington. A divided continent cannot bargain transactionally or credibly promise long-term partnership. Meanwhile, Washington sees disunity not as a problem to solve but as an opportunity to exploit. Second, it corrodes European solidarity.

Eastern Europeans interpret French autonomy as abandonment; Western Europeans interpret Polish devotion as naiveté. Each capital defines unity differently, making it well-nigh impossible.

It is conceivable to reconcile these instincts. The EU and NATO provide institutional frameworks that can harmonise differences, at least at the margins. Crises, too, can concentrate minds: Russia's war in Ukraine forced Germans to spend, Britons to take initiative, French to compromise, and Poles to coordinate. The challenge is sustaining that coordination once the crisis passes and national instincts reassert themselves.

There are tentative signs of convergence. Britain has discovered, through the response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, that loyalty can coexist with European coordination, if not full EU membership. It is seeking new or upgraded bespoke defence arrangements with the EU as well as key member states. France has softened its rhetoric, accepting that autonomy must complement NATO rather than replace it. Germany, however haltingly, has begun to spend more and signal responsibility. Poland has found that leading Europe's response to Ukraine enhances its influence not only in Washington but also in Brussels.

But these shifts are fragile, and domestic politics often pulls in the opposite direction. Britain remains consumed by its post-Brexit malaise. France remains hostage to presidential ambition and political fragmentation. Germany remains paralysed by coalition politics. Poland remains polarised between populist fervour and European obligation. None of these capitals is fully invested in the sustained compromises required for unity.

Still, the logic is inexorable. Conscious uncoupling requires Europe to speak to America with something resembling one voice. That does not mean uniformity; Britain will always lean toward Washington, France toward autonomy, Germany toward consensus, and Poland toward devotion. But it does mean coordination: a recognition that Europe's power lies not in the purity of any one approach.

A Practical Pathway: How to Get There from Here

Acknowledging that greater European unity is the prerequisite for conscious uncoupling does not make it happen. There remains the question of whether there exists a realistic pathway from fragmentation to coordination, or whether conscious uncoupling is merely an elegant idea destined to founder on the hard shoals of European nationalism.

The honest answer is that full coordination, in which all European capitals negotiate with the US as one, is impossible in the near term and perhaps ever. But meaningful coordination among the big four is at least plausible. What's needed is not perfection but sufficiency: enough alignment to present coherent package deals to Washington, even if individual countries continue to differ on emphasis and tactics.

As the cliché holds, Europe is "built though crises" and luckily there are plenty of crises right now. Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine and Trump's evident unreliability have already forced European capitals to coordinate in ways unthinkable five years ago. But such crises are merely opportunities for action. Nothing is automatic.

In that regard, below are a few "sufficient ideas" have become more plausible as a result of the current European crisis. But they need to be pursued and institutionalised in the next few years to rebalance the transatlantic relationship.

- ***Formalising the big-four coordination mechanism.*** France, Germany, Poland, and the UK already hold ad hoc consultations. These should become regular, structured meetings—quarterly at minimum—with a specific mandate: to align bargaining positions with Washington. The UK's exclusion from EU structures makes this awkward, but no more awkward than the current reality where London pursues bilateral deals that undermine Brussels.

- ***Creating joint procurement pools.*** The point of joint procurement is not uniformity but complementarity. That principle is undermined by the current dysfunction of the Franco-German-Spanish FCAS (Future Combat Air System) project, where industrial rivalries and national control disputes have delayed development for years. Europe's defence projects will only succeed if cooperation becomes pragmatic rather than protectionist. Rather than expecting Poland to stop buying American or France to abandon indigenous production, Europe should create mixed portfolios. Poland buys US Patriots but commits to European air defence integration. France builds its next fighter but opens production to German and Spanish partners. Germany buys F-35s but invests equally in European mobility infrastructure.

- ***Establishing a transatlantic bargaining secretariat.*** This could sit within the EU External Action Service or be a NATO-EU hybrid. Its job would be to map European assets across domains (defence, economic, diplomatic) and propose package deals. When Poland signs a new arms deal, the secretariat identifies what regulatory or diplomatic concessions Europe should demand in return. This turns ad hoc spending into strategic bargaining.

- ***Expanding the EU-US Trade and Technology Council into a full transatlantic bargaining forum, especially on China.*** Currently, the TTC addresses economic and technology issues but excludes defence and security and pretends its deliberation are not primarily about China. It should expand its remit with an overall goal of avoiding full economic decoupling with China, despite the current mood of securitisation of trade. It could become aim to become a standing mechanism to synchronise export-control policy, technology standards, and investment screening while allowing room for legitimate economic engagement with China. The aim would coordinate guardrails: identifying critical technologies where decoupling is necessary and others where interdependence is tolerable. By institutionalising dialogue rather than loyalty tests, Europe could preserve access to Chinese markets while reassuring Washington that its economic ties will not undercut shared security interests. The TTC could also become the primary venue for cross-domain package deals, on, for example, defence contributions for regulatory alignment, technology controls on China for US market access, and European diplomatic engagement in Africa for US support on sanctions.

- ***Creating a European Defence Investment Bank.*** Modeled on the European Investment Bank, this institution would pool member state resources to fund joint procurement, mobility infrastructure, and defence industrial capacity. Poland contributes capital but gains guaranteed access to European air defence. Germany invests in logistics but gets co-production on French systems. The idea is that the bank turns national spending into European leverage.

- ***Formalising UK-EU defence coordination through a treaty framework.*** Britain will probably never rejoin the EU, but bespoke arrangements can give it a seat in European defence planning without full membership. This could mirror Norway's participation in EU research programmes or Switzerland's Schengen arrangement: specific, limited, but formalised. The key is ensuring British deployments and procurement decisions align with broader European strategy rather than working at cross-purposes.

Of course, the hardest change is cultural: shifting from national bilateralism to European multilateralism or minilateralism as the primary mode of engaging Washington. This cannot be imposed from Brussels; it must be internalised by national capitals. It will require demonstrated success in delivering for the UK and EU member states as well as perhaps generational change.

Clearly, these initiatives will take some time and face many obstacles. But they are not impossible to accomplish. Europe has coordinated before when crises demanded it: the euro crisis, the COVID pandemic, and the response to Ukraine are just a few examples. What made those breakthroughs possible was not the absence of national interest but the alignment of threat perceptions. The threat today—prospective American abandonment combined with latent Russian aggression—is as stark as any Europe has faced.

The question is whether European elites will recognize the threat in time and act accordingly, or whether they will continue to hope that the old bargain can be preserved through rhetoric and minor adjustments. The current Russian weakness provides some breathing space and conscious uncoupling points to the path. But it will only work if Europeans have the political will to walk it.

We don’t communicate anymore

Trump’s silence in the face of Russian incursions was more than a tactical pause; it was a symbol. It showed Europeans that the old assumptions are gone. No previous American president would have stayed silent in such circumstances. The alliance in the good old days was built on automaticity and communication; reassurance was the reflex. Today, reassurance is optional, even whimsical. Clearly, Europe’s relationship with America, like Paltrow’s with Martin, must evolve in order to endure.

The European dilemma today is stark. Depend too much on the US, and you invite resentment. Push too far toward autonomy, and you invite abandonment.

Europe cannot change Trump. It cannot change the structural realities that drive America toward Asia or the Western Hemipshere or the domestic politics that make foreign commitments unpopular. What it can change is its own role. This means bargaining transactionally while building a long-term partnership on different and more sustainable terms. It means weaving together defence, economics, technology and global reach into cross-domain deals that seek not to match America but create value for it. Europe can stop being a supplicant and start being a partner.

If conscious uncoupling succeeds, if Europe builds the capabilities, coordinates the bargaining, and presents itself as a valuable rather than dependent ally then perhaps the next time Russian drones cross into Polish airspace, Washington's silence will matter less. Not because American forces in Europe have become irrelevant, but because Europeans will have created their own capacity to respond credibly.

That is the promise of conscious uncoupling: not liberation from America, but liberation from the paralysis that comes with deep dependence. It means that when the bear threatens, Europe does not wait helplessly for a phone call that may never come. It acts confidently, knowing it has the capacity to manage on its own if it must.

European self-assurance does not mean transatlantic rupture. Conscious uncoupling is not about leaving America; it is about making the relationship survivable. Even bad relationships do not always end. Sometimes they are redefined.

Nobody is saying this is easy. Looking back, Gwyneth Paltrow remains proud of her efforts at conscious uncoupling but admits how difficult it was. "It was real trial and error," she told the Daily Mail in October 2025, "we f***ed a lot of things up and then we got a lot of things right." Europe would do well to learn from her experience.

Conscious uncoupling is not as romantic as the old transatlantic community of values. But the survival of the alliance depends not on whether America loves Europe but on whether Europe can make itself useful, even indispensable. That requires confidence, coordination, and clarity of purpose. It requires seeing autonomy not as independence but as a contribution to common efforts. And it requires the humility to recognise that conscious uncoupling is not an act of liberation but an act of preservation.

Europe and America may never again enjoy the comfortable certainties of the old bargain. But if they can redefine their partnership—less dependent, more equal, more consciously uncoupled—they may yet sustain the alliance in a world that needs it. Gwyneth Paltrow would be proud.

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About the Dahrendorf Programme

The Dahrendorf Programme at the European Studies Centre, St Antony's College Oxford, commemorates the College's third Warden, Ralf Dahrendorf, one of the leading social and political thinkers of his time, and is dedicated to a subject central to his work and life. It has three main components: a Research Agenda which currently focuses on the Europe in a Changing World project, and has previously included the Europe's Stories project, the Free Speech Debate project; an annual Ralf Dahrendorf Memorial Lecture; and an annual group of competitively selected Dahrendorf Scholars.

'Europe in a Changing World'

From July 2024 to September 2026, the project enters a new phase, building on previous insights to offer policy-relevant conclusions for a new European strategy in an evolving global environment. This phase will examine how Europe's engagement with the world—politically, geo-economically, geo-strategically, and culturally—must adapt to an increasingly non-European and post-Western order, with a continued focus on the CITRUS countries.

With great power competition, climate change, technological innovation, and public health crises reshaping the international stage, EUrope faces both challenges and opportunities that will define its role in the 21st century. While much attention is given to external pressures, Europe's own transformation is equally significant. The EU is grappling with internal changes that affect how it is perceived globally, from its position as a regulatory superpower to its ambitions as a leader in the green transition. At the same time, recent events—such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's aggression in Ukraine—have underscored Europe's ability to consolidate internally and respond to external shocks.

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