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An alliance upended

The transatlantic relationship is crumbling, says an ex-head of NATO

Anders Fogh Rasmussen argues that Europe must accept it may be alone—and spend accordingly

Illustration: Dan Williams

Anders Fogh Rasmussen was prime minister of Denmark from 2001 to 2009 and secretary-general of NATO from 2009 to 2014.

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IN HIS 1985 state-of-the-union address, Ronald Reagan stood before Congress and declared that America's mission was "to nourish and defend freedom and democracy, and to communicate these ideals everywhere we can".

At the time I was a 32-year-old member of the Danish parliament, and Reagan's message stuck with me. Indeed, it was one I carried through my next 30 years in public life—as a parliamentarian, as a minister, and as first the prime minister of Denmark and then secretary-general of NATO. No matter the stakes in a global conflict of ideals, America knew where it stood.

I knew then that America had its faults—that it sometimes failed to live up to Reagan's lofty stated mission—but at no point did I ever question that the security of both my country and my continent would be best guaranteed by a close-knit partnership with the United States.

It is a conviction that I know was shared until this January by the leaders of nearly every member of the NATO alliance—each of whom is now, like me, struggling to comprehend a transatlantic relationship that is crumbling before our eyes.

As Donald Trump threatens Greenland with annexation, Europe with economic warfare, and Ukraine with a choice between economic colonisation by America and extinction at the hands of Russia, the question facing our leaders is not whether Europe was wrong to place its trust in America.

Indeed, Europe has benefited greatly from America's commitment to its security. Decades passed in peace, and every dollar the United States spent on Europe's defence was a euro that the continent could spend on infrastructure, health care and pensions. Mr Trump is a manifestation of the many Americans who rightly feel they drew the short end of that straw.

During times of peace, Europe's intransigence on defence left us vulnerable, though not existentially so. But today, in the face of a revanchist Russia waging war on our borders and an American president who is openly hostile to the transatlantic alliance, Europe must come to terms with the fact that we are not only existentially vulnerable but also seemingly alone.

After 80 years of American-backed security, we Europeans must now shoulder the burden of securing peace on our own continent. Doing so will require us to address two equally pressing challenges: ensuring Europe can finally defend itself, and securing a sustainable peace for a sovereign Ukraine.

As a baseline, European defence spending must return to cold-war levels. On a purchasing-power-parity basis, Russia spent more on defence last year than all of Europe combined. I believe that NATO's current defence-spending *target* of 2% of GDP should become a *requirement* of 3% immediately, and of 4% by 2028. That would mean some $400bn in additional annual defence spending.

Spending it on tanks, artillery and fighter aircraft will not be enough. Europe must also ensure it can act independently of America. This will require significant investments in capabilities such as air defence, refuelling and other logistics that sustain military operations—and for which Europe is almost entirely reliant on America.

Europe must also be able to produce at scale the equipment and technology it needs. Roughly 80% of its defence procurement is from outside Europe—primarily from the United States. Europe's defence companies, spread across different countries and reliant on small national orders, lack the scale required to compete with their American counterparts. As a result, the continent produces less of what it needs—often at a greater cost. This must change quickly.

Europe must allow for major consolidation in its defence industry, even if it means the merger of dozens of small and mid-sized national defence companies. To encourage new private investment, the European Investment Bank must change its ESG (environmental, social and governance) guidelines to allow it to lend more to the sector. You can forget about funding the green transition if Russian forces are marching on Tallinn while America looks on.

While there is near-unanimity in Europe about the need to spend more on defence, there is little on how to address the most pressing threat to our security since the surrender of Nazi Germany. As Mr Trump negotiates Ukraine's sovereignty with Vladimir Putin, Europe must now put its cards on the table.

A post-war Ukraine will need concrete security guarantees to deter a rested and rearmed Russia. NATO's Article 5 mutual-defence clause is the most ironclad and cost-effective of guarantees—so we should forcefully make the case for Ukraine's NATO membership.

Despite his demands, Mr Putin has no say in the question of whether the alliance welcomes Ukraine into the fold. It is for Ukraine and NATO to negotiate. But if Mr Trump, as the leader of NATO's largest member, does not accept it, Europe must offer guarantees of its own.

In the absence of America, I see no credible deterrent beyond a European-led peace-enforcement mission, under which tens of thousands of our forces are stationed behind the lines in support of their Ukrainian counterparts—with a clear commitment that any renewed Russian attack would be met with a military response by Europe.

Mr Putin has sought to claim a veto of Western troops on Ukrainian soil, but it is not for him to decide. If Ukraine's sovereign government requests a European deterrence mission, we should ignore the Russian leader's threats, rather than cower in fear of them.

Such a mission would of course bear risks for Europe and would have been unthinkable barely three months ago. But the costs of an unsteady peace would be higher in the long run. History tells us that appeasement and half-measures do not lead to peace. If Mr Putin senses weakness, he will not stop in Ukraine. We must make clear that on matters essential to our security, Europe will not back down.

The decisions facing Europe are not easy. An increase in defence investment will mean less money for social spending. The deployment of men and women in uniform must be treated as the potentially life-and-death decision it is. But we do not have time to waste on indecision.

The security architecture that Europe has relied on for generations is gone and is not coming back. Amid a new global conflict of ideals, we no longer know where America stands. If the mission of defending freedom and democracy in Europe falls solely on us, we must finally be ready to take it on.■