

## Meet Europe's Gaullists, Atlanticists, denialists and Putinists

As Donald Trump returns, so do Europe's old schisms over how to defend itself

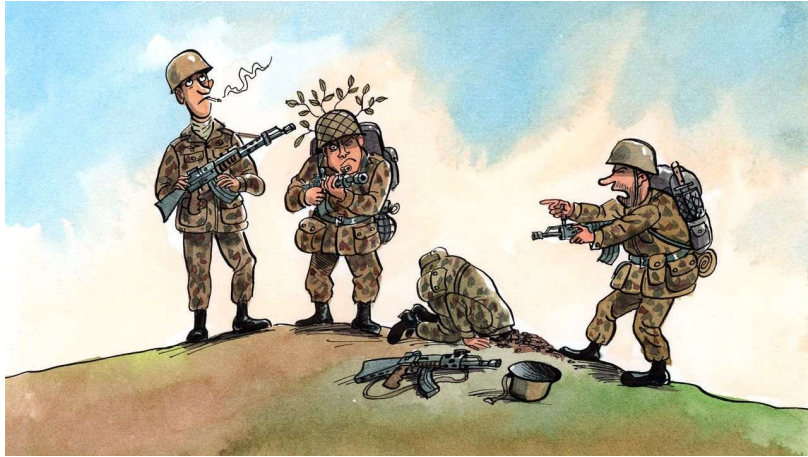


Illustration: Peter Schrank

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Can a country still call itself an ally of America if America is threatening to annex part of its territory? Such a question might once have seemed ripe for a Gitane-puffing *philosophe* to ponder in a Saint-Germain-des-Prés café circa 1968. It has gained fresh relevance in recent weeks as Donald Trump has made repeated threats to seize Greenland, currently an autonomous region of Denmark. At first Europeans convinced themselves that the returning American president's designs on the island were merely part of his patter, something that could be ignored as safely as his suggestion in 2020 that injecting bleach might cure covid. (It doesn't.) Now nobody is sure. After a reportedly fiery phone call with Mr Trump, Mette Frederiksen, the prime minister of Denmark, has criss-crossed Europe this week to shore up support in Paris, Berlin and Brussels. The French foreign minister volunteered to send troops to Greenland, just in case. Channelling his inner Jean-Paul Sartre, a European diplomat quipped: "With allies like Donald Trump, who needs enemies?"

The prospect of war between America and an ally in Europe still seems mercifully distant. But the return of Mr Trump has stirred the debate over how Europe should defend itself. A rethinking of the continent's "security architecture", as NATO types put it, has been near the top of the agenda ever since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine three years ago. Yet a ramp-up in military spending across the continent has thus far not been matched by a grand new vision of keeping Europe safe. On February 3rd European Union leaders will meet in Brussels both to take stock of the situation and to pitch fresh ideas. (Sir Keir Starmer, Britain's prime minister, will join part of the meeting, as will NATO's secretary-general, Mark Rutte.) Under the spotlight, all sides will emphasise they stand united. Behind closed doors the divisions that plagued the bloc during Mr Trump's first term will come back to the fore. To understand Europe's future direction, meet its Gaullists, Atlanticists, denialists and Putinists.

The Gaullists, as the name suggests, are the intellectual descendants of the prickly French leader who resented America's tutelage of Europe and went so far as to pull France out of NATO's military arm in 1966. Charles de Gaulle's successor as French president, Emmanuel Macron, has no wish to leave the military alliance—but [argued during Mr Trump's first term that NATO was experiencing "brain death"](#). Europe thus needs to find a way to achieve "strategic autonomy", the ability to act on its own, if its interests diverge from its big transatlantic ally. Whoever sits in the White House, America is pivoting to other priorities, notably Asia. Europe at the very least must hedge its bets. To best ensure autonomy, European defence budgets should be increased—and, preferably, spent on European kit, insist the Gaullists. Old pipe dreams of an EU army occasionally get an airing, too.

The Atlanticists think Europe going it alone is mad. Poland is the standard-bearer of the NATO-first club, which takes in much of northern and central Europe. Preserving the relationship with America is their top priority. This engagement can essentially be bought with defence contracts. As the Polish foreign minister, Radoslaw Sikorski, recently put it: “Europe’s deal with the US up to now might be crudely characterised as follows: ‘You help defend us, we buy your weapons.’” Mr Trump’s transactional instincts do nothing to undermine that arrangement. On the contrary, bigger defence budgets would result in bigger orders of F-35 jets and the like. Even if dealing with a volatile American president is less than ideal, Atlanticists admit, it is still preferable to relying on militarily impotent European allies. If Russia is intent on further military action in Europe by the end of the decade, as some spooks posit, NATO has to be improved rather than replaced. Buying European defence kit is a laudable idea in the long term, but if done too hastily would mean relying on French and German defence contractors whose products will be delivered only after Russian troops have marched into the Baltics. Focusing too much on EU schemes will make co-operating with Britain harder, too.

Both the Gaullists and the Atlanticists agree that more defence spending will help—either to keep America sweet, or towards achieving European autonomy. Mr Trump wants Europe to go from a spending target of 2% of GDP to 5%; NATO leaders meeting in June are expected to settle on a long-term objective of 3.5%. That summit promises to be an awkward moment for Europe’s third camp, the denialists, whose defence strategy amounts to planting their heads in the sand, ostrich-style. How else to explain that two of the EU’s four biggest member states, Italy and Spain, spend under 1.5% of GDP on defence?

As infuriating as denialism can be to Gaullists and Atlanticists, it is still better than the final camp. An arc of Putinist leaders stand ready to foil EU schemes that rile Russia, whose strongman president the likes of Viktor Orban in Hungary and Robert Fico in Slovakia seem to want to emulate. (They think of themselves as Trumpian: same difference, some might say.) Though small, their camp is growing and any of them can derail EU measures that require unanimity, such as imposing sanctions or aiding Ukraine.

### **How many divisions does Europe have?**

All countries contain bits of the four factions in their political establishment. (Germany, set to get a new chancellor following elections on February 23rd, is hard to place in any camp for now.) Even if Europeans were to agree on an overarching defence plan, the thorny question of how to pay for it would then need to be resolved. Some cash-strapped countries could afford to spend more on defence only if funding came through borrowing the money jointly at EU level, a non-starter for fiscal hawks. That would open up another can of divisions for future summits to ponder. ■