



# Europe's Strategic Transformation: Implications for the Mediterranean Region

by Luis Simón

Europe's security environment is being reshaped by US strategic retrenchment and Russian revisionism in the east, accelerating the shift toward greater European responsibility for deterrence and defence. As Europe's political attention, military planning and resources concentrate on NATO's eastern flank and support for Ukraine, its capacity for sustained engagement beyond those core areas is narrowing. At the same time, the Mediterranean retains critical relevance for European security as an enabling space for logistics, reinforcement and operational access to the Balkans and the Black Sea, providing depth and flexibility for deterrence along NATO's southeastern flank. The resulting mismatch between Europe's declining bandwidth for southern engagement and the Mediterranean's continued strategic importance creates structural tension in European security planning, with implications for force posture, mobility and crisis response across Europe's southern periphery.



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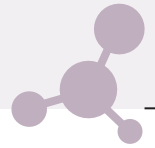
TRANSATLANTIC  
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NETWORK

**Luis Simón** is Director of the Brussels Office and Senior Analyst at the Elcano Royal Institute. He also directs the Centre for Security Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS) at Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

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The Mediterranean has long functioned as a geopolitical extension of the European system. Historically, the balance of power in Europe projected itself southward, shaping dynamics across the broader Mediterranean basin. During the Cold War, the Mediterranean was a sub-theatre of superpower competition, but Western Europe – under US strategic leadership – continued to exercise broad influence across the Mediterranean. Even after the Cold War, Europe's interventions in the Balkans, Euro-Mediterranean cooperation frameworks and counterterrorism operations reinforced the perception that the Mediterranean, though complex, remained embedded in a Western-led European order. Europe's role in the Mediterranean, however, was never autonomous: it was embedded in, and sustained by, a broader transatlantic strategic framework. As that framework comes under strain, Europe has increasingly lost its strategic bearing in the Mediterranean.

Two major forces are reshaping Europe's geopolitical and security environment: (1) US strategic retrenchment, driven by Washington's prioritisation of competition with China, and (2) Russian revisionism



*The convergence of US retrenchment and Russian revisionism is shifting Europe's strategic centre of gravity northward and eastward*

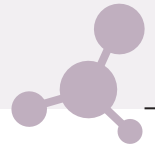
and full-scale war against Ukraine, which has reintroduced high-intensity conflict to the European continent. Together, these forces compel Europeans to assume greater responsibility for their own defence. Yet this emerging strategic landscape comes with severe constraints. For one thing, without strong US leadership, Europe risks greater geo-strategic fragmentation. For another, the imperative to reinforce deterrence on NATO's eastern flank will consume much of Europe's political and military bandwidth, and arguably constrain its ability to engage in the Mediterranean. Relatedly, Europeans are also increasingly likely to view the Mediterranean through the lens of strategic competition with Russia, as a critical theatre for reinforcing the south-eastern flank and protecting supply lines to Ukraine. Concretely, the Mediterranean is emerging as an enabling theatre for operations along NATO's southern-eastern arc, including reinforcement routes into the Balkans and Black Sea region, which are often viewed as the weakest link in the Alliance's posture.

The interaction of these trends – US retrenchment, Russia's revisionism, and Europe's shifting priorities – will likely shape geopolitical and security dynamics in the Mediterranean region for years to come. This paper examines how Europe's changing geopolitical and security order is evolving and how it may affect the broader Mediterranean region. It argues that the convergence of US retrenchment and Russian revisionism is shifting Europe's strategic centre of gravity northward and eastward, constraining Europe's ability to engage in the Mediterranean just as the region becomes more contested. At the same time, the region's value as a strategic enabler for eastern-flank deterrence means Europe cannot afford to overlook it entirely.

## **1 US STRATEGIC RETRENCHMENT: HOW FAST? HOW DEEP?**

Although Washington has reaffirmed its commitment to NATO's Article 5 and extended nuclear deterrence, US strategic priorities now centre on the Indo-Pacific. As senior US officials have emphasised, deterring China is the Pentagon's principal objective, which means European allies must assume primary responsibility for Europe's conventional defence. This does not imply abandonment, but rather a clear strategic rebalancing: the era of US strategic primacy in Europe is giving way to US retrenchment, and Europeans must adapt accordingly.

The pace and depth of US retrenchment in Europe remain uncertain. While US officials reportedly are pressuring European allies to assume by 2027 primary responsibility for the continent's defence, it is still unclear what this will mean in relation to key areas such as command and control, conventional warfighting or nuclear deterrence. Critically, it is unclear what this will entail for US force



*Even in conditions of a US deep retrenchment, NATO arguably remains Europe's most functional security instrument*

posture and defence strategy in Europe.

A recent paper outlines four ideal-type scenarios in terms of US military presence or engagement in Europe.<sup>1</sup> At one end of the spectrum we can envisage the extreme scenario of a complete US withdrawal from NATO and European security. If we think of a 2x2 with two axes – one measuring the degree of likelihood and the other the degree of disruption – this would be the low likelihood, maximum disruption scenario. At the other end of the spectrum we would have status quo minus, which would entail minor adjustments such as the withdrawal of one or two US Army brigades from Europe, i.e. going back to pre-February 2022 levels. This is arguably low likelihood, low impact scenario.

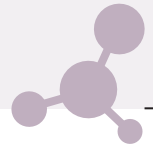
Then there are the more intermediate scenarios, which are arguably the most likely. One such scenario would entail cutting US presence in Europe to the bone, withdrawing most or all combat forces from the European Area of Responsibility, including possibly tactical nuclear weapons, but retaining NATO's strategic command, maintaining the strategic nuclear umbrella, and the commitment to defend NATO. Another would be a residual but still strategically significant presence, leaving a light footprint in the eastern flank – e.g. one brigade and a divisional headquarters –, tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, retaining key command posts at NATO (e.g. SACEUR, air component) and the strategic nuclear umbrella.

Each of the above scenarios would have different implications for European defence planning, and for Europe's degree of 'autonomy' or 'responsibility'. Yet even in conditions of deep retrenchment, NATO arguably remains Europe's most functional security instrument, as it provides the most robust and integrated framework for C4ISR and operational planning, and incorporates non-EU members – such as the United Kingdom, Turkey, Norway and Canada – whose roles will remain indispensable for European security.

## **2 EUROPE'S LONG AND WINDING ROAD TOWARDS "PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY"**

An unpredictable threat environment and almost certain drawdown in US force presence compels European leaders to dismiss any scenario closely resembling the status quo as dangerous wishful thinking. Europe must work for the best (a residual but strategically significant US presence) and plan for the worst (deep retrenchment or de-facto Europe on its own). In this context, as Europeans prepare

<sup>1</sup> Simón, Luis and Lotje Boswinkel, "What if Hell Breaks Loose? Imagining a Post-American Europe", in *CSDS Policy Briefs*, No. 17/2025 (11 June 2025), <https://csds.vub.be/?p=9558>.



**As Europeans prepare to assume “primary responsibility” for their own defence, they will have to step up their role in critical areas such as conventional warfighting and command and control**

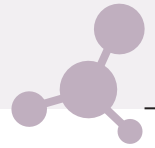
to assume “primary responsibility” for their own defence, they will have to step up their role in critical areas such as conventional warfighting and command and control.<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to conventional warfighting, the most significant effort will have to go into thinking through the continent's intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance requirements; long-range strike investments to provide critical force options below the nuclear threshold; ballistic missile defence efforts – now almost fully shouldered by the United States; or the necessary mass and ability to surge forces without the United States enabling and amplifying these efforts. Some degree of dependence is arguably inevitable, at least for some time, as many European systems remain deeply tied to American technology and targeting architecture. A key factor here will be for Germany to step up its defence modernisation efforts and for Poland and Germany to step up their military-to-military cooperation, especially in the land and air domains.

The greatest challenge that deep US retrenchment may bring for Europe arguably lies in the area of command and control. Of the many capabilities the US provides to NATO and the European deterrence architecture, military (and political) leadership is probably the hardest one to replace. And deep US retrenchment will unavoidably lead to a vacuum in the critical area of command and control. First, no European power has the capability or experience to command military forces beyond a certain level (e.g. above division), let alone in a multinational context, providing an integrated command for Europe's entire Area of Responsibility and integrating the conventional and nuclear aspects of deterrence. Second, and relatedly, no one has the legitimacy to do so. Europe's key powers will likely disagree over alternative command arrangements, and trilateral or bilateral constructs (e.g. Anglo-French or Anglo-German French) will likely lead to coordination problems. Thus, in a context of deep US retrenchment some degree of fragmentation and sub-regionalisation within NATO's command-and-control – and defence planning – would likely be unavoidable.

Arguably, the Baltic-Nordic region may be easier to structure, as it features countries that are ramping up their defence spending, are relatively aligned in terms of threat perception, and are highly interoperable. Britain arguably stands as a “natural” candidate to fulfil the key roles in the key areas of command and control and extended deterrence. Beyond that, however, a sub-regionalisation of

<sup>2</sup> The nuclear dimension is of course critical. However, it has been explored in detail elsewhere and will not be addressed in this paper due to space and time constraints. See, e.g. Perot, Elie, “Revisiting Deterrence: Towards a French Nuclear Umbrella Over Europe?”, in *CSDS Policy Briefs*, No. 6/2025 (20 March 2025), <https://csds.vub.be/?p=8845>.



command and control could turn SACEUR into an empty shell limited to performing advisory functions, and thus deprive the European Area of Responsibility from the integrated strategic picture that US leadership has so far provided. Relatedly, structuring key functions like command or force planning in less cohesive environments – like the Mediterranean or Black Sea areas – will probably lead to greater fragmentation and chaos therein.

Europe's transition toward primary responsibility will thus be uneven, messy and slower than ideal. And it is in this context that the future of Ukraine becomes pivotal.

### 3 RUSSIAN REVISIONISM AND UKRAINE'S STRATEGIC CENTRALITY

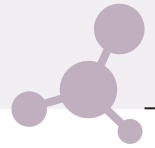
Assessments on the nature of the Russian threat to Europe diverge.<sup>3</sup> Some emphasise Russia's weaknesses: Moscow has expended enormous resources to make only modest territorial gains in Ukraine, and its losses in manpower and equipment have been substantial. From this perspective, Russia poses a long-term but limited threat – it might be able to threaten NATO countries but is in no position to upend the European balance of power. According to this view, Russia represents a challenge to European stability but not a strategic or systemic threat.

Others stress Russia's transformation into a war economy and society. Russia has mobilised its defence-industrial base, reoriented its economy around military production and cultivated a national war ethos that provides it with a comparative advantage over a Europe which – for all its efforts to ramp up defence spending – continues to boast a peace mentality. Intelligence estimates suggesting that Russia could rebuild significant offensive capabilities within five years reinforce concerns that Moscow remains both intent on and capable of significantly challenging European security.

Regardless of these differing interpretations, Ukraine remains central to Europe's strategic stability. Since the end of the Cold War, preventing Ukraine from falling into the Russian sphere has been a critical Western objective. If Ukraine were to align with Russia, NATO's eastern flank would expand dramatically, forming a continuous frontier from the Arctic to the Black Sea. Such a configuration would resemble the Cold War's central front and require immense European investment in manpower and infrastructure to preserve deterrence alongside an expanded flank.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive assessment of Russian military power see: Ruiz Palmer, Diego, "Down But Not Out? Russia's Future Military Capacity in the Shadow of Its War on Ukraine", in *CSDS Policy Briefs*, No. 28/2025 (6 October 2025), <https://csds.vub.be/?p=10123>.

**Ukraine remains central to Europe's strategic stability**



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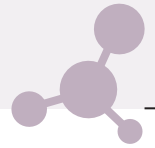
Ensuring that Ukraine survives as a sovereign and functional geopolitical entity is thus the most cost-effective means of containing Russia's ability to threaten Europe. Whether Ukraine's future is stabilised through a negotiated settlement or a protracted conflict is uncertain, but the strategic imperative remains constant. A functional Ukraine reduces the risk of wider European conflict and relieves pressure on Europe's defence posture. It also constrains Russia's ability to project power into the Mediterranean, preventing Moscow from using the region to threaten reinforcement routes or destabilise Europe's southern neighbourhood.

All this has direct implications for the Mediterranean. The more resources Europe must devote to deterring Russia in the East, the fewer resources it will have available for stabilisation and influence in the South. Europe's political, military and institutional bandwidth is finite – and bolstering deterrence in the eastern flank in a context of US retrenchment is likely to absorb most of it going forward. At the same time, Europe's growing focus on the Russia threat also reinforces the degree to which it now sees the Mediterranean as strategically relevant to supporting Ukraine and bolstering deterrence in the south-eastern flank. This is particularly evident in NATO's increased reliance on key logistical nodes such as Alexandroupoli, whose port, rail and hinterland connections provide a crucial alternative reinforcement route into the Balkans and Black Sea – especially should turbulence re-emerge in the Straits or should Russia seek to test NATO cohesion there.

#### **4** IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN

Given the significant economic, technological and military gap between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, we should (still) conceive of that region as a geopolitical extension of Europe. Yet Europe itself is being transformed by new strategic pressures, and the resulting inward shift of focus will inevitably affect its ability to project influence southward. Relatedly, Europe's perception of the Mediterranean is being reshaped by the war in Ukraine and the broader confrontation with Russia, making the region increasingly important as a logistical corridor and strategic buffer connected to the south-eastern flank. As NATO reinforces its presence in the Balkans and seeks to strengthen deterrence in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean – particularly its north-eastern corner – plays an indispensable role as an enabling theatre for troop movements, sustainment flows and crisis-response options.

As Europe directs its resources, political attention and military planning toward the eastern flank – especially in a context of US retrenchment – it will have less bandwidth to manage developments in the Mediterranean. This does not mean Europe disengages entirely,



but rather that its capacity for sustained involvement declines relative to the rising demand. Yet its military planning increasingly depends on the Mediterranean as a staging area for reinforcing Romania, Bulgaria and potentially non-NATO Ukraine, emphasising that southern neglect is neither strategically viable nor operationally prudent.

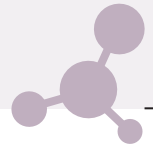
Within Europe, the key military powers face their own constraints. France and the United Kingdom possess Europe's most capable expeditionary forces, including advanced naval assets, airpower and nuclear deterrents. Their ability to conduct out-of-area operations makes them the European states best positioned to maintain influence in the Mediterranean. However, as Washington steps back from Europe, France and the UK-NATO's only nuclear powers other than the United States – will likely prioritise reinforcing deterrence on the continent. Their resources, attention and political capital will be redirected toward shoring up European security, reducing their bandwidth for sustained engagement in the Mediterranean. This reprioritisation is reinforced by the Mediterranean's emerging role as a supporting theatre for the defence of NATO's south-eastern flank.

Germany, for its part, is re-emerging as a significant defence and defence-industrial actor. Yet its geo-strategic orientation is fundamentally different from France and the UK: Germany is less maritime and less expeditionary, with a defence and industrial build-up aimed primarily at continental security. While Berlin maintains interests in Mediterranean energy and infrastructure – spanning North Africa, the Sahel and the Caspian – its core geopolitical focus for the years ahead will likely be in Central and Eastern Europe. This orientation will also limit Germany's appetite for a more assertive Mediterranean role.

Russia's role in the Mediterranean and the broader southern European neighbourhood – including the Sahel – has also been the subject of intense debate.<sup>4</sup> Recent developments – including the fall of the Assad regime in Syria and Russia's retreat from Mali – suggest that Moscow has lost ground in both the Mediterranean and the Sahel. To be sure, Russia remains capable of playing a disruptive or destabilising role, but its ability to shape outcomes in the Mediterranean should not be overstated. Crucially, Moscow's influence in the Mediterranean is closely tied to its access to naval facilities – above all Tartus. At present, the nature of Russia's agreement with post-Assad Syria remains uncertain, ranging from limited logistical access to the possibility of a more substantial re-engagement. The extent of Russia's future Mediterranean role will

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<sup>4</sup> On this see, e.g., Milosevich-Juaristi, Mira, "The Impact of Russia on the Resilience of NATO and the Southern Neighbourhood", in *Elcano Royal Institute Analyses*, No. 54/2024 (7 May 2024), <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/?p=97369>.



largely depend on how this issue is resolved.

In this context, Russia's Mediterranean posture is best seen as a form of secondary-flank competition: a means of complicating NATO's strategic picture, threatening lines of communication, or exploiting instability to stretch European attention and resources already concentrated on the eastern flank. Its capacity to do so, however, is increasingly contingent rather than structural.

Other regional and extra-regional actors are likely to gain influence. Turkey continues to expand its reach across the Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa and the Middle East. Israel is asserting its influence in the Levant and the Middle East and deepening its Eastern Mediterranean partnerships, particularly on energy and maritime security. Despite the recent war with Israel has damaged its capabilities, Iran continues to project influence westward via Syria, Lebanon and non-state actors. For its part, Morocco is asserting itself more prominently in North and West Africa and deepening ties with Gulf and Western partners. Last but not least, China is quietly expanding its Mediterranean footprint through port investments, infrastructure financing, digital networks and energy partnerships, embedding influence in southern Europe and North Africa. Against a backdrop of greater fluidity and contestation, non-state actors – from armed groups to criminal networks – will also be able to exploit vacuums and weak governance.

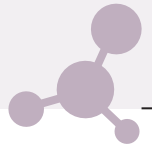
What emerges is not a rigid “two-front challenge”, but rather a progressive narrowing of Europe's strategic horizon: the more Europe focuses on the eastern flank and the defence of Ukraine, the harder it becomes to devote sustained attention to the Mediterranean. As a result, the region becomes more fluid, heterogeneous and contested – shaped increasingly by regional actors and extra-regional powers whose interests diverge from Europe's. Yet paradoxically, Europe's growing confrontation with Russia also reinforces the Mediterranean's relevance as a supporting theatre for protecting supply lines, reinforcing the south-eastern flank and countering Russian influence in North Africa.

## CONCLUSION

Europe's security order is being reconstituted under the twin pressures of US retrenchment and Russian revisionism. These trends compel Europeans to assume greater responsibility and concentrate resources on the eastern flank. At the same time, maintaining Ukraine as a functional geopolitical entity will be essential to tying down Russia and buying Europe the time needed to complete this transition.

But these imperatives limit Europe's ability to engage in the Mediterranean. As Europe focuses on the East, other actors –

***Europe's growing confrontation with Russia reinforces the Mediterranean's relevance as a supporting theatre for protecting supply lines, reinforcing the south-eastern flank and countering Russian influence in North Africa***



regional powers, extra-regional competitors, and non-state groups – will continue to shape the Mediterranean's evolving order. The region is unlikely to be dominated by any single power; instead, it will be increasingly contested, characterised by overlapping spheres of influence and shifting alignments. Europe will therefore face an environment where its strategic responsibilities grow even as its bandwidth narrows. And yet, precisely because the confrontation with Russia is expanding across multiple theatres, Europeans will need to think of the Mediterranean not as a distraction from the eastern flank but as a complementary arena – one that affects supply chains, reinforcement routes and Russia's ability to shape Europe's southern neighbourhood. Understanding this dynamic – and preparing for its consequences – will be essential for shaping the future Euro-Mediterranean order.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17  
I-00186 Rome, Italy  
T +39 06 6976831  
[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)



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- 25 | 33 Luis Simón, *Europe's Strategic Transformation: Implications for the Mediterranean Region*
- 25 | 32 Ludovica Castelli, *Europe, Nuclear Risks, and the Politics of Restraint*
- 25 | 31 Valeriia Gergiieva and Manuel Herrera, *Strategic Boundaries and Limitations of Iran-Russia Partnership*
- 25 | 30 Marc Julienne, *Opening up the G7 to South Korea to Address Contemporary Global Challenges*
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