

European Versus East Asian Security in a Multipolar World of Great Powers

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Abstract

Given the US pivot from Europe to other regions, especially to Asia, Europe needs to be more independent in its own foreign and security policy. This policy should be based on its own interests with less reliance on the US security umbrella. In a multipolar world of great powers, the US has less capacity to provide security for Europe. European leaders need to understand that great powers like the US always give priority to their own interest when making foreign policy decisions. Security cooperation with the US can work when the interests of the US and Europe are similar but is less favorable when the interests differ. Part of Europe's strategy should be to seek long-term stability in its relations with Russia. While maintaining good relations with the US, Europe should cooperate with China and other Asian countries and engage in mutually beneficial trade and investment based on its own interests. It is notable that the ASEAN countries have not sought as close economic and political integration as the EU member states have done and there is no common military alliance in the region comparable to NATO. Many ASEAN countries seek neutrality in their dealing with great powers. Despite great diversity, Southeast Asia mostly remains a relatively peaceful region while there is a major war going on in Europe.

Keywords: Great powers, European integration, ASEAN, defense alliances, NATO.

JEL classifications: F51, F52, F55

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1. Introduction

The United States (US) has been the security guarantor for Western-Europe post-World War II primarily via the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that was established in 1949² (NATO, 1949), but also via bilateral defense agreements with several European countries. Because of NATO, the European Union (EU) has been able to focus more on its own economic reconstruction and prosperity, and less on investment in security.

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² See further: <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/1949/04/04/the-north-atlantic-treaty>

The US was also influential in the Eastern and Central Europe when the Soviet Union collapsed and those countries were leaving the Warsaw Pact and joining the EU and NATO (See for example, Hilmarsson, 2018). Both the EU and NATO expanded when the Soviet Union collapsed. The EU now has 27 member states (European Union, 2026) and NATO 32 member states (NATO, 2026).

It is likely when the war in Ukraine is over, that the US will increasingly be preoccupied in other parts of the world, especially in Asia because of the rise of China, and the Persian Gulf, mainly because of oil, and thus less interested in European security. Recently the US has also been preoccupied in its back yard, South America, most notably in Venezuela and there are currently tensions between the US and Cuba. At the time of writing there is an ongoing war in the Middle East between the US and Israel joining forces against Iran.

Pivot to Asia and to other regions of the world has already resulted in demands from Washington DC that the burden of Europe's defense be increasingly shifted from the US to European NATO member states. In a recent NATO summit in Hague, it was decided that European countries must spend 5% of their GDP on defense, which is a radical change as the previous commitment that was 2% of GDP (NATO, 2025). This growing preoccupation in the US in other parts of the world is a challenge for the transatlantic alliance between Europe and North America and raises questions about its viability and feasibility. Because of this changes, Europe needs to become more independent from the United States on security.

The ongoing war in Ukraine has created tensions between the EU and European NATO member states as well as Canada on one hand, and the US, on the other. The shift from a unipolar world after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, with the US as the only great power, to a multipolar world ca. 2017 with three great powers, US, China and Russia, means that the US needs to prioritize its engagement in the world.³ The US government is already planning for this change as can be seen in its recent National Security Strategy published in November 2025 (White House, 2025) as well as in its National Defense Strategy published in January 2026 (US Department of War, 2026a). Europe may thus need to develop its own vision on international engagement and security policy and prioritize it according to its own interests with less US engagement.

Europe and the US may also have increasingly different interests when it comes to engaging with other regions in the world, including Asia, most notably China. While the US is engaged in severe security competition with China, Europe may benefit from growing trade with China which already is extensive (European Commission, 2026). This cooperation may also result in more investment from China in Europe, not least in eastern and central Europe where investment is most needed, for example in infrastructure, and where the EU can only provide limited support.

³ In PPP terms the Chinese GDP became larger than US GDP in 2017.

It is notable that in Southeast Asia, ASEAN⁴ countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam have sought more neutrality from the great powers than has been the case in Europe. Those ASEAN countries generally pursue a policy of strategic neutrality or "hedging" to avoid choosing sides between major powers like the US and China or Russia. They maintain this stance to protect economic interests, diversify partnerships, and maintain regional stability through ASEAN. The Philippines is an exception as it is clearly an ally of the US.

In Europe many countries are currently under the security umbrella of single great power, the United States, via their NATO membership. Like those European states both Japan and South Korea have also sought to be under the US security umbrella. The great power in Asia currently is China, and India can be viewed as an emerging great power in the region.

One reason why most ASEAN countries have chosen a more neutral stance on security matters than European countries have done is perhaps that they need to engage with all the great powers in trade and investment, as well as on security. The rise of China in Asia means that China is important for them economically, but so is the US. The US also plays a role for them militarily including weapons sale and so does China and in some cases also Russia. It is thus not feasible for them to pick sides either with the US or China and they have incentives not form very close alliance with a single superpower as Europe has done with the US.

When NATO was established in 1949, there were two great powers in Europe, the US and the Soviet Union. European NATO member states sought to be under the US security umbrella, and the Soviet Union was mostly a closed economy formed its own defense alliance, the Warsaw pact. There was very little trade between Western Europe and the Soviet Union which fell in 1991.

Now the European states face a dilemma. They still seek security from the US, but at the same time it is also beneficial for them to trade with China. Given the severe security competition between the US and China this can cause conflict of interest between the US and Europe and result in tensions that can eventually weaken the transatlantic between the US and the Europe. Europe thus needs to form its own vision on how to cooperate with the US on security matters, but at the same time engage with China economically.

2. Objective of the research

The objective of the research is to analyze how great power politics in a multipolar world is likely to affect European security. Great powers are the most important players shaping international relations. From 1945 to 1991 we lived in a bipolar system dominated by the US and the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union there was a unipolar moment from 1991 to about 2016/17 with the US dominating. Since 2017 we arguably live in multipolar with the rise of China,

⁴ The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded on August 8, 1967 in Bangkok. See further: <https://asean.org/>

stronger Russia and the US remaining the greatest power. Since 1945 the world has thus moved from a bipolar to a unipolar system, and to the current multipolar system of great powers. The world is likely to change dramatically in the coming decades especially if China continues to grow economically with intense security competition especially between the US and China. Europe needs to reconsider its security in a multipolar world of great powers and possibly learn lessons from East Asia and ASEAN.

3. Research methodology

The methodology used is the case study method, i.e. multiple case studies and comparative analysis. Compared to other research methods, a case study enables the researcher to examine the issues involved in greater depth (Yin, 2009). Comparative analysis is employed as it enables a researcher to assess and explain the political phenomenon among cases (Lancaster and Montinola, 1997). It helps capture the effects of complicated and interrelated causal influences and facilitates our understanding of political and economic issues at national, regional, and international levels (Ragin, 2014). Also, the literature on comparative analysis is rich with suggestions on how such an inquiry should proceed (Lijphart, 1975). Comparative country and country group case studies involve analysis and synthesis of the similarities, differences and patterns across different country and country group cases that can produce knowledge about how and why particular economic and security policies work or fail to work.

This research is different from other previous research as it is more interdisciplinary covering issues of security policy, international relations and politics, regional integration as well as the effect of international institutions. It is also different in which it emphasizes how policies are shaped by the interaction between smaller, medium-sized powers and great powers.

4. Differences between Europe and Asia, between EU and ASEAN

Europe and Asia have followed different strategies when it comes to security and there are also different approaches to regional integration in Europe versus Southeast Asia:

First, while Europe is mostly Christian, Southeast Asian nations have more diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, including Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism and Islam, all of which exist in the region, leading to different and more diverse political and military considerations among those nations. In fact, ASEAN is the world's most diverse region when considering culture, religion ethnicity, as well as political and economic systems. Vietnam, a country of more than 100 million people with a thriving economy, is a communist country and an ASEAN member state. In contrast, the similarity of European civilizations is greater, which also provides them with a basis for closer regional integration. Mahbubani and Tang (2018) describe the EU as a mono-civilizational club of Christian

countries, but ASEAN as a multi-civilizational club of unparalleled diversity (see Mahbubani and Tang, 2018). Mahbubani (2023) states European regional integration is based on the principle that, “To join us, you must be like us.” (Mahbubani, 2023). This would not be a viable approach ASEAN.

Second, Europe had a bipolar system during the Cold War with two great powers in the system, the US and the USSR, while in Asia the balance was more complicated. Asia was not only affected by the United States and the Soviet Union, but also by major countries such as China, India, and Japan. European countries only needed to choose sides between the United States or the Soviet Union, i.e. between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Taking sides was less appropriate in Asia and flexible diplomacy and pragmatism replaced it. Different structure affects the behavior of individual states.

Third, for many Asian countries, flexibility and pragmatism is important in their foreign policies. If a multilateral defense agreement like the North Atlantic Treaty in Europe was signed in Southeast Asia, it could provide stronger security guarantees, but at the cost of flexibility. Many Asian countries are not willing to accept such arrangement. That's also why one can see a foreign policy of non-alignment. ASEAN has not sought as high level of integration as the EU has done economically or in terms of security. There is also no common currency in Southeast Asia. ASEAN emphasizes national sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states.

Forth, the differences in national borders also affect the strategic choices of Southeast Asian countries. European countries mostly share land borders, which makes relatively fast movement of military forces between countries possible. For example, continental European countries can quickly move their troops to the eastern flank of Europe if necessary. The only major European military power that is an exception to this is the UK, which is an island state. The situation in ASEAN is different, with several major island countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines that have no interconnected borders with continental Asia. Military movements in ASEAN are thus more complex than in Europe.

Most Southeast Asian countries are pursuing hedging diplomacy,⁵ and are unwilling to pick sides between China and the US. ASEAN countries have close economic ties with China but also are engaged in military cooperation at various levels with the US and they do not want a military confrontation between China and the US, let alone a full-scale war. Picking sides between the two great powers could harm the interests of these countries. An exception to this rule in ASEAN is the Philippines that have chosen to take sides. The Philippines have tense relationship with China because of the South China Sea and have become an ally to the United States.

Currently there are two great powers dominating in Asia militarily, China and the US. China seeks to balance US military might in Asia and the US has been building coalitions to balance against China. Among those US lead coalitions are,

⁵ Including Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy, which is essentially a form of hedging.

AUKUS where the participating countries are the US, the UK and Australia (see US Department of War, 2026b) and Quad where the participating countries are Australia, India, Japan and the US (see US Department of State, 2026).

Moving forward, it seems clear that the US will from now on become more preoccupied in Asia than in Europe because of the rise of China. Europe will be forced to shoulder more of its own defense, not relying so much on the US as before. While doing so Europe will be more independent in its relations with other great powers and could engage more freely with China in mutually beneficial trade and investment deals. It would also improve European security profile in the long term, if the current poisonous relations with Russia could be improved.

5. Discussions

It is interesting to compare the different security strategies of Europe and the Southeast Asian or ASEAN countries. The ASEAN countries have almost 700 million people and Europe more than 700 million people, the EU alone about 450 million people. NATO member states have now about one billion people.

Many Southeast Asian countries have been described as hedging states, navigating their relationships with both China and the United States by engaging with them and each other on different issues and maintaining strategic partnerships where it is beneficial for them. In contrast many European countries have chosen to be under the US security umbrella as NATO member states. The US led the establishment of NATO in 1949 and has been the backbone of their security strategy. By being totally dependent on a single great power Europe must consider US interests when dealing with other great powers, most notably China and Russia.

There have recently been growing tensions between the US, on one hand, and European NATO member states, as well as EU, on the other hand, because of the war in Ukraine. The US has sought to make a peace deal with Russia with compromises that Europe is unwilling to accept. In addition to this there may be growing tensions between the US and Europe regarding trade with China and investment from China.

The current US government seeks to normalize its relationship with Russia, which might be a sensible strategic move given the fierce great power competition between the US and China. The US has made similar moves before when it was engaged in a severe security competition with the Soviet Union in the 1970s, by improving relations with China. It seems that many European leaders have failed to understand that a great power like the US always gives priority to their own interest when making foreign policy decisions, and this is especially true on security policy.

Given this situation one could argue that Europe should have avoided becoming so security dependent on the United States, and that Europe could engage in hedging to pursue its own foreign policy interests, keeping good relations with the US, but also seeking beneficial cooperation with other great powers, most notably China.

Hedging diplomacy has been described as a foreign policy strategy where a state avoids taking a definitive side between competing powers by using a mix of engagement and resistance, cooperation and confrontation. It is a risk-management approach to navigate uncertainty in a complex international environment, aiming to maintain strategic autonomy and avoid being overly reliant on any single great power. This strategy involves diversifying a country's diplomatic and security stakes to create a fallback position, rather than fully aligning with one side only.

Hedging states deliberately avoid a single, clear-cut choice to side with one power over another. It involves a combination of both cooperative and confrontational measures, such as seeking economic partnerships with one power while strengthening security ties with another. The core purpose is to manage potential risks associated with great power competition and uncertainty about future international power dynamics. By not becoming a "security vassal" to any single power, a hedging state can maintain its ability to act independently and pursue its own interests.

Europe made a clear-cut choice by being firmly under the US security umbrella. This worked reasonably well during Soviet times and during the unipolar moment when the US was the only great power. The great power competition between that Soviet Union and the US is fundamentally different from that between China and the US. While the Soviet Union was a closed economy, China is driven by foreign trade with the West. Because of Europe's security dependence, Europe has limited its ability and freedom to form an economic partnership with China and engage with China. Conflicts with the Trump administration has made Europe more vulnerable. US interests and European interests do not necessarily go hand in hand anymore. The US imposes tariffs on its allies in Europe just as it does with its foes around the world. By becoming a security vassal to the United States, Europe has undermined its ability to act independently and pursue its own interest.

If one considers Southeast Asia, those countries have formed ASEAN as a platform for consultation and cooperation. The EU on the other hand has gone much further in its integration efforts, including a common currency. But the EU remains a union of 27 independent and sovereign nation states that have often had conflicting interests.

The EU has a common defense clause⁶ but no common army and since 1949 it has primarily relied on NATO for its defense. The ASEAN countries on the other hand emphasize national sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. There is no NATO alliance in Southeast Asia, and in terms of defense, individual states are more responsible for their own defense than European NATO member states that emphasize collective defense. Among those the larger and more populous states such as Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam have more freedom in pursuing independent defense policies than smaller Southeast Asian states such as Cambodia and Laos that are more vulnerable.

⁶ See further: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/mutual-defence-clause.html>

The NATO alliance is facing challenges now with its lead nation, the US, less willing to carry the burden of providing defense for European countries. It wants to shift more of the burden of defense for Europe on European states. When Donald Trump ran for president for the first time in 2016, he described NATO as an obsolete institution.⁷ At the same time the world has become multipolar, and the US has less capacity to focus on European defense. The US has been running fiscal deficits for a long time, accumulating public debt. With NATO expansion an alliance that once was 12 member states but now has 32 member states with one billion people, the burden of funding a security umbrella has become heavier for the US and perhaps unsustainable.

EU member states have relied on external security guarantees rather than investing in a unified EU-level military capability. No single member state is currently willing or able to act as a central authority to command deep military integration in the EU. European defense remains hampered by fragmented procurement and incompatible systems.

Should NATO disintegrate, EU member states will have to take care of their own security more independently. The EU has so far not assumed the role of providing collective defense for its member states. Thus, many nation states in Europe will seek to strengthen their defenses individually. The larger European states, most notably, Germany, France and the UK are likely to start competing among themselves and this can lead to instability in Europe and possibly wars that we have seen before. The US will no longer serve as a "pacifier" maintaining peace and stability in Europe protecting European nations from external threats (historically the Soviet Union and now Russia) and preventing them from returning to their own internal rivalries and power struggles. Some smaller European states have formed alliances that can be used to form a common agenda to strengthen the position of these countries within the larger alliances such as the EU and NATO (Hilmarsson, 2025). But by providing a security umbrella, the US allowed European nations to focus on economic integration and prosperity effectively managing crises that European powers were often unable to resolve on their own. NATO meant that security was off the table in Europe.

6. Conclusions

In the current multipolar world, the US is under pressure to shift more of the burden of European defense to Europe. The US can no longer afford to provide for European security as it did in the past. At the same time European interests may no longer be compatible with those of the US. Europe may want to pursue a different policy towards China on trade and investment which can be beneficial to Europe. Frictions between the US and Europe regarding the war in Ukraine has also weakened NATO and the transatlantic link. The US has shown more willingness to compromise with Russia than Europe and thus normalize relations with Russia which can serve US interests in the current great power competition.

Given reduced commitment of the US to NATO in a multipolar world, Europe does not only need to strengthen its defenses, but it could become necessary

⁷ See further: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38635181>

to reach some agreement with Russia on Europe's security architecture in the long term. Russia has about 145 million people, is a major nuclear power and has vast natural resources. No matter what Europe does, Russia will disappear, it will still be there. Europe may in the long term be forced to take a more realistic stance in its relations with Russia.

In a multipolar world of great powers it is not possible to isolate Russia completely with economic sanctions since there are alternative markets in other regions of the world especially in Asia where China is a close partner with Russia, and where India trades with Russia, and so do many other countries including in the ASEAN group and various BRICS member states.

Currently the relationship between the EU and European NATO member states on one hand and Russia on the other is poisonous. But if Europe can work out a security arrangement with Russia in the long term it can reduce its dependence on the US and take steps to pursue its own foreign and security policies. Europe would have more space to negotiate with China with its own interest in mind. This way it can have more freedom to form its own policies and distance itself more from the fierce great power competition between the US and China.

By becoming dependent on the US for its security, Europe lost its ability to form an independent foreign policy. Europe could still seek good relations with the US and would cooperate with the US on security, but it would also be able to cooperate with the other great powers when it is economically beneficial as well as emerging powers on terms that suits its own interest.

ASEAN countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam have so far managed without siding firmly with a single great power. They engage with all the great powers benefiting from trade, investment and military cooperation to a varying degree. This gives them more room to form their own foreign policy. They do not want a military conflict between the US and China. For them peace and stability are the best option. For them trade and investment with the high-income nations in the West, as well as middle- and high-income countries in Asia, is also vital to eventually become high income countries.

Vietnam's non-aligned policy known as "four no's" is notable: (i) No siding with one country against another. (ii) No military alliances. (iii) No foreign military bases. (iv) No use of force or threatening to use force in international relations. This approach is noteworthy, not least if one considers what has happened in Ukraine. With such policy the Ukraine war could possibly have been avoided.

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