

Reconfiguring European Security

The Role of Strategic Non-Nuclear Weapons in a Changing Threat Environment

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Preface

The reconfiguration of European security and the question of how Europe can strategically reposition itself more independently have been at the heart of the foreign policy debate for some time now. We at the Academy will also be focusing more closely on this topic under the heading of 'comprehensive security'. In this paper, the two Pakistani researchers, Ahyousha Khan and AIA Associate Fellow Summar Iqbal Barbar, argue that Europe has been caught in a security dilemma since Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022: on the one hand, Europe is heavily reliant on US protection due to the threat from Russia; on the other hand, uncertainty regarding the reliability of the US and concerns about remaining politically and militarily dependent on it are growing. To explain this, they draw on Glenn Snyder's 'alliance security dilemma', which distinguishes between two fears: the fear of being abandoned by one's ally in a crisis, and the fear of being drawn into unwanted conflicts by one's ally. As a solution, they propose that Europe invest more heavily in strategic non-nuclear weapons systems (SNNWs), such as precision-guided missiles, missile defense, cyber and space capabilities. The fact that this perspective has been written by two researchers from a non-European region that is nonetheless highly significant in terms of geostrategy and security policy is particularly valuable and makes for an especially interesting read.

Die Neugestaltung der europäischen Sicherheit und die Frage, wie sich Europa strategisch unabhängiger positionieren kann, stehen seit einiger Zeit im Mittelpunkt der außenpolitischen Debatte. Auch wir an der Akademie werden uns unter dem Stichwort „comprehensive security“ verstärkt mit diesem Thema befassen. In diesem Beitrag argumentieren die beiden pakistanischen Forscher Ahyousha Khan und AIA Associate Fellow Summar Iqbal Barbar, dass Europa seit dem Angriff Russlands auf die Ukraine im Jahr 2022 in einem Sicherheitsdilemma gefangen ist: Einerseits ist Europa aufgrund der Bedrohung durch Russland stark auf den Schutz der USA angewiesen; andererseits wachsen die Unsicherheit hinsichtlich der Verlässlichkeit der USA und die Bedenken, politisch und militärisch von ihnen abhängig zu bleiben. Um dies zu erklären, greifen sie auf Glenn Snyders „Allianz-Sicherheitsdilemma“ zurück, das zwischen zwei Ängsten unterscheidet: der Angst, in einer Krise vom Verbündeten im Stich gelassen zu werden, und der Angst, vom Verbündeten in unerwünschte Konflikte hineingezogen zu werden. Als Lösung schlagen sie vor, dass Europa stärker in strategische nicht-nukleare Waffensysteme (SNNWs) investiert, wie z. B. präzisionsgelenkte Raketen, Raketenabwehr sowie Cyber- und Weltraumfähigkeiten. Die Tatsache, dass diese Perspektive von zwei Forschern aus einer nicht-europäischen Region verfasst wurde, die jedoch in geostrategischer und sicherheitspolitischer Hinsicht von großer Bedeutung ist, ist besonders wertvoll und macht die Lektüre besonders interessant.

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Abstract: *The European security environment has undergone significant transformation following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, particularly amid rising uncertainty over the credibility of US security commitments. This paper examines the drivers of Europe's current security dilemma—marked by Russian coercion and doubts about US commitment—and explores possible pathways to strengthen European security. As an answer, we propose Glenn Snyder's 'alliance security dilemma', particularly the secondary alliance dilemma for transatlantic security. By applying this particular theory, the paper examines how asymmetrical dependencies within the US-Europe relationship have created vulnerabilities for Europe, particularly in the domain of extended deterrence, military presence and access to advanced security-related technologies. This paper identifies SNNWs as a viable strategic, military and political option for Europe to enhance its security amid the anxiety of abandonment. Moreover, this paper argues that investment in SNNWs can reduce Europe's abandonment concerns by enhancing self-reliance, improving escalation control, and strengthening conventional deterrence, while simultaneously reducing US entrapment concerns by shifting greater responsibility for regional deterrence and crisis management to European allies.*

Abstract: *Das europäische Sicherheitsumfeld hat sich nach dem russischen Einmarsch in die Ukraine im Jahr 2022 erheblich gewandelt, insbesondere angesichts der wachsenden Unsicherheit hinsichtlich der Glaubwürdigkeit der Sicherheitszusagen der USA. Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Ursachen des aktuellen Sicherheitsdilemmas Europas – das durch russische Zwangsmaßnahmen und Zweifel am Engagement der USA gekennzeichnet ist – und lotet mögliche Wege zur Stärkung der europäischen Sicherheit aus. Als Antwort darauf schlagen wir Glenn Snyders „Allianz-Sicherheitsdilemma“ vor, insbesondere das sekundäre Allianz-Dilemma für die transatlantische Sicherheit. Unter Anwendung dieser speziellen Theorie untersucht der Beitrag, wie asymmetrische Abhängigkeiten innerhalb der Beziehungen zwischen den USA und Europa Schwachstellen für Europa geschaffen haben, insbesondere in den Bereichen erweiterte Abschreckung, militärische Präsenz und Zugang zu fortschrittlichen sicherheitsrelevanten Technologien. Dieser Beitrag identifiziert SNNWs als eine tragfähige strategische, militärische und politische Option für Europa, um seine Sicherheit angesichts der Angst vor einem Verlassenwerden zu verbessern. Darüber hinaus argumentiert dieser Beitrag, dass Investitionen in SNNWs die Verlassenheitsängste Europas verringern können, indem sie die Selbstständigkeit erhöhen, die Eskalationskontrolle verbessern und die konventionelle Abschreckung stärken, während gleichzeitig die Bedenken der USA hinsichtlich einer „Falle“ gemindert werden, indem eine größere Verantwortung für regionale Abschreckung und Krisenmanagement auf die europäischen Verbündeten verlagert wird.*

1. Introduction

The European security environment is evolving under the dual pressures of increasing uncertainty over US security commitments and persistent coercive behavior from Russia. This paper argues that Europe is stuck between a rock and a hard place, where as a dependent ally of the US, Europe requires the latter's constant support against Russian threats of escalation. On the other hand, in gaining US support, Europe must ensure that it is not exploited by its closest ally in the post-Cold War security architecture because of the economic, military and political leverage its ally holds. To analyze this dilemma between Europe and the United States, the paper draws on the "secondary alliance dilemma" developed by Glenn Snyder. Snyder argues that once alliances are formed, member states face enduring tensions arising from the inherent characteristics of alliance relationships, particularly asymmetry in capabilities, uncertainty regarding the credibility of commitments, and divergent strategic interests. These conditions generate two opposing fears: abandonment, where an ally may fail to provide support in times of need; and entrapment, where a state may be drawn into unwanted conflicts due to its alliance obligations. This paper will attempt to unfold how Europe and the US are involved in this dilemma. Moreover, it will examine how Europe is trying to implore all options, including political, economic, strategic and military options, to overcome this dilemma and attain "strategic autonomy". However, the exclusive focus of this paper is on strategic and military options, especially the role of SNNWs, which Europe could explore to enhance its security.

This therefore raises the question as to how strategic non-nuclear weapons could reshape European security dynamics by mediating the abandonment-entrapment dilemma in the context of Russian coercion and evolving transatlantic burden-sharing expectations. This paper argues that strategic non-nuclear weapons would be a good alternative option for Europe to fill the gap between conventional and nuclear level of escalation against Russia. Investing in these weapon systems would provide options of escalation control and flexibility to choose from various options. Moreover, these systems would enhance Europe's self-reliance and strategic autonomy despite being part of the NATO system and relying on US's extended deterrence framework. Thus, not only would Europe be able to escape its fears and anxieties concerning US support, but it would also lessen the entrapment situation for the US as well.

The discussion is structured in three stages: an examination of Europe's evolving security environment, an analysis of Snyder's theoretical framework, and its application to the European context. The last section will focus on SNNWs and how they could help in easing the alliance dilemma.

2. The European Security Situation

The European security situation changed significantly in 2014 after the Russian annexation of Crimea, but the truly definitive moment occurred after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 had implications for Europe on two levels. Firstly, it gave rise to the self-realization in Europe that it cannot maintain or sustain its security with the current level of minimal defense spending and

very little reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence. This reliance is partly a byproduct of the intensification of hostilities between Europe and Russia, particularly following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In this context, Russian reliance on nuclear weapons as a component of its overall strategy to achieve its political objectives, to avoid large-scale attack, to coerce adversaries and to issue escalation threats before and during conflict became an unignorable issue. In this regard, President Vladimir Putin's 2022 statement explicitly signaled the possibility of nuclear escalation when he warned that "in the event of a threat to the territorial integrity of our country and to defend Russia and our people, we will make use of all weapons available to us. This is not a bluff" (Bundae et al., 2025). Moreover, Russia deployed its nuclear weapons in Belarus to complicate western security equations and conducts regular exercises on the use of nuclear systems to constantly signal its nuclear capacities (Horovitz & Wachs, 2024). Akimenko highlighted that more than nuclear weapons, Russia also continuously invests in strategic and sub-strategic dual-use systems, which are also a growing threat for Europe because of their ability to target strategic systems. Moscow has pursued a two-pronged strategy since the start of the war: one prong to coerce Kyiv into accepting Russia's political and territorial demands, and a second prong to stop the West from providing (military and political) support to Ukraine (Bundae et al., 2025).

Europe and NATO members continue to support Ukraine against Russia, although this support faces several challenges, such as internal rifts among allies, managing escalation risks, the divergence of resources from other allies (Southeast Asia, Middle East and Far East) to the European theater and disagreements regarding financial and military support for Ukraine. Matters took a nosedive, however, upon the inauguration of the Trump Administration in 2025, where the administration was not only apprehensive about the war in Ukraine but also about the European allies not contributing enough in the war and at the same time threatened the territorial integrity of Greenland, a self-governing territory of Denmark. Even in its National Security Strategy (NSS), Trump Administration is apprehensive about Europe and has criticized Europe, for its "civilizational decline" because administration believes that now Europe is economically weak, flooded with migrants, too much focus on Russia as adversary while simultaneously dangerously dependent on China (Belin and Ruge 2025). In response to US's criticism on Europe in NSS, Connor (2025) reports that European leaders—including Antonio Costa and Friedrich Merz—described elements of the document as "unacceptable," particularly its critical portrayal of Europe's economic condition, competitiveness, and strategic dependencies, as well as what they perceived as an attempt to shape internal European policy debates, which they regarded as political interference. The analysts Belin and Ruge (2025) believe that the document is just blatant criticism of Europe without offering any solutions to lead Europe to the "era of transatlantic prosperity" and only serve American interests.

3. Theoretical Framework: Alliance Politics and the Security Dilemma

The security dilemma rests on the self-defeating logic that measures adopted by one state to increase its security can inadvertently generate insecurity, as adversaries are rarely certain about the state's intentions. Security dilemma is one of the most researched concepts in the field of adversarial relations, especially in the context of arms races between adversaries. However, in his seminal paper "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," Glenn Snyder (1984) highlighted the existence of security dilemmas between allies, especially in a multipolar world. The paper deals with two kinds of dilemma: primary alliance dilemma (before formation of an alliance) and secondary alliance dilemma (after formation of an alliance). As Europe and the US are already allies, the nature of their relationship and present situation shall thus be explored through the lens of the secondary alliance dilemma amidst evolving multipolarity. The central dilemma in alliance politics does not lie in whether states should form alliances, but to what extent they should commit to their partners. As Glenn Snyder explains, this creates a trade-off between two competing risks: abandonment and entrapment. Strengthening commitments to allies can reduce the fear of abandonment—where support may not be forthcoming in times of need—but simultaneously increases the risk of entrapment, whereby a state may be drawn into conflicts not of its choosing. Conversely, limiting commitments may help avoid entrapment but heightens the possibility of abandonment. It is this tension between competing risks, rather than simply "good" or "bad" aspects of cooperation, that constitutes the core of the secondary alliance dilemma. He further argues that alliance dilemmas are particularly acute when one ally is more dependent on the other.

However, although the dominant ally may seek to avoid entrapment, its position within the alliance affords it considerable leverage over its less powerful partner. This leverage is derived from the weaker ally's concern about potential abandonment. If the dominant ally signals unwavering commitment and does not display any possibility of distancing itself from the alliance, its support may come to be taken for granted. Consequently, the weaker ally becomes less responsive to its preferences, reducing the dominant ally's leverage and influence within the alliance. Thus, what Snyder terms "ambiguous commitment" by a dominant ally always increases its bargaining power. Allies have to be careful, however, because they are not only dealing with each other but also simultaneously with adversaries. If the adversary is expansionist, the uncertainty in an alliance would be beneficial for the adversary, and thus the alliance must be founded on a policy of firmness. Therefore, allies must account not only for their internal dynamics but also for how their interactions are perceived by adversaries. When alliance commitments appear uncertain or ambiguous, particularly in the face of an expansionist adversary, this can signal disunity or lack of resolve. Such perceptions may incentivize the adversary to test the alliance through coercion, limited aggression, or escalation, in the expectation that a fragmented response will follow. In this context, maintaining credible and consistent commitments becomes essential, as greater clarity and firmness in alliance behavior can help deter opportunistic actions by the adversary.

4. Application of Glenn Snyder to Europe

The history of European dependency on the US begins right after the end of World War II with the formation of institutions and mechanisms like the Bretton Woods system, the Marshall Plan and the treaty of collective defense, which later gave birth to NATO. Sánchez (2025) argues that these institutions and systems were not isolated incidents but rather they ensured the US hegemony and leadership role in Europe in the post-war period and halted the development of autonomous European policy in defense, economy, trade and technology. However, after the Trump Administration's criticism of Europe, threats to Greenland and the tariff war, European leadership now considers this dependency to be a major threat. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said that if "we want to be taken seriously, we will have to learn the language of power politics" (Vinocur & Sheftalovich, 2026). Europe is now seeking to "de-risk" its relationship from the US, deploying a term that previously was used for EU-China relationship.

Among Europe's various dependencies, none generates greater strategic anxiety than its dependence on the United States for security, encompassing both extended nuclear deterrence and conventional defense capabilities. In the face of the ongoing Ukrainian conflict and Russian threats, worsening transatlantic relations, Europe stands to be affected even more adversely if issues remain unresolved. With regard to security reliance, the issues are two-pronged. First is the issue of US involvement, deterrence guarantees, military presence, and investment in European defense in the form of NATO and extended deterrence mechanisms. Second, dependence on the US for high-tech security equipment and services included air defense, missiles, fighter jets and advanced software. Europe's strategic reliance on the US lends itself perfectly for the application of Glenn Snyder's theory of secondary alliance security dilemma due to the asymmetrical relationship, especially in the security domain, whereby the US exploits its dominant position to attain leverage over Europe. Wheaton (2025) explains that the word leverage is used here to denote how defense dependence can translate into unfavorable trade relations. Mejino-López and Wolf (2025) argue that the unfavorable trade arrangements between the United States and the European Union are partly a consequence of Europe's security dependence, a view later echoed by Antonio Costa, President of the European Council. On the other hand, the United States faces the risk of entrapment within the alliance, as Europe's direct confrontation with Russia—particularly in the context of the ongoing Ukraine conflict—creates pressures for sustained US military, political, and financial involvement. Given its security commitments to NATO allies, Washington risks being drawn into a prolonged confrontation or potential escalation with Russia, even in scenarios that may not align with its broader strategic priorities, particularly its increasing focus on the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific.

Europe therefore feels the dilemma of "abandonment" by the US as the US seeks to commit itself to Asia-Pacific. Dee (2024) highlighted that the issue with this dependency is that US foreign military sales are subject to delicate and careful foreign-policy decisions. Moreover, President Trump announced that new fighter jets should be sold to allies with downgraded capabilities, which would affect allies' defense capabilities (Allison, 2025).

Europe will thus have to increase its budget and increase the production of key weapon systems to avoid this conundrum of dependency on the US in the field of security presence

and military capabilities and gain strategic autonomy to deal with Russian revisionist policies. However, as reported by Mejino-López and Wolf (2025), it is important to note that since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, European countries have increased their defense spending from 1.6% to now above 2 %. However, owing to limited domestic production capabilities and a relatively weak defence-industrial base, European states have increasingly turned to the United States to procure military equipment and sustain their defence requirements. In the evolving European security environment, greater self-reliance in critical military technologies—particularly Strategic Non-Nuclear Weapon Systems (SNNWs)—may become increasingly necessary. The development of such capabilities would strengthen Europe's strategic autonomy, enhance its ability to address potential Russian threats, support its continued commitment to nuclear non-proliferation, and reduce its dependence on US security guarantees. Moreover, such military developments could be pursued while remaining in an alliance with the US.

5. Understanding Strategic Non-Nuclear Weapons

As the one Europe has many options on the table to enhance European security, including continuing to rely on American guarantees, developing exclusively European nuclear deterrents, strengthening French-British nuclear deterrence, or relying on conventional deterrence (Bundae et al., 2025). Among the options available for European defence, one scenario is a shift towards conventional deterrence, including both offensive capabilities and ballistic missile defence (BMD). This option would become more relevant in the event of a breakdown of trust in US extended deterrence, a rapid withdrawal of US forces from Europe and NATO, or a substantial shift in US nuclear doctrine or policy. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that SNNWs and advanced conventional capabilities are not intended to serve as standalone alternatives for Europe; rather, they are pursued alongside nuclear deterrence guarantees, functioning as a bridge between conventional and nuclear deterrence. This paper focuses on the role of SNNWs as a critical instrument in the emerging European security environment, which can not only serve as a deterrence tool, but could also manage escalation and coercion threat from Russia and at the same time enhance Europe's strategic autonomy by reducing its reliance on the US.

Strategic non-nuclear weapons are defined as weapon systems that do not cross the nuclear threshold but yet can achieve strategic (decisive) effects against adversaries. The term strategic means that these weapons have the capability to target the adversary's foundation of national power. To introduce more conceptual clarity into the term "strategic non-nuclear weapon systems", Fabian Hoffman categorized these weapons on the basis of range, duality (counterforce and countervalue) capabilities, and potential to threaten an adversary's nuclear forces with these capabilities. These weapon systems are further divided into two additional categories, kinetic and non-kinetic weapon systems. Kinetic weapon systems include missile systems (cruise, hypersonic and ballistic), ballistic missile defenses (BMDs), unmanned aerial/naval vehicles, and kinetic ASATs, while non-kinetic

weapon systems include electro-magnetic pulses, information/disinformation campaigns, computer operation networks, and offensive cyber operations.

6. Why SNNWs for European Security

As Sauer (2024) argues that SNNWs matter today because in NPT (N-5) the Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) promised to pursue disarmament in good-faith, thus reliance on these weapon systems for security would strengthen that promise. These weapons would therefore reduce discussions about vertical and horizontal nuclear proliferation in Europe. Moreover Arbatov (2019) explained that nuclear deterrence is a tricky concept and practice that some believe worked because of the sheer “luck” of states, which is not a reliable mechanism for strengthening security. Another key argument is SNNWs are more usable than nuclear weapons, giving them credibility, in-keeping with US political scientist Samuel Huntington’s (1983) assertion that “effective retaliation means credible retaliation and in today’s world credible retaliation means conventional retaliation.” Another implication, and more specific to the European context is that SNNWs address critical capability gaps arising from Europe’s structural dependence on the United States for extended deterrence and high-end military technologies. By investing in long-range precision strike, missile defense, and advanced cyber capabilities, European states can enhance their ability to deter and respond to Russian coercion independently, thereby strengthening strategic autonomy without formally abandoning alliance structures.

SNNWs are particularly suited to the contemporary threat environment in Europe, where Russian strategy relies heavily on nuclear signaling, coercion, and escalation management. In such a context, SNNWs provide Europe with credible options to operate in the “gray area” between conventional and nuclear conflict, enabling it to counter coercion without immediately escalating to the nuclear level. This is especially important given the geographic proximity, short warning times, and high escalation risks that characterize the European theatre.

In addition SNNWs can contribute to burden-sharing within NATO by allowing European allies to assume a greater role in deterrence and crisis management. This, in turn, helps mitigate the risk of abandonment identified in alliance politics by reducing over-dependence on US capabilities, while simultaneously addressing US concerns about entrapment by distributing security responsibilities more evenly across the alliance.

Lastly Nitze (1994) believed certain conventional options to be less escalatory in nature than nuclear weapons because they could be used in situations where use of nuclear weapons is politically and militarily not viable or practical.

While this analysis highlights the potential advantages of SNNWs, it is important to recognize that these systems also present their own challenges, and no strategic option is without trade-offs. However, Europe’s longstanding commitment to non-proliferation and disarmament, combined with the growing salience of advanced conventional capabilities—as demonstrated in recent conflicts including the India–Pakistan conflict in May 2025—underscores the increasing relevance of these technologies in contemporary security environments.

7. SNNWs, European Security and Managing the Alliance Dilemma

Based on Glenn Snyder's alliance dilemma, SNNWs could be used as an instrument to mitigate the anxiety of abandonment for Europe, while avoiding the risk of entrapment for the US. It is important to note that Europe is already investing in selected Strategic Non-Nuclear Weapon Systems (SNNWs). This development is occurring in parallel with a broader recalibration of NATO's posture, driven by increasing uncertainty regarding U.S. security commitments and continued coercive signaling from Russia.

Arnold (2025) argued that the uncomfortable truth for Europe today is that it can no longer outsource its security and defense capabilities. Lubold et al. (2025) posit that the US is not expected to decrease its nuclear commitments to Europe, but there are expectations that it will reduce conventional forces, which would have significant adverse effects on the continent's security equation. Arnold and Dolzikova (2025) reported that the positive aspect in this regard is that European political leaders and the public are aware of the changing security dynamics around them and are therefore supportive of deepening European defense initiatives. Resultantly, European leaders have agreed to a new defense spending target of 5% of GDP of which 3.5 % would be spent on hard military capabilities by 2035 (NATO, 2025). Europe has also been investing in advanced conventional capabilities such as long-range precision strike weapons, cyber and space operations, and missile defense systems to improve its security by hedging against the rising uncertainty. Investment in long-range precision strike capabilities is increasing across many European countries, although the pace and level of progress remain uneven.

According to Bundae et al. (2025) many existing initiatives such as the Joint Early Warning for a European Lookout (JEWEL) program are still in the early phases of development, while major collaborative projects—including the European Long-Range Strike Approach (ELSA), the Future Combat Air System (FCAS), and the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS)—continue to face delays, financial constraints, and political complications. These issues stem particularly from diverging national priorities, disagreements over industrial participation and workshare, and concerns over technological sovereignty among participating states. This suggests that, despite growing political will, considerable work remains before Europe can field reliable long-range precision-strike systems and the supporting intelligence, surveillance, and command-and-control architectures necessary for credible conventional deterrence.

At the political level, however, momentum for such investments is becoming increasingly visible. At the Munich Security Conference, Emmanuel Macron talked about the necessity of expanding Europe's long-range missile and deep precision-strike capabilities, arguing that these systems are essential for enabling Europe to negotiate with Russia "as equals" and to close the capability gap that has widened following the collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (Diaz-Maurin, 2026). Reinforcing this trend, six European states—France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom—signed a letter of intent to advance long-range strike and integrated defense capabilities, reflecting a

broader shift toward greater strategic self-reliance (Chomsky, 2026). At the same time, several European analysts note that Macron's broader rhetoric on strategic autonomy is aimed less at the immediate deployment of French nuclear weapons abroad and more at strategic signaling. Given that French nuclear forces remain under sovereign national control, any form of extended deterrence would likely remain political and symbolic rather than institutionalized through formal arrangements comparable to NATO's nuclear-sharing framework. NATO (2025) reports that, in addition to precision strike weapons, NATO leaders have also agreed to enhance the interoperability and readiness of Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) systems, with the objective of strengthening overall deterrence and defensive credibility against potential adversary strikes. Diaz-Maurin (2026) argues that for Europe to increase its deterrence capabilities, it is becoming essential for European states to have "proven" air and missile defense systems that could deny nuclear or non-nuclear strikes by adversaries. In the field of non-kinetic SNNWs, NATO recognizes cyber and space weapons as fourth and fifth operational domains and has been working to improve network operations, situational awareness, implementation and the use of private companies to improve capabilities (NATO, 2025).

These examples substantiate the argument that European investments in precision-strike and related strategic conventional (kinetic and non-kinetic) systems are increasingly viewed as a means of reducing abandonment concerns, strengthening deterrence credibility, and enhancing Europe's bargaining position vis-à-vis Russia, while still operating within the broader transatlantic alliance framework.

SNNWs also change the dynamics of entrapment within the transatlantic alliance by shifting its primary burden toward the United States. In line with Snyder's alliance dilemma theory, Washington feels entrapped, with US Secretary of Defense Hegseth stating in a speech in 2025 that the US does not want to take moral, military or fiscal responsibility for European security vis-à-vis Russia. The development and integration of SNNWs offer a partial mitigation of this concern by enabling European allies to assume a greater role in deterrence and crisis management without immediate reliance on US nuclear forces.

However, this strategic autonomy of Europe will be neither linear nor unproblematic. In the short to medium term, European efforts to enhance strategic autonomy through SNNWs will remain heavily dependent on US technological ecosystems, operational integration, and NATO frameworks, ushering in a transition phase. Such a phase will be further characterized by simultaneous dependence and diversification, where European states pursue domestic capabilities while remaining embedded within US-led structures. However, over time such developments would reduce US leverage within the alliance, raising questions about whether Washington would fully support a trajectory that dilutes its dominant position in the alliance. Nonetheless, for Europe this pathway offers a means to balance alliance cohesion with greater autonomy by mitigating abandonment concerns while strengthening its capacity to respond to Russian coercion and broader revisionist pressures.

8. Conclusion

This paper highlighted the contemporary European security dilemma arising in times of evolving multipolarity due to an expansionist Russia emerging as a threat at the same time as uncertainty in Europe's transatlantic alliance grows. In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russia's reliance on coercion and nuclear escalation for strategic signaling has exposed gaps in European security where its dependency on the US for conventional and nuclear deterrence has become a source for anxiety given the Trump Administration's apprehension. Glenn Snyder's alliance security dilemma theory can provide an insight on understanding the emerging European-US situation, namely a "secondary alliance dilemma" between both allies because of the asymmetrical nature of the relationship. Europe's dependency on the US causes an "abandonment" feeling, while as the dominant power, the US wants to use Europe's dependency as leverage in trade, politics and the resolution of the Ukraine conflict and is also seeking territorial gains. However, when met with resistance on these demands, the US feels entrapped and dutybound to spend on European security requirements, while demonstrating reluctance to engage in prolonged security commitments because its focus is on competition with China in Asia-Pacific.

As a result, Europe has been moving towards 'strategic autonomy', particularly in the defense and security sector. SNNWs have emerged as the most feasible and politically acceptable option for Europe to bridge the gap between conventional and nuclear deterrence; these systems also enhance deterrence credibility and provide more escalation management options while simultaneously reducing abandonment concerns by improving self-reliance. However, Europe's pursuit of strategic autonomy through SNNWs will remain gradual and contested, as Europe will continue to depend on US technologies and NATO frameworks during a transitional period. Ultimately, the future of European security may depend on Europe's ability to develop credible strategic conventional capabilities without undermining alliance cohesion, thereby transforming the alliance dilemma into a more balanced and sustainable security arrangement.

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