

The world order in transition: A new plan for European defence

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The European defence is once more under debate. This time there is a sense of urgency unlike never before. There is a war going on in Europe: not merely any conflict, but one closely linked to the changing political order. The world order is an agreement between states on how to handle major collective problems, such as sovereignty and security, finance, and trade. This order is not static, but evolves based on shifts in power dynamics, geopolitical tensions, and the ability of global institutions to enforce norms. [When key actors challenge or disregard established rules](#), the legitimacy of the order weakens, leading to a period of instability and eventual restructuring. If countries do not adequately comply, a transition period begins. At the end of that period, a new world order might be established. **The last change in the world order took over thirty years and required two world wars.** It is no wonder that the discourse on European defence has resurfaced in the current transition period and that a plan for financing Member States armies has been drawn up. This renewed focus on European defence stems from a combination of factors, including growing uncertainty over long-term commitments to NATO, the increasing assertiveness on non-Western powers, and the recognition that the EU must assume greater responsibility for its own security. So, [ReArm Europe](#) has nothing to do with creating an European Army. In the absence of a possible European (federal) state, we cannot be able to envisage a European military force.

But the world changing concerns all countries, especially the European ones, which have benefited significantly from this order. Relations between citizens, social groups and political parties deteriorate in any state when global laws and policies on finance, trade and security fail. The European citizens are becoming aware of this situation since they have been affected by the war in Ukraine and were confronted with the consequences of the costs associated to this conflict.

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The meeting between Trump and Zelensky on 28 February 2025, followed by the subsequent American powerful declarations to cut off military aid and intelligence to Kyiv, was not light news to hear for the Europeans. Equally concerning were the repeated [US calls for NATO members to increase their defence budgets](#). On March 6th, 2025, the [European Council](#) approved the *ReArm Europe* plan, which has two objectives: support Ukraine, and increase European military spending.

ReArm Europe is a financial plan through which EU countries commit to increasing their military spending with the support of EU budgetary resources and financial institutions. This initiative involves a structured funding mechanism, where national governments receive loans backed by the EU, allowing them to modernise their military capabilities without immediately straining national budgets. The main objective is to create economies of scale, ensuring coordinated procurement and reducing fragmentation in European defence systems. Furthermore, this plan enables national military capabilities to develop and coordinate at the EU level. In this way, according to the [Commission President's press release of 4 March 2025](#), Europe will be able to assume its responsibilities in global security while continuing to work with its NATO partners. The conclusions adopted by the European Council on March 6th, confirmed that *ReArm Europe* is the response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and its impact on European and global security in a "changing environment". **Such an environment corresponds to the transition of the world order.** Previously, the violation of international law and the breakdown of peace in Europe were used to justify support for Ukraine. Today, the EU acknowledges that Russia's attack on Ukraine is undermining the world order. However, what is the link between the Russian attack and the world order remains to be assessed by EU governments. **This shift in perspective reflects a broader recognition that this war is not just a regional conflict, but a direct challenge to international norms,** particularly the principle of territorial sovereignty enshrined in the UN Charter.

The current world order was established between 1944 and 1947 at the Bretton Woods, San Francisco, and Geneva conferences. The few dozen states that attended these conferences identified three pressing problems - monetary and financial instability, security against armed aggression, and trade wars - and created three international organisations - namely the IMF, the UN, the GATT (later WTO) – to address these problems as multilateral policymaking institutions. Member governments were meant to implement their national laws and policies in a manner consistent with these global framework policies. **This system of world order was subsequently accepted by all states and functioned quite effectively for a few decades.** At

the beginning of the 1970s, the United States, with the complicity of its allies, undertook a monetary policy correction to rescue the dollar from the difficulties caused by American presidents' policies. **Following this, the global institutions began to work again to promote economic interdependence and political globalisation.** The Helsinki process on cooperation and security in Europe was accepted by the Soviet Union and its allies. Less than twenty years later, the Soviet bloc collapsed. In the 1970s, however, the world order began to lose its legitimacy. Countries outside the capitalist and communist blocs demanded a New International Economic Order, i.e., changes in the world finances and trade policies. UN conferences and world economic institutions produced little to meet this demand. Those who could – the newly industrialised countries (NICs) – moved out of underdevelopment, with China among them. In 1995, Western countries replaced GATT with the WTO, introducing rules to protect their interests. Years later, the United States blocked the WTO's functioning by obstructing the Appellate Body, the new dispute mediation mechanism, and initiated what seems as a trade war with China, which has joined the WTO in 2001.

Only global security policy remained in its original form. The unequal decision-making rules of the Security Council, with the veto power of the five permanent members, made it unique, yet still functional in many serious crises. However, the Russian invasion has effectively undermined it – probably irrevocably. In short, with monetary and trade policy in flux and security policy at an impasse, multiple indicators suggest the world order is becoming more fragmented and unstable. If history repeats itself - and it often does at least partially, because states do not stray far from established paths - **we can expect governments eventually to agree on a new world order, but for sure it will take time.** Historical precedents suggest that world order transitions often follow a protracted period of diplomatic realignments, economic restructuring, and, in some cases, military conflicts. We must have in mind that the post-World War I transition saw the League of Nations fail due to the weak enforcement mechanisms, while the post-World War II order succeeded partly because of the nuclear deterrence policy between the Western bloc and the communist one, US economic leadership and a security framework enforced by NATO. They will have to figure out how to reform or replace the institutions that determine binding global policies to respond to the world's top priorities. Put simply, **what should occur is what has happened in past transitions: states come together in coalitions, each formulating a project of a world order aligned with its interests, and then reaching a decision acceptable to all.** How will this happen? We still do not know. What we do know is that in the past, a world war was required to bring it about. But

in this moment, we do not have any evidence that this is the case. What we see at the end of the day is that all the parts involved want peace. However, some may argue that today's nuclear deterrence and economic interdependence may prevent a large-scale global conflict. Instead, we may witness a gradual reordering where major powers form competing parties, engaging in economic, technological, and military competition without direct warfare. The evolution of institutions like the G20, BRICS and other regional security pacts will likely shape this transition.

The current US president believes that the financial, commercial, technological, and military capabilities of the United States are sufficient to convince two warring states to end the conflict: even if the war is between a state that was part of the Soviet Union and an aggressor state that inherited the Soviet Union's veto right in. **This belief does not account for the fact that during a world order transition, the influence of the United States must adapt to the reconfiguration of global coalitions.** The USA still leads the coalition of Western states, whose authority in the world order system, one might say, is declining and which is now less cohesive than ever.

Meanwhile, the rest of the world, including Russia, forms a large entity from which an anti-Western coalition can emerge, challenging the existing institutions of the world order. Trump's plan to end the war only stands a chance if it achieves what Putin wants: the exclusion of Zelensky from Ukraine's political leadership. **Such an outcome might slow the transition process, but would not reverse it.** It will not alter the coalition-building dynamics that bind Russia with the rest of the world. This is the scenario the EU probably must prepare for.