

Political Uncertainties Are Affecting Europe's Defense Buildup

By

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Following European Parliament [elections](#) in June, French president, Emanuel Macron, abruptly dissolved his own parliament and held elections that left him [without a majority](#). In the United Kingdom (UK), Keir Starmer's Labour Party won a majority in parliament, making Starmer the first Labour prime minister in 14 years. Former German Defense Minister, Ursula von der Leyen, was reelected for 5 more years as President of the European Commission. And while the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) called Ukraine's path to membership "irreversible" in a new pledge, American support for Europe and Ukraine may shift after the presidential election in November. In short, political uncertainty is impacting Europe's defense buildup.

Prior to their defeat, the UK's Conservatives advocated for raising defense spending to 2.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2030, higher than NATO's existing 2 percent goal for member states. Their 14-year record left much to be desired with programs cancelled, defense investment waning, and the British armed forces nearly "hollowed out." Enter Labour, which also pledged to spend 2.5 percent of GDP on defense, subject to streamlining government finances. With an unwavering commitment to NATO and the UK's nuclear deterrent, such an increase may be possible.

However, Labour's immediate decision was to declare a "strategic" pause on the 6th-generation aircraft program whilst they investigate its feasibility. Chief of the General Staff General Sir Roland Walker [predicted](#) that Britain must be ready within three years to fight a war against an "axis of upheaval" of China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia. And when delivering his closing keynote address at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) Land Warfare Conference (2024), Walker declared that he intends to double the Army in three years and triple it by 2030.

In France, foreign and defense policy are reserved for the president. However, it is the parliament that controls the purse, which is problematic when the president's party does not hold a majority in parliament—the case for Macron. Because Macron was concerned with the strong showing of the "far right" National Rally in European Parliament elections, he abruptly dissolved the French Parliament, calling for constitutionally scripted elections in two rounds, for its 577 members (called "députés") to be renewed.

The first round saw the National Rally come in first place, followed by an improvised grouping of "far left" communists, socialists, and greens, with Macron's centrist party shrinking and the center-right Les Républicains barely surviving. Tactical voting in the second round had Macron's party and the hastily coalesced left mutually desist to prevent the right-leaning candidates from reaching an absolute majority. This resulted in a hung parliament, with no pathway for coalitions leading to an absolute majority from which a prime minister could be selected.

Because of France's election outcome, Macron might wait until September to nominate a prime minister. No one knows from which party the prime minister will come. The key is choosing a person who can ensure the government survives any parliamentary motion to terminate the government. Thus, it remains unclear how the potential ungovernability of France, until the 2027 presidential election, may affect defense policy.

The European Parliament's swing to the right weakened German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social-Democrat Party and his Green Party allies. Former German defense minister, Ursula von der Leyen, recently won reelection to the presidency of the European Commission

by a more comfortable margin than five years ago, grabbing the vote of Green Party members. She pledged to implement the [Green Deal](#), albeit in diluted form. Von der Leyen also received support from Italian prime minister Georgia Meloni, who leads the right-wing coalition immediately on von der Leyen's right, though not as "far" right as the coalition led by French National Rally's Marine Le Pen and Hungary's Victor Orban. As president of the European Commission, von der Leyen offers strong support for Ukraine, and stronger European defense—in areas where the European Commission can sway what national governments plan and implement.

At the NATO 75th anniversary summit in Washington, DC, the national leaders of member-states issued a plan for the next year, calling Ukraine's path to membership in the alliance "[irreversible](#)." That statement follows a [document](#) issued by NATO at the 2023 Vilnius, Lithuania, summit. For NATO accession to start, a country should not be involved in on-going conflict. So even if the NATO accession process could be accelerated for Ukraine, it is unlikely to happen any time soon. Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, was not given an accession schedule.

In February 2024, at the annual Munich Security Conference, long before his selection as Donald Trump's running mate, Senator JD Vance rang alarm bells among Europe's political and foreign policy elites when he voiced his opposition to military aid for Ukraine and bluntly warned that Europe will have to rely [less on the US](#) to support NATO. Political rhetoric has a place in American elections, but the fact is, American presidents change their views as resources tighten.

Regardless of whether Donald Trump or Kamala Harris win the White House in November, the United States faces fiscal constraints in the years ahead because it faces a national debt that now exceeds defense spending. A perfect storm driven by the "Axis of Upheaval" may absorb American capability in the Indo-Pacific while the US is stretched thin elsewhere.

Europeans may signal which candidate they perceive as more hostile to their interest, but it is the geopolitical and budgetary math that ultimately shapes the nature of alliances. Unless Europe tackles the harsh reality that it must take its own defense seriously, French President Macron will be proven right after he once argued that it was not only an issue of sovereignty, but a matter of survival for Europe. How that works politically and fiscally is for Europe to figure out.

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