

European Strategic Selectivity

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In the darkest hours of Europe's recent history, the continent has avoided another catastrophe on the scale of World War II—but conflict never truly disappeared; it simply changed form.

In the early Cold War years, violence was shaped by ideology. The Greek Civil War set the tone, while uprisings such as the Hungarian Revolution and the Prague Spring were crushed by Soviet force. At the same time, Western Europe grappled with its own internal tensions, most notably in The Troubles in Northern Ireland.

With the end of the Cold War came a resurgence of nationalist violence. The Yugoslav Wars tore apart the Balkans—especially during the Bosnian War and the Kosovo War—bringing ethnic cleansing and mass atrocities back to European soil and prompting international intervention.

In the 21st century, large-scale conflict has returned to Europe's eastern edge. From the Second Chechen War to the Russo-Georgian War, tensions steadily escalated, culminating in the annexation of Crimea and the Russian invasion of Ukraine—the most serious war in Europe since 1945.

Throughout these turbulent decades, the United States has played a central—at times decisive—role in shaping Europe's security, acting as both a stabilizing force and a powerful external influence.

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the U.S. helped rebuild Western Europe through the Marshall Plan, investing billions to revive shattered economies, reduce instability, and contain the spread of communism. At the same time, it anchored Europe's defense through NATO, a military

alliance that deterred Soviet expansion and made large-scale war between Western European states highly unlikely.

During the Cold War, the United States served as Europe's primary security guarantor. Its military presence and nuclear deterrent discouraged direct confrontation with the Soviet Union, while its political support strengthened Western governments facing internal and external pressures. Even in conflicts such as The Troubles, the U.S. contributed diplomatically, helping to advance peace efforts.

After the Cold War, American involvement remained significant, particularly in crisis zones. The U.S. led or supported NATO interventions in the Yugoslav Wars, helping bring an end to the Bosnian War and intervening in Kosovo. More recently, in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it has provided military aid, intelligence, and economic support, while reinforcing NATO's eastern flank.

In sum, the United States has supported Europe through a combination of economic recovery, military protection, and political influence. At the same time, its role has sparked ongoing debate about dependence, power, and the balance of leadership in the transatlantic relationship.

Within this broader context, one could argue that Europe has too often repeated the same mistake: acting too late. As before World War II, hesitation and the desire to avoid confrontation have given aggressors time to consolidate power, expand, and control the narrative. The responses to Russia's invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 illustrate how delayed and divided action can undermine effective deterrence.

This selectiveness is equally evident in Europe's approach to external conflicts. For

decades, its engagement with countries such as Iran, Venezuela (in which Cuba, Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas and criminal groups are strong allies), and Russia has frequently reflected a tension between stated principles and material interests—particularly in energy-oil and trade.

The result has often been cautious and uneven policies that, critics argue, have weakened Europe's credibility and consistency on the global stage. Recent positions toward countries such as Colombia suggest that this tendency persists, at times shaped by aviation agreements and other economic arrangements—including, among other deals, the outsourcing of passport production to European providers—whose transparency remained questioned.

Often underestimated and misunderstood in Europe, many peoples elsewhere have turned to the United States with hopes of liberation—even at the cost of great sacrifices—much as Europeans themselves have done in different historical contexts.

Times have changed, as have methods, leaders, and geopolitical realities, yet many societies living under undemocratic regimes continue to face prolonged uncertainty and hardship. In countries such as Iran, Cuba, Ukraine, and Colombia, among many others, calls for political change have persisted for decades, sometimes at great human cost. In contrast, European responses are often characterized by caution, a preference to wait and observe, and a tendency toward appeasement rather than decisive action.

When support for democratic change is absent, critics argue that in practice—whether through omission or the pursuit of economic interests—it can amount to sustaining the status quo of violent or repressive regimes. In some cases, this is reflected in complex local realities, including situations such as

Colombia, where the state has faced long-standing challenges from illegal armed groups and organized criminal networks that operate today with formal governance structures.

In this context, the effectiveness and consistency of external responses are often questioned, particularly when strategic or economic considerations appear to outweigh a more decisive stance on security and governance issues.

When President Trump adopted a more aggressive approach to drug trafficking in the Caribbean, his actions received strong support in the region and countries affected. At the same time, opposing narratives emerged internationally—also supported by actors linked to Venezuela's Maduro regime and Colombia's Petro administration—that framed criminal groups primarily as victims of social conditions. This interpretation gained traction in certain international forums, including parts of the United Nations system and among European countries, in part due to broader political opposition to Trump-era policies.

Critics argue that this has contributed to inconsistent positions on external crises, where moral and strategic considerations appear to conflict with economic and political interests, including in relation to Iran, Ukraine, and Colombia, rather than aligning with the United States.

What should be made clear is that some European criticism of the current U.S. administration is at times miscast as sympathy for authoritarian regimes or criminal groups abroad.

Meanwhile, those regimes use international PR to cultivate support for ayatollahs, Hezbollah, Hamas, illegal armed groups and criminal organizations—as in Colombia—leaving the people under their control undefended.