

How much would European defense cost without the US?

About €250 billion more per year – roughly €550 per European – plus 300,000 extra troops, according to Bruegel. Fragmentation already costs a fortune.



Sticker shock is the point of most headlines about this number. The more useful exercise is to see what it buys, what Europe already wastes, and what the alternative costs.

The headline sums

The most careful public estimate comes from Bruegel and the Kiel Institute: replacing the American contribution to Europe's defense would take at least €250 billion a year in additional spending – lifting Europe to roughly 3.5 % of GDP – and about 300,000 more soldiers, some fifty brigades. That comes on top of the \$574 billion European allies already spent in 2025, itself nearly a fifth more than the year before.

Divide it out and the number domesticates: about €550 per European per year. A euro and a half a day is not nothing. It is also, for comparison, far less than the continent's energy bills moved in a single crisis year.

What the money actually buys

Not parade tanks. The bulk goes to the unglamorous capabilities Europe never built because America provided them: satellites that see, tankers that keep jets flying, heavy transport that moves brigades, electronic warfare that blinds air defenses, and ammunition measured in months rather than days. Plus the fifty brigades – the ready, deployable land forces that separate a spreadsheet army from a real one. (Whether Europe could fight without them today is its own question – see “Could Europe defend itself without the US?”)

The bill Europe already pays

Here is the half of the story the sticker price hides: Europe currently pays a fortune for weakness. Some 178 different weapon systems against America's thirty; seventeen types of main battle tank against one. Each duplicate means its own factory run, spare parts, training pipeline and upgrade program – money that produces org charts instead of firepower. Studies of joint procurement consistently land in the same range: buying together yields on the order of a third more capability per euro.

Run that against €250 billion and the conclusion writes itself. A meaningful slice of the “cost of independence” is really the cost of fragmentation – a bill Europe pays annually, whether or not it ever becomes independent.

The comparison that matters

The honest frame is not “€250 billion versus zero.” It is three prices side by side. The price of independence: 3.5 % of GDP – which is what NATO members except Spain already promised at The Hague anyway. The price of dependence: cheaper on paper, plus a permanent unpriced risk premium on decisions made in Washington. And the price of the current arrangement: American-level spending trajectories and thirty incompatible armies.

Europe has, in other words, already agreed to pay for a serious defense. The open question is purely organizational: whether 3.5 % of GDP buys thirty small armies with seventeen tank types – or one

continental pillar that makes the whole question of this page academic.

[All questions →](#)

FREQUENTLY ASKED

What is the headline cost of European defense without the US?

Bruegel and the Kiel Institute estimate at least €250 billion more per year – reaching about 3.5 % of GDP – plus roughly 300,000 additional troops, about 50 new brigades.

How much is that per person?

Around €550 per European per year, or about €1.50 a day – on top of the roughly \$574 billion European allies already spent in 2025.

What exactly would the money buy?

Mostly the things America currently provides: reconnaissance satellites, aerial refueling, heavy transport, air-defense suppression, deep ammunition stocks – plus the ready land forces Europe lacks.

How much does fragmentation waste today?

Europe has operated 178 different weapon systems to America's 30, and 17 tank types to one. Studies consistently find joint procurement buys on the order of a third more capability per euro.

Is this affordable?

It is roughly what NATO members except Spain already promised at The Hague in 2025 – 3.5 % of GDP on core defense by 2035. The question is not affordability; it is whether Europe buys thirty small armies or one capable pillar.

SOURCES

- Bruegel / Kiel Institute: Defending Europe without the US (2025) – €250bn/yr, ~300,000 troops
- NATO: European allies' defence spending 2025 (over \$574bn, 2021 prices)
- The Hague Summit Declaration (2025): 3.5 % core + 1.5 % broader by 2035
- Munich Security Report / McKinsey: 178 vs 30 weapon systems; joint-procurement savings estimates
- FAS/SIPRI nuclear forces data