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Who Guarantees Europe: NATO's Rebalancing and India's Opening

 **THE HINDU**

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IR**SECURITY & DEFENCE****GS2****GS3**

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GS2

GS3



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India buys defence equipment from Russia, France, the United States and Israel simultaneously, and calls this strategic autonomy. At what point does purchasing from everyone stop being autonomy and start being an absence of choice?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A nuclear guarantee is not a document. It is a belief about what someone else would risk for you, and beliefs do not survive on treaty language alone.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

NATO questions in GS2 usually get answered as institutional description: founding year, Article 5, membership expansion. This supplies the analytical layer, why an alliance changes shape, which transfers to every question about alliance politics and to India's own partnership choices. The arms-control collapse is also a self-contained Prelims cluster most candidates hold only partially.

GS Paper 2: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests; important international institutions, agencies and groupings; [bilateral](#) and regional groupings involving India.

GS Paper 3: Security challenges and their management; defence and technology.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Article 5	NATO's collective-defence clause: an armed attack on one is an attack on all	Invoked once , after 11 September 2001
Extended deterrence	A nuclear guarantee extended by one state to protect another	Its weakness is credibility, not capability
Nuclear sharing	US weapons stationed in allied states, deliverable by their aircraft under US custody	Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkiye host the weapons; the United Kingdom rejoined NATO's airborne nuclear mission in 2025 , purchasing F-35A aircraft for the role
Strategic autonomy	Freedom to determine one's own strategic choices without alignment	India's stated posture, and now a European debate too
Enablers	Strategic airlift, aerial refuelling, suppression of enemy air defences, satellite intelligence	The capabilities that determine whether a force can campaign. Europe has largely closed the airlift and refuelling gap; SEAD and satellite ISR remain the real dependencies

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The alliance was founded by the **North Atlantic Treaty, signed 4 April 1949 at Washington**, with twelve original members. Its collective-defence provision, **Article 5**, has been invoked exactly once, following the attacks of 11 September 2001. Membership has expanded repeatedly, most recently with **Finland in 2023** and **Sweden in 2024**, which roughly doubled NATO's land border with Russia and ended two long traditions of non-alignment.

Two recent summits frame the current position and should be cited rather than the general trend.

At the **Hague Summit of 24 to 25 June 2025**, allies committed to spending **5 per cent of GDP on defence by 2035**, structured as **3.5 per cent on core defence and 1.5 per cent on defence-related investment**, with a review in 2029. At the **Ankara Summit of 8 July 2026**, four weeks before this edition, the declaration announced **over \$50 billion in new procurements**, committed to expanding collective manufacturing capacity and to eliminating defence trade barriers among allies, and framed a **"NATO 3.0"** vision built on industrial **resilience** and technological superiority. In 2025 European allies and Canada increased core defence investment by **more than \$139 billion**.

Those commitments are the specific evidence for the claim that spending has risen. Whether capacity has risen with it is the separate question this article takes up below.

The arms-control position that framed European security for four decades has largely dissolved:

INSTRUMENT	STATUS
Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, 1987	Terminated 2019
Open Skies Treaty, 1992	Abandoned by both principal parties
Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty	Effectively defunct
New START, 2010	Expired 5 February 2026. Article XIV permitted a single extension of up to five years, which was used in February 2021, so further extension was not legally available and no successor was negotiated

The New START expiry is the most consequential entry and the one most often stated incorrectly. The treaty was signed in 2010 and entered into force in February 2011, capping deployed strategic warheads and delivery vehicles with an intrusive on-site inspection and data-exchange regime. Its own **Article XIV** allowed **one** extension of up to five years. That extension was taken in **February 2021**, which fixed the terminal date at **5 February 2026** as a matter of treaty law rather than of political choice.

The result is that, for the first time since **SALT I in 1972**, there is **no negotiated limit on the strategic nuclear arsenals of the United States and Russia**, and no verification or inspection regime between them.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The credibility problem is structural, not political

Extended deterrence has a logical **vulnerability** that no amount of reassurance fully closes. A state guarantees another's security against nuclear attack, which means committing to accept the risk of nuclear retaliation against its own cities on that other state's behalf.

This was recognised early in the Cold War. The classic formulation of the doubt is whether Washington would trade one of its own cities for a European one, and the answer was never demonstrable, only assertable. Nuclear sharing arrangements, forward-stationed weapons and integrated command structures all exist to make the commitment look **structurally difficult to withdraw from**, precisely because the promise alone was never sufficient.

What has changed is not the logic but the confidence. Once European planners begin to discuss openly what a European deterrent would look like, the guarantee has already been discounted, and reassurance offered afterwards cannot fully restore what the discussion revealed.

Why the arms-control collapse compounds it

The dissolution of the verification architecture matters in a specific way that is easy to state and often missed.

Verification regimes allow states to plan against **known capabilities**. Without them, states plan against **worst-case capabilities**, because that is the **prudent** course when you cannot see. Planning against worst cases produces procurement that the other side reads as threatening, which produces reciprocal procurement. That is the classic security dilemma, and transparency mechanisms exist precisely to interrupt it.

Their removal therefore does not merely raise risk at the margin. It removes the mechanism that kept a competitive dynamic bounded.

What Ukraine actually taught

The operational lessons are specific, and specificity is what distinguishes a strong answer.

LESSON	IMPLICATION
Mass and industrial capacity matter again	Precision was expected to substitute for volume; it did not. Munitions production rates became a strategic variable
Stockpiles were far too thin	European inventories were sized for short expeditionary operations, not sustained high-intensity war
Drones are decisive at tactical level	Cheap attritable systems altered reconnaissance, artillery correction and strike, and counter-drone capability became essential
Electronic warfare is a primary arm	Jamming, spoofing and spectrum management determine whether other systems function at all
Space-based intelligence is foundational	Persistent satellite imagery, including commercial imagery, changed what either side could conceal

Each of these invalidates an assumption embedded in two decades of Western force planning built around expeditionary counter-insurgency.

Why the counter-argument deserves weight

A candidate who writes only that NATO is transforming will be describing half of it.

Spending has risen faster than capacity. The Hague pledge of 5 per cent of GDP by 2035 and the Ankara commitment of over \$50 billion in new procurement are real, and European allies with Canada raised core defence investment by more than \$139 billion in 2025. But defence-industrial output, munitions production lines and skilled manufacturing capacity take years to build and have not risen proportionately. Money committed is not capability delivered, and a procurement announcement is a claim on future output rather than present stock.

Procurement remains fragmented. European states largely buy from national champions, producing duplicated programmes, incompatible variants and lost economies of scale. Genuine European autonomy would require consolidating that, which touches industrial employment in every member state and is therefore politically hard.

The decisive enablers are still American, though not uniformly. The picture here is more differentiated than the standard account allows, and getting it right matters. Europe has **largely closed the gap on strategic airlift and aerial refuelling**, through the A400M fleet and the multinational MRTT arrangement, and assessments now judge it able to stand alone or close the remaining gap within a few years on both. The genuine dependencies are **suppression of enemy air defences** and **satellite intelligence**. The scale of the second is stark: in 2025 the United States fielded **108 military communications satellites**, against six for the United Kingdom, five for France, three for Italy and two each for Germany and Spain, and Europe held **36 ISR and signals-intelligence satellites, up from 14 in 2015**. Europe is generally assessed as needing until the **early 2030s** to field the critical enablers. A force that cannot suppress air defences or see independently has not achieved autonomy however large its budget.

And the prediction has been made before. Announcements of transatlantic rupture have recurred since the 1960s, through Suez, Vietnam, the Euromissile crisis and Iraq, and the alliance has outlasted each. Predicting its dissolution has a poor record.

What this leaves India

The productive framing is that the rebalancing **widens options** rather than forcing a choice.

OPENING	CONTENT
European partnerships	States seeking capability and supply-chain diversification are natural partners for co-development and co-production, and are often less constrained than the United States by end-use monitoring and technology-transfer restrictions
Indo-Pacific convergence	An American reorientation toward the Indo-Pacific deepens an alignment of interest India already holds
Capability priorities	Ukraine's lessons point directly at what India most needs to build: munitions industrial depth, drones and counter-drone systems, electronic warfare, space-based intelligence
Autonomy as an asset	India's value to several partners at once rests on not being locked to one, which is a bargaining position and not merely a principle

The honest complication is that autonomy exercised through diversified purchasing produces a **heterogeneous** inventory with interoperability, maintenance and spares consequences, and creates dependencies on several suppliers rather than freedom from dependency. The resolution is not to abandon autonomy but to convert diversified access into **indigenous production**, which is the only form of autonomy not **contingent** on someone else's export policy.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

When an alliance changes shape, distinguish changes in burden-sharing from changes in dependency, because only the second alters the strategic position. An ally that spends more, procures more and commits more troops has changed its contribution. An ally that acquires the enabling capabilities allowing it to act without the patron has changed its position. Systems under pressure reliably deliver the first, because it is measurable, announceable and achievable within a budget cycle, and defer the second, because it requires industrial construction over a decade. Apply this test to any claim of increased autonomy, in alliances, supply chains, energy and technology.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture a large house whose roof has always been held up by one very substantial pillar at the centre, with a ring of smaller columns around the edges taking some of the weight. The householders have begun to notice that the central pillar's owner is looking at another property, and they have started, for the first time in memory, discussing openly what would happen if it were withdrawn. So they are strengthening the outer columns, buying more stone, hiring more masons, spending seriously. What they have not yet built is a central load-bearing structure of their own, because that is the expensive and slow part. Meanwhile a builder in another country, who has always bought stone from several quarries rather than one, is being approached by all of them, and has to decide whether to keep buying stone or start cutting his own.

WAY FORWARD

- ① **Convert diversified access into indigenous production**, since autonomy that depends on multiple foreign suppliers is a hedge rather than a capability.
- ② **Prioritise the Ukraine-validated capabilities** in domestic industrial planning: munitions production depth, drones and counter-drone systems, electronic warfare, space-based intelligence.
- ③ **Pursue co-development with European partners** where technology-transfer terms are more favourable than the American baseline, while sustaining the Indo-Pacific convergence with the United States.
- ④ **Address the interoperability cost of a heterogeneous inventory** explicitly, through common data standards and modular architectures, rather than treating it as an unavoidable price of diversification.
- ⑤ **Build the industrial base for sustained operations**, since the central lesson of Ukraine for a country with two contested land borders is that stockpile depth and production rate are strategic variables.

- ⑥ **Engage the arms-control vacuum diplomatically**, since a world without verification regimes raises risk for every state including those outside the treaties, and India has standing to argue for transparency mechanisms it is not itself party to.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has tested NATO, India's strategic autonomy, defence procurement and **indigenisation**, and the implications of great-power competition across GS2 and GS3. The extended-deterrence credibility argument and the enablers test are the analytical moves that lift an answer above institutional description.

Practice question: "An alliance member that spends more has changed its contribution; one that acquires enabling capabilities has changed its position." Examine this distinction with reference to NATO's current transformation, and assess what it implies for India's defence partnerships. (250 words, 15 marks)

Interview angle: India buys defence equipment from Russia, France, the United States and Israel simultaneously, and calls this strategic autonomy. At what point does purchasing from everyone stop being autonomy and start being an absence of choice?

Sources: The Hindu, NATO, Ministry of External Affairs

Source: Who Guarantees Europe: NATO's Rebalancing and India's Opening — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

• KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

NATO is undergoing a structural rebalancing rather than an incremental adjustment: European confidence in the United States as the alliance's ultimate guarantor has visibly weakened, arms-control architecture has largely collapsed, and the war in Ukraine has demonstrated that deterrence now rests on credible conventional capability rather than on nuclear assurance alone, which is pushing Europe toward assuming primary responsibility for its own conventional defence while Washington reorients toward the Indo-Pacific.



SUPPORTING

- The credibility of an extended nuclear guarantee depends entirely on the belief that the guarantor would accept risk to itself on another's behalf, and that belief has become harder to sustain in Europe, which is why the continent is having its first serious public debate in decades about a security architecture not underwritten by Washington.
- The arms-control framework that stabilised European security has substantially dissolved, with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty terminated in 2019, the Open Skies Treaty abandoned by both principal parties, the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe effectively defunct, and New START expired on 5 February 2026 with no successor negotiated, so that for the first time since 1972 there is no negotiated limit on American and Russian strategic arsenals and no verification regime between them.
- Ukraine has reshaped the alliance's force-planning assumptions in specific ways: mass and industrial capacity matter again, munitions stockpiles proved far too thin, drones and counter-drone systems have become decisive at tactical level, and electronic warfare and space-based intelligence have moved from enabling functions to primary ones.



COUNTER

The transformation may be less complete than it appears, and India should be cautious about over-reading it. European defence spending has risen substantially but European defence industrial capacity has not risen proportionately, procurement remains fragmented across national champions, and the enabling capabilities that make a modern campaign possible, strategic airlift, aerial refuelling, suppression of enemy air defences and satellite intelligence, remain overwhelmingly American.

A Europe that spends more while still depending on the United States for the decisive

enablers has changed its budget rather than its strategic position, and predictions of transatlantic rupture have been made and falsified repeatedly since the 1960s.

**WAY FORWARD**

India should treat the rebalancing as widening its options rather than requiring a choice: deepen defence-industrial and technology partnerships with European states now seeking capability and diversified supply chains, continue the Indo-Pacific convergence with the United States, and use both to accelerate indigenous capability in the areas Ukraine has shown to be decisive, munitions industrial capacity, drones and counter-drone systems, electronic warfare and space-based intelligence, while preserving the strategic autonomy that makes India useful to several partners at once.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

Examine the drivers of NATO's current strategic transformation, and assess the opportunities and risks it presents for India's defence and technology partnerships. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

NATO's current transformation is frequently described as a response to the war in Ukraine. It is better understood as the convergence of three developments, of which the war is only the most visible: an erosion of European confidence in the American guarantee, the near-total collapse of the arms-control architecture, and a set of hard operational lessons that have invalidated a generation of force-planning assumptions.

BODY

The first driver is the credibility problem inherent in extended deterrence. A nuclear guarantee extended to another state rests on the belief that the guarantor would accept catastrophic risk on that state's behalf, and no treaty language can supply that belief where doubt has entered.

Europe's current debate about a security architecture not underwritten by Washington is the first serious one in decades, and its significance lies in the fact that it is being conducted openly. The second is structural.

The arms-control regime that made European security calculable has substantially dissolved: the INF Treaty terminated in 2019, the Open Skies Treaty was abandoned by both principal parties, the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty is defunct, and New START expired on 5 February 2026, its single permitted extension having been used in 2021, leaving no negotiated limit on American and Russian strategic arsenals for the first time since 1972. Without verification and transparency mechanisms, states plan against capabilities rather than intentions, which is inherently escalatory.

The third driver is operational. Ukraine has re-established that industrial capacity and munitions stockpiles are strategic assets, that drones and counter-drone systems shape the tactical battlefield, that electronic warfare and space-based intelligence are primary rather than supporting arms, and that a short-war assumption is a planning error.

Together these push the alliance from a posture organised around collective security assurance toward one organised around credible conventional deterrence, with Europe carrying more of the conventional load while the United States redirects attention to the Indo-Pacific. The caution is that European spending has risen faster than European capacity, and the enablers that make a campaign possible remain American.

CONCLUSION

For India the rebalancing widens rather than narrows the field. European states seeking both capability and supply-chain diversification are natural partners in co-development and co-production, the Indo-Pacific reorientation deepens an existing convergence with the United States, and the operational lessons of Ukraine point directly at the capabilities India most needs to build domestically.

The strategic autonomy India maintains is what makes it valuable to several partners simultaneously, and the correct posture is to convert that into technology access and industrial capability rather than to treat it as a position to be defended for its own sake.

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