

The Lonelier Continent: Europe and the Burden of its Own Defence

The Annual European Lecture, European Studies Centre, St Antony's College, Oxford



Warden Goodman, Director Betts, colleagues, students, friends —

It is an honour to speak in this room. And it is, for me, more than an honour — it is a homecoming of sorts. I spent a year at the European Studies Centre during my doctorate, and the debt I owe to that year is not one I can easily measure. It was here that I learned what it meant to think about Europe seriously: not as an institutional architecture or a body of law, but as a civilisation, with a history that demanded patience, contradictions that demanded honesty, and a future that demanded imagination. The seminars in this Centre, the conversations in the common room, the kindness of the Fellows who took a foreign graduate student under their wing and treated her ideas as worth arguing with — those things shaped me intellectually, and they shaped me as a person. I am very grateful for the rich intellectual and human environment of this place.

The European Studies Centre is now half a century old, and in those fifty years it has done something rare in our public life: it has insisted, against all the gravitational pull of fashion and crisis, that Europe is a subject worth thinking about comprehensively — let us say, slowly. The list of those who have stood here before me —

Patten, Schäuble, Aznar — is not one that encourages levity in an opening line.

So let me begin with a sentence that I would not have written ten years ago, and that I would have been embarrassed to write five years ago.

Europe is alone.

Not completely, not irrevocably. But more alone than at any moment since 1945. Alone in a way that the architects of our post-war order — Monnet, Schuman, Adenauer, Bevin, Spinelli and Churchill, but even de Gaulle in his prickliest moods — would have found astonishing. We are, for the first time in three generations, a continent that must seriously contemplate the defence of its own territory, the security of its own neighbourhood, and the credibility of its own deterrent, without the assumption that the cavalry is coming from somewhere else.

That is the subject of my lecture this evening. I want to argue four things.

First, that for the longest time the question of European strategic autonomy has been a French obsession, a German embarrassment, a British irritation — and that today, *nolens volens*, it has become a European necessity. Not because the argument has been won, but because today's alternatives are unacceptable.

Second, that we are responding — with unprecedented sums of money, new institutions, a tempo of decision-making that would have been unimaginable in 2019 — but that money and acronyms are not yet a strategy. We have a budget. We do not yet have a doctrine.

Third — and this is where I want to use most of my time tonight — that the answer must be a genuinely European answer, with a particular question at its heart: the question of Germany. The growth of German military power is one of the most consequential developments in European security since the fall of the Iron Curtain. Whether it is a blessing or a problem depends almost entirely on whether it is, in deed and not just in word, embedded in Europe. I will argue that Germany needs a new guiding principle for this new era.

And finally, my **fourth** point: that European loneliness in this new era is not only military — it is also, inherently, custodial. We have become the custodians of something larger than our territory — a political tradition whose other guardian is in trouble.

Let me address them one at a time.



I. How we got here

Here in Oxford we are permitted, even encouraged, to begin with history. So allow me a brief detour.

The phrase "*European strategic autonomy*" entered the EU's official lexicon only in 2013, in the conclusions of the December European Council on defence. It was, at the time, carefully designed not to be perceived as threatening. It referred to the EU's industrial base, its capacity to make its own helicopters and frigates, and was greeted in London and Washington with the indulgent smile reserved for things the French say.

The smile first faded slowly, then quickly.

It faded slowly across the 2010s, as one assumption after another came under strain. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 ended the post-Cold War holiday from history, though we did not quite admit it at the time. The first Trump administration's approach to NATO — the public hectoring about two-percent contributions, the suggestion that Article 5 might be conditional — cracked the psychological foundation of the Alliance even as the institutional architecture held. Brexit removed from the European Union its most significant military power and one of its two nuclear weapons states. The withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, conducted with what European capitals experienced as the courtesy of an afterthought, demonstrated that even an Atlanticist American administration would set the timetable, and Europeans would adjust.

The 24th of February 2022. Suddenly, nobody and nothing to smile about.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine did not change everything — that is true — but it did change the things that mattered. It showed that a major land war in Europe was not just a memory but had become the new reality. It demonstrated that European defence industries, atrophied by decades of peace dividend, could not produce artillery shells at the rate war consumes them. It demonstrated that European countries, individually, lacked the strategic enablers — air-to-air refuelling, satellite intelligence, suppression of enemy air defences, long-range precision strike — that turn willing armies into effective ones. We had, between us, more tanks than Russia. We could not have got them to the front.

And it demonstrated, above all, that even though Biden's United States remained — at the time — willing to lead, European security could no longer be a passive military good consumed by Europeans and produced by Americans.

The second Trump administration has now made what was implicit explicit. The pivot to Asia is real. The patience for European free-riding is exhausted. The conditionality on Article 5, once whispered, is now spoken. The recently announced withdrawal of five thousand US troops from Germany — triggered, we are told, less by strategic calculation than by presidential displeasure at Chancellor Merz's criticism of the war against Iran — is a small data point, but a telling one. The defence

of Europe now depends, in part, on the mood of one man in Washington. That is not a sustainable basis for our security — for the security of half a billion people.

I do not say this in anger. American voters have, over multiple elections and across both parties, signalled that the burden-sharing balance of the Atlantic Alliance has to change. They want this. We need to acknowledge it and act accordingly.

So, what options do we have?



II. The architecture of the response

Since March 2025, we have begun to respond with more seriousness. The European Commission's White Paper on European Defence — Readiness 2030, originally branded ReArm Europe, was unveiled last year. It proposed mobilising up to €800 billion in defence spending across the Union over the coming years. Its first pillar — the Security Action for Europe instrument, SAFE — provides €150 billion in long-maturity loans to member states for joint procurement of defence capabilities. SAFE was adopted by the Council in May 2025 and was, within months, fully subscribed by nineteen member states. Seventeen countries have now activated the national escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact, allowing them to increase defence spending without breaching fiscal rules. In Germany, we have changed the

constitution so that defence spending above one per cent of GDP can, de facto, be financed by unlimited debt.

These decisions are not just for show. They are the largest commitments to collective European defence in the last seventy years.

In the process, the European defence ecosystem has produced acronyms at a rate that would make even the Pentagon blush. SAFE, PESCO, EDIRPA, ASAP, EDIP. Each one, I should say, represents a genuinely useful instrument. Together, they represent the absence of a single political authority.

And yet — and here I need the candour more appropriate to this room than to a press conference — they are not yet a strategy. They are, at best, the beginning of one.

A European security and defence strategy needs to answer four questions. Against whom are we defending ourselves? With what means? Through what command structure? And to what political end?

We have begun to answer the first. Russia is the most serious, the immediate and proximate threat to the European security order, and will remain so for at least a generation, regardless of how the war in Ukraine ends. There is no longer a serious dispute about this in any European capital, including those that prefer to dispute it rhetorically.

We have begun to answer the second, with money. €800 billion is a serious answer to the question of means, if it materialises. But you cannot will artillery shells into existence simply by appropriating funds for them. And the bulk of the money still flows through national channels — twenty-seven separate budgets, twenty-seven separate procurements, twenty-seven separate priorities. The construct as it stands today will not provide the common European dimension needed to build a comprehensive and credible deterrent against any potential aggressor.

We have barely begun to answer the third. There is no European command. The European Defence Agency is a procurement coordinator; the EU's Military Staff a planning cell. Today, the command of European forces in any plausible scenario remains either a national prerogative or a NATO joint command — which means, in the most demanding scenarios, that we depend on American willingness, or American mood. As I said before, that is not sustainable. It can no longer be our default scenario, or our lifeline. So what is the alternative?

And we have not honestly begun to answer the fourth. To what political end are we rearming? To deter Russia, yes — but deterrence is a means, not an end. Are we rearming to enable Ukraine's victory, or its stalemate? What, in the end, are we defending? These are not academic questions. They determine what forces we need, what industrial base we need, and — let us not flinch from the word — what nuclear posture we need.

I do not believe any European government, including the one I know best, has yet given a clear, comprehensive public answer.

So let me try to give you mine.

The answer is as simple as four words and as complex as those same four words: **the European Defence Union**. This is not — this will not be — the project of all twenty-seven EU member states. If we tried, we would undoubtedly fail; and those who insist on twenty-seven as a precondition for moving forward are either naïve or, more likely, against the very notion of a European Defence Union. What we need is a coalition of the brave. The large states that have to be in: France, Germany, Poland, Spain, Italy. The states that bring the front line and the experience: the Baltics, the Nordics. The states that bring serious defence-industrial and naval weight: the Netherlands above all. Ideally Norway as well, and — indispensably — the United Kingdom.

Concretely, a Defence Union should have four pillars, and together they amount to something Europe has never had until now.

First, deployable European armed forces — not paper formations or rotational rebadging, but standing units capable of acting under a European chain of command when the situation requires it.

Second, decision-making structures that actually work: faster than NATO, slower than panic, with clear rules about who decides what, and on whose behalf. **Third**, joint procurement as the rule

rather than the exception, and a properly empowered European armaments agency with the authority to take decisions and the budget to back them. **Fourth**, a genuinely integrated European defence and security industrial complex — not twenty-seven national champions in competition, but a single market for defence, woven together by design, in which Finnish, French, German, Dutch, Polish, Italian, Spanish, Swedish, Czech, British and all other members of the European Defence Union — and, in due time, the ingenuity and know-how of our Ukrainian heroes and friends — are brought into a single whole.

And we must be clear-eyed about what this architecture has to deliver. The capability gaps that matter most in 2026 are not only the ones the Ukraine war made visible — artillery, integrated air defence, long-range precision strike, satellite intelligence, strategic enablers. They are also, increasingly, digital. Drones, in every category, have rewritten the economics of the modern battlefield, and we have been slow to draw the lessons. But it goes well beyond the cockpit and the trench. The European Defence Union must be a sovereignty project across the whole stack on which modern military power now rests: sovereign cloud infrastructure, secure communications, our own chips, our own AI capability for defence applications, and a serious, sustained effort to reduce European dependence on imported rare earths and critical minerals. Without this digital and industrial backbone, every shell we produce and every aircraft we deploy still runs, in the end, on

infrastructure controlled elsewhere. That is not strategic autonomy. That is autonomy on someone else's terms.

This is not a fantasy. It is the minimum architecture compatible with the loneliness I described at the start of this lecture. With it — and only with it — we begin to have a plausible answer to the question of what the means are for, and on whose authority they will be used.

And let me be clear about one thing before I go further. Peace is more than tanks and rifles, more than drones and chips, and Europe's vocation is not only to deter but to remain, as it has been at its best, a force for peace through diplomacy, through development, through the patient construction of institutions in which conflicts can be managed before they have to be fought.



III. The elephant in the room — Germany. From German *Angst* to fear of Germany, and *nie wieder allein*

It is here that I want to turn to the question that, in this room of all rooms, cannot be avoided. The question of Germany. And I want to turn to it as a German.

Timothy Garton Ash — Isaiah Berlin Professorial Fellow at this College — wrote a column in the Guardian last week, on the eve of the eighty-first anniversary of the end of the war in Europe. He set out a fact and posed a question. The fact is that Germany will again be the leading European military power. Already next year,

German defence spending will be as much as that of France and Britain combined. By 2030 it will be significantly larger. The German government's declared goal, set out in its first ever national military strategy — titled *Verantwortung für Europa*, Responsibility for Europe — is to have the strongest conventional army on the continent. Let me repeat that: the strongest conventional army on the continent. Barring unforeseen developments, this will happen.

Garton Ash asks: how do we — and by "we" I mean my own countrymen and women, and through us, the whole of Europe — ensure that this time, the growth of German military power is a positive development for all of Europe? I choose those two words carefully: *this time*.

Let me put it bluntly. The lack of historical acumen Chancellor Merz showed in the way he spoke about German military power — and, of all weeks, in the week of the eighth of May, without sparing a thought for what those words mean and still mean in the collective memory of this continent — is, at best, surprising. I was born on the border between Germany and France. I am a child of the Franco-German reconciliation project, and I find myself wondering how quickly my fellow citizens "forget" the scars that German imperialism and Nazism have left all over Europe. Those words have meant Verdun and the Somme. They have meant Warsaw and Coventry, Lidice and Rotterdam. They have meant Auschwitz. The post-war German republic — and I say this with

the gratitude of someone whose entire adult life has been lived under its protection — was constructed precisely on the recognition that this should, and could, never happen again. *Nie wieder*. The simplest and most powerful two words in modern German political language. Never again.

For the past seventy years, *nie wieder* has meant restraint. To this day it implies a constitutional reluctance to use force. It has meant the deliberate cultivation of a strategic culture so cautious that it sometimes infuriated our allies. It has meant deferring, on hard questions of military power, to Washington, to Paris and to London. That restraint, embedded first in NATO and then in the European Union, is a foundational achievement of the post-war order. It was the price we had to pay to be admitted into a community of nations that had every reason to be wary of us.

But *nie wieder* in that form — restraint, deferral, a smaller army than circumstance demanded — is no longer the *nie wieder* that today's world requires. Today's *nie wieder* must be, in its deepest form, Germany's commitment that the catastrophes of the twentieth century shall never return to this continent. Restraint, in the face of an aggressive nuclear-armed Russia and an unreliable America, is a misinterpretation of *nie wieder*. It risks no longer being a contribution to European peace. It risks becoming a subtraction from it.

Nie wieder must be a contribution to European peace.

So we must rearm. The question is not whether, but how. And the how is, in the most serious sense, a question about German self-understanding.

Let me come to what I most need to say tonight, and what almost no one is saying clearly enough back home. Our neighbours are watching German rearmament — its efforts and its intentions. The German political class would like to believe that all is fine in paradise, but the surveys and the data tell a different story: a story of how uneasy our neighbours feel about a re-militarising Germany — and of how unwilling we seem to be to address their fears. I do not say this to scold. I say it because it is true, and because the longer it remains unspoken among us, the more damage it will do. In Berlin, we have, over the last three years, persuaded ourselves of a comforting story: that the *Zeitenwende* is overdue, that Europe is grateful for it, that our partners have been waiting for us to step up and now welcome us doing so. There is some truth in that story. Our partners are, on the whole, relieved that Germany has woken from its long strategic slumber. But the story is incomplete, and the part it omits is the part that matters most.

The part it omits is this. Beneath the relief, the same partners who welcome a stronger Bundeswehr also feel something they are too polite to say loudly: a quiet, persistent, historically rooted unease at the prospect of a continent in which the dominant military power, by a considerable margin, is once again Germany. They do not say

it loudly because they are our friends; because the European Union has been built on the patient suppression of exactly these anxieties; and because they recognise that the immediate threat is from Moscow, not from Berlin. But the unease is there. It is real. And it is not paranoia. It grows stronger, not weaker, as the American president weakens his commitment to NATO and to European security.

Lord Ismay, NATO's first Secretary-General, famously said that the purpose of the Alliance was "to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down." It was a glib formulation, and it has been wryly quoted ever since. But behind the wryness lay a real architecture. The Americans being in is what made the Germans being down sustainable — and what made German power, when it returned, embeddable in European structures rather than threatening to them. As the Americans recede, the question their presence held in suspension comes back into view. Our neighbours feel that question. We Germans must feel it too.

The Polish right's reaction to German rearmament and American withdrawal — what Garton Ash, with characteristic understatement, called "hysterical" — is not merely an irrationality to be educated away. It is collective memory speaking. The same memory speaks in Prague, in Paris, in The Hague, in Athens, in Brussels. It speaks in muted form among our British friends. It even speaks, I suspect, among Americans of a certain generation. We Germans need to hear it. We need to hear it not because our

neighbours are wrong, but because they are historically right. There has never, in the modern history of this continent, been a Germany at its centre that was at once peaceful and militarily dominant. That is the historical record. We do not get to wave it away by pointing to the achievements of the Federal Republic, however real those achievements have been. We have to earn the trust — against the historical experience, against the very instincts — of an audience that has every reason not to trust us.

This is the part of the German conversation that has gone missing since 2022. At home, we talk about the *Zeitenwende* as a German project — what *we* must do, what *we* must spend, what *we* must build. We rarely talk about how it looks from Warsaw, from Paris, from London. We rarely ask whether the way we are conducting this rearmament — much of it American procurement, the rest overwhelmingly national, channelled through our own industrial base, our own factories, our own constituencies — is a way that reassures our neighbours, or a way that quietly reawakens their oldest fears. We are not asking the question. We need to ask it.

The discomfort our neighbours feel is sharpened, of course, by the political moment in my country. *Alternative für Deutschland* currently leads in our national polling. The most likely behaviour of an AfD-led government would be, ironically, the appeasement of Moscow rather than any aggressive use of German military power; that is the historical irony of German nationalism today. But the planning horizon of the new German military strategy runs

to 2035. No serious person in this room would predict German politics in 2035. The new Bundeswehr that we are building today will be inherited by political coalitions we cannot yet name, in geopolitical conditions we cannot yet foresee. That should give every German pause. And the fact that it is not, today, giving most of us pause is itself a reason to worry.

This is why I want to suggest tonight that German strategic culture needs a new formulation. Not a replacement for *nie wieder* — *nie wieder* remains the foundation, and must remain the foundation — but a development of it, fitted to the world we now inhabit.

Today's *nie wieder* must also mean never again German exceptionalism. It must mean Germany always in and with Europe, for European peace.

The formulation I would propose is this: *Nie wieder allein*.

Never again alone.

Nie wieder allein means recognising that our deepest interest lies in being part of a strong Europe, and in contributing generously so that Europe is strong enough to deter any potential aggressor from even thinking — let alone trying — to undermine the European order.

It is also a principle addressed to our partners — and this, I think, is the harder face for us, and the one we have barely begun to confront. *Nie wieder allein* must mean that German power is never again exercised alone. Not in the sense that we cannot have a

national army; of course we must. But in the sense that the great choices — what to build, what to deploy, where to send it, under whose command, to what end — are made in concert, in structures, in binding frameworks, with allies who have a real say and not merely a courtesy consultation. We must want this. We must propose it ourselves, before our neighbours feel they have to demand it of us.

This is not weakness. It is the deepest possible reading of the lessons of 1914 and 1939. The catastrophes of the twentieth century did not happen because Germany was too embedded in Europe. They happened because we were not embedded enough. Helmut Kohl understood this in the 1990s, when he embedded a newly unified Germany in the single market and the single currency, against the doubts of many of my own countrymen. In the end, no country benefited more than ours.

The frameworks for European defence will not be as tidy as the single market — security is not just economics — and they will not even be principally inside the EU. But the principle is the same. German power, embedded, is a continental blessing. German power, disembedded, is a continental anxiety — and, if we are honest with ourselves about what our country has been when it has stood apart, a German anxiety too.

Nie wieder allein, applied to the rearmament now under way in my country, has at least four implications.

First, on the industrial side, the great surge of German defence spending must not be channelled, by default, into a national industrial base. The pressures pushing in that direction are formidable. Our export-based economic model is in crisis; defence is one of the few growth sectors available to us. Some of our great factories are already being converted to weapons production. Every procurement contract above twenty-five million euros must be authorised by the Bundestag's budget committee — a perfect mechanism for converting strategic decisions into regional infighting. If we emerge from this rearmament with a vastly expanded national defence industry that has merely replaced American imports — without genuinely integrating with French, Dutch, Polish, Italian, Spanish, Swedish, and yes, British capacity — we will not have built European defence. We will have built a German defence industry. And we will have created the very European nervousness that *nie wieder allein* is meant to prevent.

Second, on procurement: we could laugh about it, were it not so tragic. The United States operates thirty-three main weapons systems. Across our militaries, Europe operates one hundred and seventy-four — including twelve different kinds of tank and fourteen different kinds of combat aircraft. That is not strategic autonomy. It is strategic incoherence with a budget line. Germany, as the largest spender, has both the leverage and the responsibility to drive consolidation — including, when the right capability is French or Polish or Italian or British, by buying it rather than

building our own. That is a discipline my country will not find easy. We must impose it on ourselves anyway.

Third, on command and operations, *nie wieder allein* means binding the new German forces into multinational structures that cannot easily be withdrawn by a future German government. Permanent multinational corps. Integrated air defence. Pooled strategic enablers. Forward deployments in the east that are commitments, not gestures. The point is for the Germany of 2026 — clear-eyed, aware of its history, alive to its own political fragilities — to constrain in advance the unknowable Germany of 2035. We should welcome those constraints. We should propose them ourselves.

Fourth, and most delicate, *nie wieder allein* must be extended — by France, by the United Kingdom, and ultimately for us too — to nuclear deterrence. The conversation about extending British and French nuclear cover eastwards, until recently unthinkable, is now beginning. It is a conversation we Germans cannot have on our own, and one Britain and France cannot avoid. It is the hardest conversation in European security, and it is overdue.

I have come to Oxford this evening also to say things to my fellow citizens. The German conversation about defence must include how our partners see us. Without that — without the ability to understand how our neighbours see us, with affection but also with memory — the rearmament we are now undertaking risks

becoming the most expensive and dangerous misunderstanding in our recent history.

We can do better than that. We have done better than that before.



IV. A word to our British friends

Allow me, before I close, a word addressed directly to the country in which I am speaking — a word from a European who comes here as a friend, not as a recruiter.

Britain is not in the European Union. The arguments about whether that should one day change are arguments for the British people to have, in their own time, on their own terms. I will not rehearse them tonight; I rather suspect you have rehearsed them quite enough among yourselves.

What we are going to do is work with you. Closely, seriously, and as equals. Because there is no honest map of European defence that does not have Britain at its centre. One of our continent's two nuclear deterrents is British. One of its two genuinely expeditionary militaries is British. A defence industrial base — BAE, Rolls-Royce, the yards at Barrow — that the rest of us cannot do without is British. The Trinity House Agreement with Germany, the Lancaster House framework with France, the architecture of British association with SAFE: these are not consolation prizes for non-membership. They are, in their own right, pillars of the European defence we are now building

together. And it is not only the material foundation that matters. It is the British strategic tradition — the instincts that come from a long history of taking the security of this continent seriously. We have seen those instincts again, sharply and clearly, in the British response to Putin's attack on Ukraine. They are instincts the rest of us need.

So the message I want to leave with this audience is a simple one. We need you. We know we need you. We are not asking you to choose between your sovereignty and our solidarity; we are asking you to bring the first into the service of the second. The European Defence Union will be built with Britain, or it will fail without Britain.



V. The lonelier continent — and what it is for

I called this lecture "*The Lonelier Continent*." I do not mean that Europe is destined for decline, or for irrelevance, or for the bitter consolations of nostalgia. As I said at the outset, I mean the absence of a guarantor. The recognition that we are now responsible, in the first instance, for ourselves.

But I want, in closing, to widen the meaning of that loneliness. Because it is not only military. It is also, and I think more profoundly, custodial.

Let me explain what I mean.

Until tonight I have spoken of European defence as a question of capabilities — of artillery shells, of integrated air defence, of joint procurement, of the embedding of German military power. These are the right questions, and they are urgent. But they are not, in the deepest sense, the question. The deepest question is what we are defending. And that question, in this room, in this College, with its vocation to think about Europe slowly, deserves its moment.

I recently read — and many of you will have seen it — Helena Rosenblatt's book *The Lost History of Liberalism*. Rosenblatt's argument is that the political tradition we now call liberalism was not, in its origins, the Anglo-American doctrine of individual rights and free markets that we have come to associate it with. It was, for most of its existence, a continental tradition — French, German, Swiss, Italian — preoccupied with civic virtue, with duties to the community, with the moral and educational formation of citizens capable of self-government. The word "liberal" itself, in its modern political sense, was coined in the early nineteenth century not in London or Boston but in Paris and Madrid and Berlin. The liberalism of Constant, of Tocqueville, of Guizot, of the German *Rechtsstaat* tradition was not principally about getting government off the citizen's back. It was about making citizens fit to bear the freedom they had won.

Hannah Arendt, who knew this tradition intimately and from the inside, made the same point in a different idiom. Freedom, for Arendt, is not a property of the isolated individual. It is not the

absence of interference. It is not even, primarily, an interior condition of the will. Freedom appears, she argued, only in the space between people — in plurality, in the public realm, in what she called acting in concert. To be free is not to be left alone. It is to act with others, in public, on matters that concern us all. *Frei sein* — being free — is a practice, not a possession. It exists only as long as the performance lasts.

Both Rosenblatt and Arendt are recovering something we have half-forgotten: that freedom is a civic achievement, not a private endowment. That it requires institutions, habits, virtues, and above all a community of citizens willing to maintain it. That the lone individual, sovereign over his own choices but indifferent to the public realm, is not the embodiment of freedom but its solvent.

Why does this matter to a lecture on European defence?

It matters because the political tradition that European strategic autonomy is, in the last analysis, *for* — the tradition we are now spending €800 billion to defend — is precisely this older, fuller, civic conception of freedom. It is the conception under which freedom is not what one has when one is left alone, but what one does when one acts together. It is the conception that built the European Union: that pooled sovereignty between states is not a diminution of freedom but its enlargement, because freedom only exists in the space between us.

This understanding of freedom is now under severe pressure in the other great democratic civilisation that, until recently, we assumed shared it. The United States is in the midst of a confrontation with its own illiberal conundrum, the outcome of which no one can predict. American friends I respect are openly asking whether their liberal tradition still has the capacity to reinvent itself. They are turning, significantly, to European thinkers to find the triggers, the thoughts that have been forgotten. Constant. Tocqueville. Arendt. The civic, continental, virtue-laden liberalism that we Europeans rather sheepishly half-remember as our own.

This is the deeper meaning of European loneliness. We are alone not only in the sense that we must now defend our territory ourselves. We are alone in the sense that we have become, somewhat to our own surprise, custodians of a political tradition whose other heartland is in trouble. The lonelier continent is also, for the moment, the lonelier liberalism.

I should pause here, because the phrase "lonelier continent" can be misheard, and I do not want it to be. I do not mean that Europe stands alone in the world as the only defender of freedom. That would be both arrogant and untrue. Indians, Brazilians and South Koreans are defending their democracies under acute pressure. Democrats from South Africa to Taiwan, from Senegal to Costa Rica, are fighting their own battles for civic freedom — many of them harder, and at greater personal cost, than most Europeans

have ever been asked to bear. Our loneliness is the loneliness of an old custodian discovering that the structure they relied on has weakened — not the loneliness of being the last one left.

Which means that a strong Europe is not the end of the project. It is the platform from which the next project begins: building coalitions, around the world, with everyone who shares a stake in the civic conception of freedom this lecture has tried to describe. A continent that has rebuilt its own defence, recovered its own confidence, and remembered its own intellectual tradition is a continent that has something to offer such coalitions — and an obligation to seek them out. The post-American world is not a world in which Europe replaces America as a single guarantor. It is a world in which guarantee itself has to become plural — built between many democracies, each with its own history, its own scars, and its own contribution to make.

This places upon us a responsibility we are not yet, I think, mentally prepared for. It is not enough to rearm. It is not enough to embed German power in European structures. It is not enough to extend French and British nuclear deterrence eastwards. We must also — and this is much harder, and more burdensome, and in the end no amount of funding will help us master the task at hand — actually live the conception of freedom we are defending. We must keep our public realms vigorous. We must resist, in our own polities, the temptation that has overtaken so much of the democratic world: the temptation to imagine freedom as a private

possession that politics can only threaten, rather than a public practice that only politics makes possible. We must, in Arendt's words, keep acting in concert — among ourselves, between our nations, and with democratic partners everywhere, in the spaces our institutions have made for us.

I want to extend, in closing, the principle I set out earlier in this lecture. *Nie wieder allein* is the guiding principle for the new German military posture. But I think the principle has a wider application. It applies, in the end, to the European condition as such.

Never again alone — for Germany, in the exercise of military power.

Never again alone — for Europe, in the assumption that someone else will defend it.

And never again alone — for any of us, in the deepest sense, because freedom itself, properly understood, is not a thing one has alone. Freedom is what citizens do together, in the space between them, in public, in plurality. The defence of Europe and the defence of European freedom are the same defence, conducted on different fronts, requiring the same virtues: solidarity, plurality, the willingness to act in concert, the refusal to be alone.

A continent that learns that lesson — late, expensively, painfully — will have done more than rebuild its armies. It will have remembered what armies are for.

That is the principle. That is the project. That is the work of our generation.

The French philosopher Élisabeth Badinter has spent a lifetime insisting that the Enlightenment is not a period of history but a project — not something we inherit, finished, from the eighteenth century, but something each generation must take up, defend, and carry forward, or watch erode. She is right. The Enlightenment is a project. Liberalism is a project. Europe is a project. Freedom, in the civic sense in which Rosenblatt and Arendt understood it, is a project. None of these things can be possessed. All of them must be practised.

We have, on this continent, in this hour, been handed the practice. May we prove worthy of it.

Thank you.