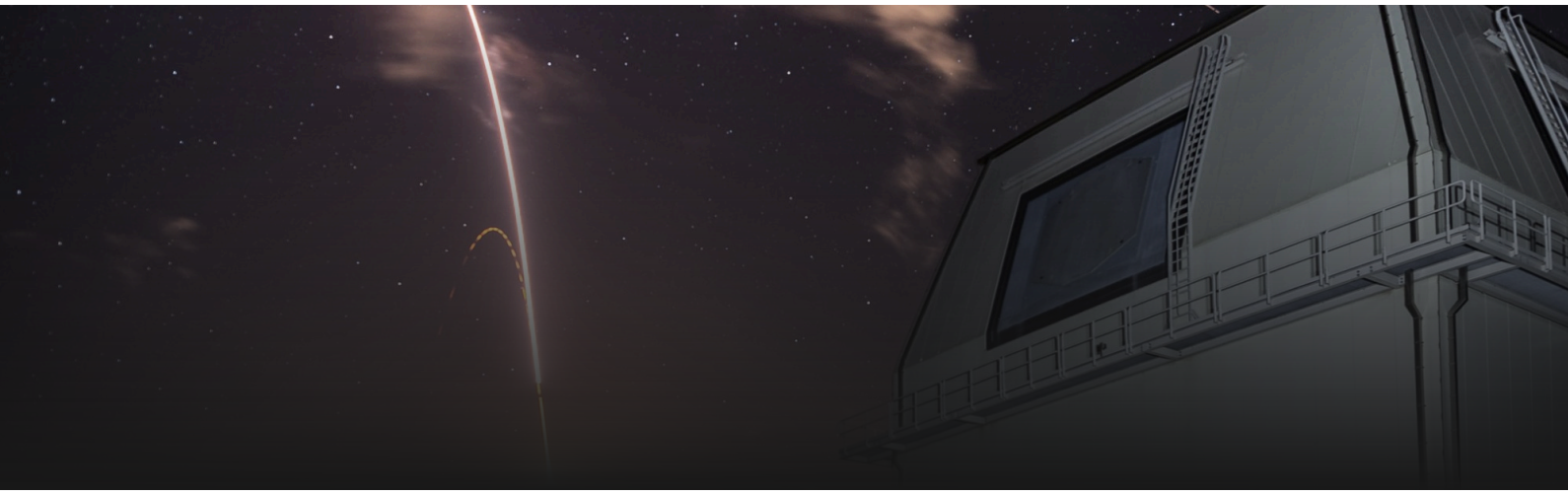

Nick Anstead December 15th, 2025

What imaginary threats can tell us about the strategic estrangement between Europe and America

Literature and other media can often give a window into public and policy makers' concerns about the dangers they may face. **Nick Anstead** *writes on the differing "threat imaginary" in the US and Europe, commenting that the US is worried about unexpected and potentially world-ending events, while in Europe, concerns center on hybrid warfare and an increasingly uninterested America.*

In the decades before the First World War, British writers were obsessed with the idea of invasion. Some of these novels were very explicit on who posed the threat. The first prominent publication in the genre, 1871's *The Battle of Dorking*, published in the months after the Franco-Prussian War, is clear that the invaders are German-speaking. In some other books, the threat is more metaphorical, as is the case in probably the most enduring and reinvented example of invasion literature, H.G.Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1897).

American and European visions of the threat imaginary

As this literature from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century suggests, what we might term "the threat imaginary" can tell us quite a lot about the world as it actually is, and how policy makers and the public understand the dangers faced by their society. It is striking then, at a time where US security strategy is increasingly negative towards Europe, there is a corresponding divergence in the fears animating debate on either side of the Atlantic.

Recent high profile American examples of geopolitical futurology have largely focused on the nuclear threat. Examples include Jeffrey Lewis's *The 2020 Commission on the North Korean Nuclear Attacks Against the United States* (2018), Annie Jacobson's *Nuclear War: A Scenario* (2024) and Kathryn Bigelow's recent film A House of Dynamite (2025). These works share some common themes, in that they all involve what US military jargon terms a "bolt from the blue" nuclear attack, and that the instigator of the conflict is North Korea (or assumed to be North Korea, albeit with the lurking fear that a major rival power is really behind the attack). Furthermore, they all suggest a level of unpreparedness, chaos and dysfunction in the American response. In the more apocalyptic scenarios outlined by Jacobson and, with some ambiguity, Bigelow, the knee jerk ideology of deterrence kicks-in, with the US military persuading a weak and overwhelmed President to give them the authority to launch a massive nuclear response.

European visions of the future are different. One recent example is a podcast series produced by Tortoise and Sky News, The Wargame. This imagines a Russian attack on the United Kingdom. Retired senior British politicians (including former Tory Defence Secretary Ben Wallace and former Labour Foreign Secretary Jack Straw) role play a response in real time. The escalating situation culminates with Russian cruise missile attacks on Britain. *If Russia Wins* by German Security expert and academic Carlo Masala rehearses a different scenario, where a Russian territorial victory in Ukraine (of the sort that is now being proposed by the Trump administration in their peace deal) encourages the annexation of small areas of territory in NATO countries in 2028. In this version of the future, Russian troops take the city of Narva in Estonia, with the aim of testing the willingness of NATO members to trigger Article 5.

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Russian threat and US estrangement

These American and European literature are divergent, but they are not inherently contradictory. As much as they focus on the threat posed by Russia, the European examples also place great emphasis on American estrangement from the European theatre, a fact underlined by the lack of American interest in imagining Europe as the starting point for future international crises.

In both the Tortoise / Sky News podcast and Masala's book, the US refuses to trigger NATO Article 5 and instead position itself as a broker of peace with Russia, seeking to cut the European countries out of the diplomatic dialogue. These scenarios are not dissimilar to the way bilateral talks between the US and Russia over the future of Ukraine are currently playing out.

In contrast to the nightmare of a nuclear Pearl Harbour-type event raining down on American cities, nuclear weapons play a very different role in the European debate. Citing the example of Russian nuclear sabre rattling in October 2022, Masala states this most clearly when he argues in his postscript that the major role of Russian nuclear weapons system is rhetorical, to scare opponents away from deploying their conventional forces and deter any form of escalatory response:

> *Of course, we can't simply pretend that there aren't any nuclear weapons. But one lesson to be learned from recent events is that we must be aware of the coercive psychological mechanisms associated with threatening the use of nuclear weapons, and factor into our own thinking the fact that Russia uses such threats deliberately and tactically.*

Diverging European and American visions of the future

This hints at the major difference between American and European attitudes, at least in these texts. Europeans seem more concerned by hybrid warfare and how a multitude of small actions and non-responses can bring about the demise of security institutions. In this context, cyber-attacks, fake

news, drones over airport and little green men appearing on uninhabited islands in the middle of the ocean is seen as a genuine threat. American concerns, perhaps unsurprisingly given the millenarian tone of much contemporary US politics, are more focused on unexpected, devastating and potentially civilisation-ending events.

The fact that Americans and Europeans are now grounding their worst-case scenarios and fears for the future in such different visions is instructive, and it shows just how great the strategic estrangement between these once strong allies is.

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