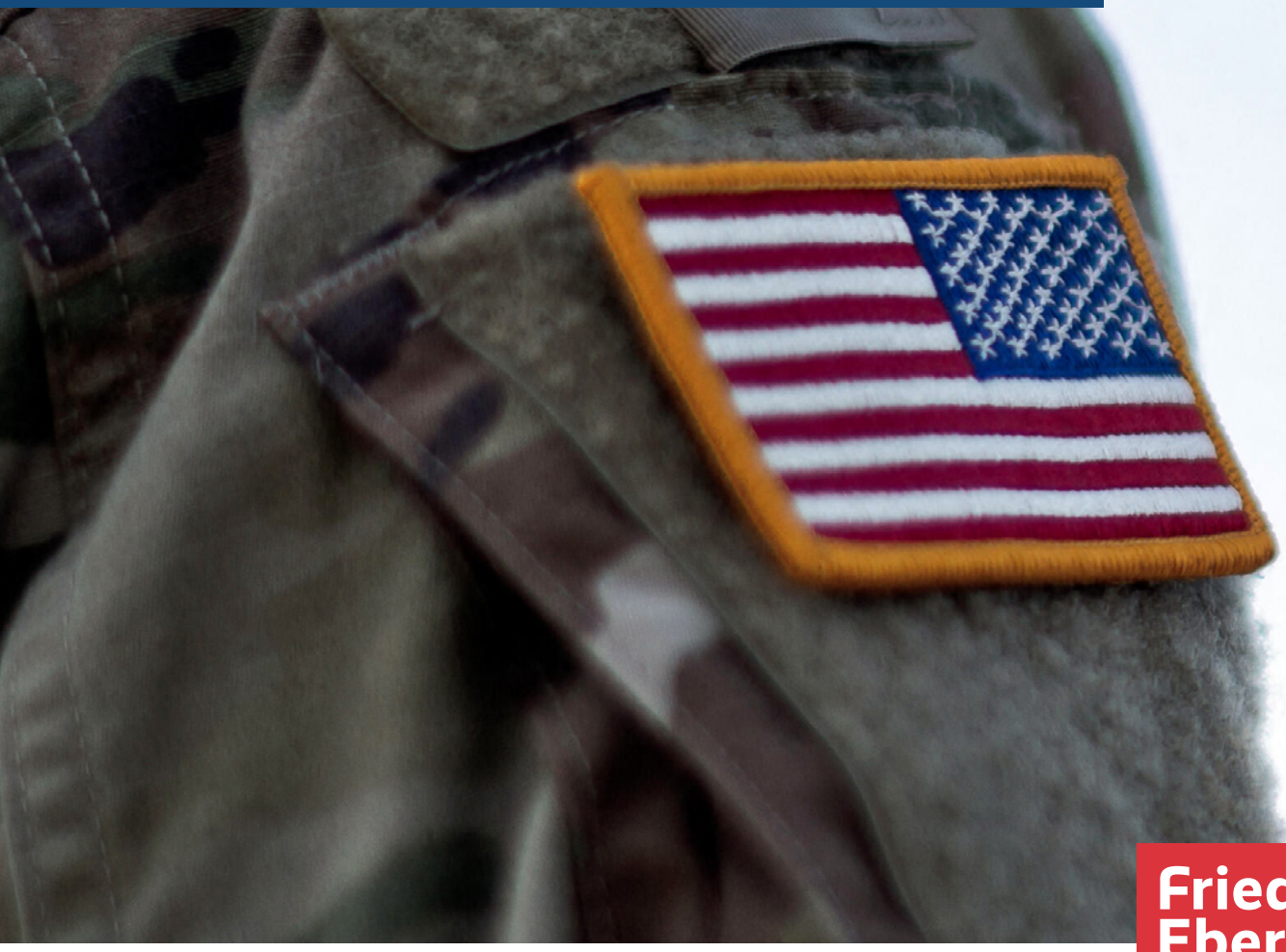
STUDY

Marco Overhaus
June 2025

The Future of NATO

From Benign Leader to 'Uncle Sucker': The US Debate on NATO



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Content

Introduction

At an early stage in his second term, US President Donald Trump initiated a fundamental shift in US foreign and security policy. He has sought to normalize relations with Russia and signaled his willingness to end the war in Ukraine on Russia's terms. Trump has imposed tariffs on European allies, as was already the case during his first term. He did not even exclude the option of using military force to incorporate Greenland and has repeatedly suggested that Canada should become the 51st state of the USA. Profound changes in US foreign and security policy have been in the making for some time. Even for long-term observers of US policy, it is however astonishing to see how swiftly and radically Trump is steering America in a new direction.

This policy shift will have profound, if not existential, consequences, for NATO. In terms of military resources alone, the US has been indispensable. In 2023 the US still accounted for almost 70 percent of all allied military spending (916 billion USD of 1340 billion USD in current prices) (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2024). When it comes to the combined figures for NATO allies' armed forces, with 3.2 million men and women in uniform, the US contributes 1.3 million to the total (The Military Balance, Chapter Three: Europe 2024).[1] Beyond mere capacity, NATO allies remain very reliant on many US military capabilities and "strategic enablers" such as logistics, heavy lifting, intelligence, air defense, and so on.

The domestic debate in the United States on key aspects of foreign and security policy is lagging behind the changes already implemented by Trump and his administration. For instance, many Republican members of Congress, who have been staunch supporters of NATO and Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression, were seemingly caught off-guard by Trump's new policy. After the fact, many were reluctant to raise concerns openly, or they even fell in line and now support the new policy. Lawmakers from the Democratic side are raising concerns but are struggling to be heard and to form a coherent opposition. It is increasingly obvious that the US Congress will not be willing and able to act as a corrective to the new president's impulses. This was different during Trump's first presidency.

The same gap between public debate and official policy is evident with regard to think-tank publications. To be sure, voices critical of a strong US engagement in NATO, NATO enlargement or military support for Ukraine had been heard before Trump moved into the Oval Office again. These voices had however been marginal. The end of Trump's first term saw the establishment of new think tanks that advocate for policies in line with Trump's views and his MAGA movement. These include the America First Policy Institute and the Center for Renewing America. It is very likely that they will now become more vocal and more dominant in the public debate.

To date, think-tank discourse on NATO and NATO-related topics has been dominated by internationalist, Atlanticist, and deterrence-focused voices. Against the backdrop of Russia's full-scale onslaught on Ukraine in February 2022, NATO's new 2022 Strategic Concept, the Alliance's 75th anniversary summit in 2024, and with the tail wind from the Biden administration, most think-tank input on NATO strongly advocated for enhancing transatlantic defense cooperation – with a greater European contribution, of course – supporting Ukraine in its fight against Russia, and beefing-up the Alliance's defense and deterrence capabilities on its eastern flank.

It remains to be seen how the radical policy shift under "Trump II" will influence think-tank discourse. Some analysts are already adapting their previously Atlanticist and deterrence-focused messaging to the new political circumstances. They discuss how US engagement in NATO can be turned into "a new deal for America" (The Alphen Group 2025) and how a "new transatlantic bargain" (Hooker and Molot 2025, p. 17) can be found that will survive the second Trump administration and whatever comes after it. Others, such as Max Bergman from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), are more skeptical that it will be possible to achieve a new deal, specifically one that includes Europeans spending much more on defense and buying more US weapons or US liquefied natural gas (Bergmann 2025, p. 5).

Strategic Outlook and the US National Security Debate

For the past several decades, US foreign and security policy has been based on the assumption that American security and prosperity depend on a deep political, economic, and military engagement with the rest of the world. To some extent, this view was even reflected in Trump's National Security Strategy from his first term (2017-2021). Admittedly, this strategy – adopting the conceptual headline of "principled realism" – already signaled a departure from earlier US strategy documents. It portrayed the world in rather dark colors as an arena in which states and non-state actors compete for economic and military power and influence. According to the 2017 NSS, the major threats emanate from revisionist powers (China and Russia), rogue states (mainly Iran and North Korea), and jihadist terrorism. The authors of the strategy also complained that other countries, including allies, have taken advantage of America's generosity. At the same time, Trump's first NSS still emphasized the importance of the international order and its institutions, which America helped to create after World War II. It also committed the US to NATO and its collective defense clause, including the extended nuclear deterrent provided by the US (President of the United States of America 2017).

1 The troop numbers refer to active-duty forces only.

The Biden administration's 2022 National Security Strategy shares many threat perceptions with the document that preceded it but emphasizes US leadership on a more benign, inclusive note. Probably the most critical difference from the first Trump NSS is that Biden's strategy focusses – as one of three "lines of effort" – on (re)building alliances, partnerships, and other inclusive coalitions with democracies (The White House 2022, p. 11).

One of the most consequential issues in the US foreign policy debate over the last couple of years has been the question of how America should balance its interests and commitments in Europe with its involvement in other world regions, especially the Indo-Pacific. At the latest since Obama's "pivot to Asia" in 2011, Washington has seen China as the most critical long-term challenge for the US. Peter Rough offers a useful characterization of the various approaches in the US debate when he distinguishes between "traditional hawks and classical liberals" on the one hand and "prioritizers" on the other.

The former tend to view the challenges posed by Russia and China – as well as by other malign actors, such as Iran and North Korea – as being interlinked and "part of the same whole" (Rough 2024, p. 23). The strengthening of security cooperation between Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea in the wake of the war in Ukraine bolsters their assertions. Analysts from conservative institutions, such as the American Enterprise Institute or the Heritage Foundation, advocate for higher defense budgets in order to provide sufficient resources for a more globalist and ambitious defense strategy (Eaglen 2022; Spoehr 2022).

However, researchers from more liberal-leaning think tanks also share the "part of the same whole" threat perception. An expert group hosted by the United States Institute of Peace points to the "growing interdependence of deterrence dynamics in the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific with the rise of strategic competition between the United States and China and Russia" (United States Institute of Peace (USIP) 2024, pp. 11–2). Hans Binnendijk and Daniel Hamilton also stress that Russia and China pose an integrated challenge to NATO for several reasons: their increasingly close defense and defense industry cooperation; their threats to the freedom of navigation and the global commons; and finally China's investments in critical European infrastructure and technologies, including ports, telecom, power grids, and defense-related supply chains (Binnendijk and Hamilton 2023). For similar reasons, Regina Karp and Richard Maass stress that NATO must not view China as an "out-of-area" problem (Karp and Maass 2024, p. 7).

Proponents of this more globalist perspective also tend to emphasize Europe's relevance for US security and economic interests. For instance, Luke Coffey (formerly Heritage and now Hudson Institute) argues that "European stability, which Russia is trying to undermine, not only impacts the U.S. economy but also affects the American worker. In addition to a robust NATO, aiding Ukraine helps preserve stability in Europe" (Coffey 2024). Nile Gardiner and Robert Greenway from Heritage maintain that a "secure Europe and a robust Transatlantic Alliance, including the U.S./U.K. special relationship, advances the security of the American people" (Greenway and Gardiner 2024).

The position adopted by Heritage analysts is particularly interesting as this conservative think tank – turned advocacy organization – was closely associated with Trump in the run-up to the 2024 elections. However, Heritage's previous positions on foreign and security policy clearly collide with Trump's pro-Russia, anti-Ukraine, and NATO-skeptical policy. It will be interesting to see how Heritage will react and adapt to the new official policy.

Contrary to the "traditional hawks and classical liberals," in Rough's depiction, "prioritizers" stress that from an American perspective the real challenge is China, much more than Russia. Elbridge Colby, nominated by Trump as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in his second administration, is one of the principal proponents of this perspective. Colby is also the co-founder of The Marathon Initiative, a think-tank dedicated to fostering foreign policy strategies on the assumption that "America cannot simply outspend…its rivals" (The Marathon Initiative). A recent study published by this think-tank concluded that European reliance on the US is unsustainable due to the United States' "deepening fiscal constraints and growing pressures from rival powers in multiple regions" (Ellis 2024, p. 3).

Hardly anybody in the US debate – be they hawks, liberals or prioritizers – is expecting a significant military contribution from NATO and its European members to confront China in the Indo-Pacific. For a long time the Alliance did not even consider China as a major issue. Washington began to lobby harder in Brussels to take the challenge posed by China more seriously and consequently in 2019 NATO mentioned China in an official statement for the first time. The Alliance's current Strategic Concept from 2022 states that China's "ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values" (North Atlantic Treaty Organization 2022, p. 5). NATO has also strengthened its relationship with key partners in the Indo-Pacific, especially with the group known as IP4, i.e. Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea.

A few analysts argue that individual NATO allies should participate to a greater extent in freedom of navigation operations in Asia (Binnendijk and Hamilton 2023, pp. 13–4). Others disagree. For instance, USIP's expert group states that "it would be a mistake for the alliance to spread its military power even thinner by pursuing largely symbolic deployments and activities in the Indo-Pacific" (Council on Foreign Relations 2024). A common denominator among most analysts, however, is the view that NATO will have to

relieve the United States' conventional forces in Europe to enable the US to focus more on the Indo-Pacific.

Over and above "traditional hawks and classical liberals" as well as prioritizers, a third group can be identified and might be labelled "restrainers" or outright "NATO skeptics." There are obvious similarities between this group and the aforementioned "prioritizers" but also important differences. Just like the "prioritizers," these skeptics advocate for a reduced US security role on the European continent. However, they draw more radical conclusions and tend to view Russia more favorably than the "prioritizers" do, largely blaming the Atlantic Alliance for the deterioration of relations between the US/the West and Russia since the late 1990s. The libertarian Cato institute has played an important role in this camp.

In keeping with this way of thinking, Marc Trachtenberg argues in a Cato publication that a "European system in which the United States would play at most a peripheral role would work differently." In his view, a US withdrawal from Europe would create greater security and stability on the continent. Such a shift in US policy would, in his view, force European nations to "be more moderate, more status quo–oriented, and more purely defensive than the policy the United States has been pursuing since 1991." This, in turn, would be "less likely to be perceived as a threat by Russia" (Trachtenberg 2024, p. 16).

NATO skeptics are also often more optimistic that European nations can in fact take care of their own security even if Russia remains a challenge. For Justin Login (also Cato), Russia's "dismal performance" in Ukraine has demonstrated that Moscow is unable to "defeat Europe's larger, more powerful countries" and thus cannot achieve "regional hegemony" even if the US were to drastically reduce its presence (Logan 2023, p. 14).

The "restraint" movement is ideologically more heterogenous than conservative libertarians and includes "realist" scholars such as Barry Posen, John Mearsheimer or Stephen Walt as well as researchers at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. They, too, have been highly critical of the United States "deep engagement" in international affairs, including in NATO.

A few months into the second Trump presidency, it looks as if the NATO-skeptic view has moved from the margins of public discourse into the center of official US policy. What is less clear, however, is the extent to which Trump and his new administration will be able to forge a coherent strategy. After all, Trump's approach to foreign and security policy remains highly ambivalent and contradictory. On the one hand, Trump and the Republican Party have propagated "Peace through Strength," promising inter alia to rapidly end the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. On the other, Trump has promised his voters to keep the US out of international crises and conflicts, which is hard to reconcile with "Peace through Strength."

NATO – Still a Community of Values?

For most of NATO's history it has been taken for granted that the Alliance is not just a community of interests but also a community of values. In recent years, as analysts and commentators have discussed the specific security challenges and threats NATO is facing, the underpinning of shared values seems to have been taken as a given. There was at least not much debate about it and it was rarely made explicit in the think-tank publications that have been reviewed for this publication. If there was debate in the United States about values, it mostly concerned "outlier" countries, such as Hungary or Turkey. President Biden's initial emphasis on democracies' struggle against autocracies further strengthened the view from Washington that NATO was a liberal and democratic alliance.

Things have changed profoundly, however, since Trump returned to the White House. Vice-President JD Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025 was a pivotal moment. His speech and its reception by the audience clearly revealed the new transatlantic value rift (which, of course, is also a rift within Germany and other European societies). Vance noted that he worries not so much about external threats from Russia or China but rather about the "threat from within, the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values – values shared with the United States of America" (Vance 2025). What he meant was that, in his view, the suppression of free speech and "digital censorship" were on the rise in many European countries. German defense minister Boris Pistorius rebuked Vance sharply, commenting that it was "unacceptable" to accuse Europeans of not being real democrats (Pistorius, 2025).

Since Trump took office in January 2025, he has worked towards expanding executive powers in multiple ways. He and his advisors adhere to the legal theory of the "unified executive," according to which the President alone controls executive power at the federal level. Attempting to break the shackles of power at home could also have an impact on the way America behaves on the international stage. For a long time, the United States was seen as a liberal leader in NATO, allowing its great military power to be at least partially contained through consultation and consensus requirements. There are by now many indications that this will no longer be the case under Trump.

There is another aspect to the new transatlantic value rift. The second Trump administration has declared war on anything that it sees as "woke." In its definition, wokeness encompasses policies to support diversity, equity, and integration (DEI) of minorities or vulnerable segments of society, as well as promoting gender equality. Among conservative circles, NATO has also become a target of moves to fight wokeness. Sumantra Maitra claims in a report for the Center of Renewing America that NATO has experienced an "ideological capture of its bureaucracy," integrated "LGBTQI perspectives in Allied and Partner Armed Forces," and shifted from fighting wars to "auxiliary interests, such as

the Preventing and Responding to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence initiative." Maitra does not simply claim that NATO has become "woke," but questions the usefulness of democratic values for the Alliance as such. In his view, including non-democratic countries in NATO (Portugal before 1974 and Turkey) has done no damage to the Alliance's core task of providing defense and deterrence (Maitra 2025).

NATO Defense and Deterrence

During Biden's presidency (2021–2025) and even at the beginning of the second Trump administration, US think-tank debate about NATO's defense and deterrence posture was still dominated by Atlanticist and deterrence-oriented voices. The starting point of most analyses is that Russia is a major military threat that is set to grow even larger once the Ukraine war is over. The immediate focus has been on the scenario of a Russian attack on the Baltic States. Most estimates indicate that Russia would be able to fully reconstitute its armed (especially ground) forces within three to five years after the conclusion of the war in Ukraine (Kramer and Agachi 2024; The Alphen Group 2025, p. 7; Monaghan et al. 2024, pp. 2–3). This would give Russia both the capacity and the capability to either launch another full-scale invasion of Ukraine or to attack a European NATO country. Another factor that plays into the threat perception vis-à-vis Russia is that China, Iran, and North Korea have supported Russia's war in Ukraine in one way or another and might continue to align with Moscow beyond the conflict in Ukraine.

However, differing views on how to deal with Russia have held sway, even among Atlanticist and deterrence-oriented analysts. On the one hand, there are those who advocate for worst-case military planning. For instance, Sean Monaghan from CSIS recommends NATO to return to the Cold War planning assumption of "maximum intentions." As Soviet intentions were not known during the Cold War, the Alliance's military planners considered Moscow's "maximum intentions and capabilities." Monaghan takes the view that such an approach is warranted again today (Monaghan 2022, p. 7).

On the other hand, there are those who are more cautious, pointing to escalation risks. A research team from the RAND Corporation recommends that, although a deliberate Russian decision to attack NATO is a plausible scenario, NATO should strengthen its defensive posture "without appearing to enable a first strike on Russia" and "continue to signal that the United States and NATO allies have no plans to directly enter the [Ukraine] conflict" (Frederick et al. 2022, p. 8).

Most of those in think-tanks who focus on NATO's defense and deterrence posture welcome NATO's shift from a mere "forward presence" at the eastern flank to more substantial "forward defense"; that is a shift that – according to one study by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) – includes "having sufficient combat-ready forces positioned and ready to 'fight tonight'"(van Tol et al. 2022, p. III). Mark Cancian, Sean Monaghan, and others refer to this approach as "Repel, Don't Expel." It means that Russia must be denied the ability to conquer territory from one or all of the Baltic States in the first place. Cancian and Monaghan see NATO's decision on forward deployment of brigades as a crucial step but stress the need to clarify the nature of this deployment, especially with regard to the exact size of the troops, where they will be stationed, which nations will contribute, and how the brigades will be supported (Cancian and Monaghan 2023, pp. V–VIII).

Mobilizing sufficient numbers of combat forces and translating these numbers into actual combat power on the battlefield will be a central problem for NATO. This will require filling significant capability gaps and addressing readiness challenges (Dowd et al. 2024, p. 2). In that sense, several researchers from CSIS also raise the question of whether NATO would also be prepared for a protracted war with Russia (Monaghan et al. 2024, p. 16).

Another aspect of the debate concerns the way in which the recent accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO alters the military balance vis-à-vis Russia. Nicholas Lokker, Jim Townsend, and other researchers from the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) stress that integration of the two northern countries' very capable armed forces "will go a long way, enabling NATO to better fulfill its updated forward defense plans for its northeastern flank" (Lokker et al. 2023, p. 6). They also see an opportunity for the Alliance to create a comprehensive strategy for regional security in northern Europe. The idea would be to treat northern Europe as a single theatre that encompasses both the Baltic Sea and the North Atlantic. Luke Coffey from the Hudson Institute makes a similar argument. He proposes establishing an additional NATO battlegroup in Finland and increasing the Alliance's maritime presence in the Baltic Sea (Coffey 2022, p. 1).

Cyber, Space, New Technologies, Hybrid Threats

As has often been discussed, defense issues have expanded beyond the traditional battlefield domains of land, water, and air to include two domains that cannot be defined in geographical terms – the cyber realm and space. Moreover, the pace of technological change and innovation demands continuous adaptation of defense concepts and capabilities. It therefore comes as no surprise that technology, cyber, and space feature in many think-tank analyses to varying degrees. For instance, Franklin Kramer and Anca Agachi stress how relevant it is for the Alliance to "incorporate the key elements of the ongoing technological revolution as exemplified by unmanned vehicles, additive manufacturing, low-Earth-orbit satellites, and artificial intelligence." In their view, NATO needs to take these developments into account "across its defense architecture, from capability development to acquisition to operations." They advocate, among other things, using NATO's Defense Planning Process "to define allied capability targets for space and counter-space" (Kramer and Agachi 2024).

As technological innovation increasingly flows from the private rather than from the public sector, Kramer and Agachi propose engaging "new defenders beyond the traditional state-centric military model." However, this involves a risk that the authors do not mention explicitly, namely that reliance on private actors diminishes government control and creates new dependencies. In that sense, Ukraine's pronounced dependence on Elon Musk's Starlink private-sector satellite network has created an additional vulnerability – on top of the uncertain prospect of continued US military aid.

The relatively new concept of Multi-Domain Operations (MDO), which is currently the standard-bearer for the US Army's transformation, also emphasizes the relevance of technology, cyber, and space. Another think-tank report, also co-authored by Franklin Kramer, stresses how implementing MDO would strengthen NATO's deterrence and defense capabilities in support of its regional plans. One specific step proposed in this report is that NATO and its member states should establish "integrated cyber and kinetic offense" as well as "assured provision in wartime of the private-sector space capabilities" (Kramer et al. 2024, p. 5).

Interestingly, the issue of hybrid warfare or hybrid threats seems to have receded further into the background as compared with the 2014 to 2021 timeframe. Shortly after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, with the appearance of the "little green men," hybrid warfare absorbed a lot of attention and triggered a substantial debate across the think-tank community in the US and other NATO countries. According to one prominent definition, hybrid warfare entails "use of military and non-military tools in an integrated campaign, designed to achieve surprise, seize the initiative and gain psychological as well as physical advantages" (quote from The Military Balance (2015) in Wither 2016, p. 76).

In the aftermath of Crimea's annexation, NATO allies decided that hybrid attacks on one member state could in principle trigger an Article 5 collective defense response. Eitvydas Bajarūnas, a high-ranking Lithuanian foreign affairs official and visiting fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) in Washington, complains that the Alliance still lacks a common understanding of when and how hybrid attacks could trigger Article 5. He urges NATO leaders to clarify this and proposes specific examples, such as severe cyberattacks that threaten to cripple essential infrastructure (including power grids or financial systems). Other examples proposed as triggers to invoke Article 5 include "coordinated hybrid operations" as well as "multiple forms of attack" (disinformation, economic coercion, cyber-attacks) (Bajarūnas 2025).

More recently, monitoring and protecting critical maritime infrastructure (pipelines, LNG terminals, undersea data and power cables) has also attracted more attention. One study by CSIS analysts proposes not only strengthening maritime forces – to include "traditional gray hull" as well as smaller vessels – but also working on national maritime strategies (Herdt and Zublic 2022, pp. 2–3). Societal resilience and "whole-of-society" approaches are another important aspect in dealing with hybrid threats. In this context, new NATO members Finland and Sweden are seen as model cases from which other allies could and should learn. As Frida Rintakumpu and Veera Parko write for the German Marshall Fund, "both countries promote citizen involvement in security through education, communication, and participation in civil or military duties" (Rintakumpu and Parko 2024). Such activities prepare societies to deal better with "weaponized migration" and disinformation campaigns, as well as to cope with even more severe disruptions and emergencies. Finally, enhanced EU-NATO cooperation is seen by some as critical when dealing with hybrid threats. Monaghan and his colleagues view the creation in March 2023 of the "NATO-EU Task Force on Resilience of Critical Infrastructure" as a positive example (Monaghan et al. 2024, p. 14).

Nuclear Deterrence and Arms Control

The return of great power conflict and Russia's onslaught against Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022 led to a renaissance of nuclear deterrence in international security discourse and practice. For NATO, too, nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence have increased in significance. This trend was reinforced when Russian President Vladimir Putin repeatedly issued nuclear threats in order to discourage NATO states from supporting Ukraine more openly. Nuclear sharing has become politically relevant again. Some NATO members, including Germany, finally took the decision to replace their aging fighter jets, earmarked for a nuclear mission, with fifth-generation F-35 jets. Meanwhile, the US has developed a new generation of air-delivered nuclear bombs, the B61-12, for NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement.

When it comes to nuclear deterrence, European NATO members are even more dependent on the US contribution than in the conventional sphere. While this nuclear dependency has been the subject of some debates in European capitals, it has not really sparked a sense of urgency. Extended nuclear deterrence, which implies that Washington is willing to defend its allies even with nuclear weapons, has been deeply rooted in the United States politically and institutionally. It has enjoyed broad support in the US Congress. Even the first Trump administration took specific steps to strengthen, rather than weaken, the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence. More recently, even the more radical approaches to burden-shifting in NATO do not question the US nuclear role in Europe or Asia.

Accordingly, some think-tank contributions have focused on how to strengthen NATO defense and deterrence with a reformed nuclear posture. The Alphen Group, which consists of leading security experts from the US (Stanley Sloan, John Allen, Ivo Daalder, Ben Hodges) as well as other allied nations, is among those that have addressed this issue. They suggest, inter alia, improving complementarity between conventional and nuclear forces and enhancing conventional

deep strike capabilities within NATO. This is seen as a necessary step to counter Russia's expanding and diversifying theater and tactical nuclear capabilities, i.e., weapons with lower explosive power and shorter reach (The Alphen Group 2025, p. 11). Some have also argued for the US to develop and deploy specific nuclear weapons in order to enhance the nuclear deterrent in support of European and Asian allies, such as a new sea-launched nuclear armed cruise missile (Kochis et al. 2022, pp. 5–6). Another recommendation concerns the cohesion and cooperation of NATO's three nuclear powers – the US, UK, and France. According to Nicholas Lokker and his co-authors from the Center for a New American Security, allies should encourage France to work jointly with the United States and the United Kingdom to foster greater cohesion in their respective nuclear planning — ideally by France joining the Alliance's Nuclear Planning Group (Lokker et al. 2023, p. 5).

Finally, there has been a debate among experts on whether and how eastern NATO allies should be included in the nuclear sharing arrangement (Donnelly et al. 2024, p. 1). The scope of these proposals varies. Some advocate that Poland (and potentially other eastern NATO countries) should acquire dual-capable aircraft and host US nuclear weapons on their soil (Peters 2023, p. 5). This has long been seen as a taboo within NATO. In 1997 the Alliance made a political commitment vis-à-vis Russia not to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of the – then – new member states.

However, in the light of the war in Ukraine and Russia's announcement that it would deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, the Polish government brought up the idea of including Poland in the nuclear sharing arrangements. Others find the option of deploying nuclear weapons close to Russia too provocative and suggest "softer" options, such as vetting and training Polish F-35 pilots for nuclear operations. "Those pilots are seconded to an existing NATO DCA [Dual Capable Aircraft] unit and operate as an integral part of that unit, including for nuclear missions" (Edelman and Miller 2024, pp. 4–5).

As is true for other NATO-related topics, the think-tank debate on nuclear deterrence has to some extent been overtaken by the radical policy shifts during the first two months of the second Trump presidency. Because nuclear weapons reflect a nation's great power status, Trump is likely to emphasize their importance in America's defense policy and to continue investing significant resources in modernization of these weapons. However, given his apparent desire to normalize relations with Russia, it is even less likely than previously that Washington will expand or otherwise strengthen NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements.

For similar reasons, it is even more unlikely than previously that France will be interested in moving closer to NATO's nuclear structures. On the contrary: in March 2025 French President Emmanuel Macron renewed his previous offers to talk about the role of France's *force de frappe* for European security outside of NATO. This time around, his offer might receive a warmer reception in Berlin and other European NATO capitals.

Arms control has only played a marginal role in the US expert debate, especially since Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022. The New Start Treaty is currently the last remaining major arms control treaty between the US and Russia. This treaty, concluded in 2011, did not simply stipulate numerical limits on nuclear warheads and long-range delivery systems on the Russian and US sides. It also created a comprehensive notification and verification regime. In 2023, Russia suspended its participation in the treaty. As Samuel Charap, John Drennan, and Julia Masterson from the RAND Corporation explain in a recent report, "there has been little to no bilateral dialogue between Moscow and Washington on strategic issues" since the Ukraine war (Charap et al. 2025, pp. 1–2).

Trump's apparent interest in improved relations with Putin's Russia might at first sight offer new opportunities for arms control initiatives. In the RAND authors' positive scenario, Russia and the US might continue to comply with central provisions of the New Start Treaty while pursuing negotiations for a follow-on agreement. The current treaty expires in February 2026. Other possibilities include reviving some aspects of the Treaty on Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF), for instance by establishing a moratorium on deployment of INF-range weapons in Europe. Finally, according to RAND, Russia and the US could "establish norms for military and security behavior in space" (Charap et al. 2025).

It remains to be seen, however, if significant arms control initiatives will really take off even if Washington's rapprochement with Russia continues. In the past there were many obstacles to such initiatives. Some of these, such as Alliance considerations, may play less of a role for Trump in future. However, China's nuclear rise and the trilateral arms control dynamic that it entails may still prove to be a major stumbling block. Mary Chesnut from the Center for Naval Analyses considers that US-Russian arms control might become less formalized and "may focus more on nuclear risk reduction than on strict counting limits" (Chesnut 2023, pp. 36–7).

Burden Sharing, Europeanization, and NATO's Internal Adaptation

There is a broad consensus in the US debate on NATO that Europe must step up its defense efforts. However, there are differing assessments concerning how (much) European states need to increase their financial and military contributions and what this means for NATO's structure.

Atlanticist-oriented commentators from both liberal and conservative corners have stressed the progress being made, especially the rising defense budgets of many European allies since 2022 and their substantial aid contribu-

tions to Ukraine (Quinville et al. 2024; Rough 2024, p. 25). Others think that these efforts fall far too short of what is really needed in terms of much more equitable burden-sharing across the Atlantic. For instance, Robert Greenway and Nile Gardiner think that Europe should spend as much on defense as the US in terms of GDP (Greenway and Gardiner 2024). This would amount to about 3.5 percent or more – a figure that is now already becoming the new yardstick in NATO debates.

Those impatient voices are generally also in favor of putting much more political pressure on Europe. One proposed way to do so is to create a burden-shifting roadmap with specific time frames and milestones – combined with the implicit or explicit threat of punishment if European states fall short of their commitments (Peters 2024, p. 19). Penalties could even include withdrawal of US troops from Europe or make US security guarantees conditional on how European states fulfill their commitments (Logan 2023, p. 15). Probably the most outspoken proponent of a "forceful" approach is Sumatra Maitra who has been seen as close to Trump's thinking on NATO. He distinguishes between burden sharing and burden shifting. "Burden sharing is a collaborative process .... Burden shifting is a unilateral exercise of power driven by American interests. It provides a rapid and firm timeline, forcing Europe to plan resources and alternatives" (Maitra 2023).

Another aspect of the burden-sharing debate addresses how to define the burden that is to be shared. Many of those who want Europe to spend more on defense view this aspect of the debate as a distraction. For them, it is the simplicity of taking the "military expenditure to GDP ratio" as the principal goal-post that makes it so attractive. Others hold that this simple metric does not adequately reflect NATO's needs and contributions. A recent RAND study proposes defining burden sharing in broader terms to include defense/non-defense inputs and outputs, such as the quantity and quality of armed forces, contributions to peacekeeping operations, and even the share of lost exports due to sanctions (Mallory et al. 2024, p. xi). Similarly Kathleen McInnis and Daniel Fata propose widening the burden-sharing metric beyond NATO's current methodology to include activities that are also critical for NATO security, such as peacetime preparedness and resilience (McInnis and Fata 2023, p. 1).

It remains to be seen how the most recent decisions by Germany and the European Union to significantly increase defense spending will affect the US debate. Will conservatives and conservative populists see these decisions as a game changer, demonstrating how Trump's threats to Ukraine and NATO have forced Europeans to step up? Will Trump and his followers now see NATO as a "better deal" than before?

While the burden-sharing debate is often cast in the narrower terms of financial contributions, it also involves a more structural and institutional dimension. The core question in this regard is whether European defense will be realized through the Europeanization of NATO, through a radically recast NATO or through something completely outside of it. Obviously, Atlanticist-oriented voices call for revitalization of NATO by strengthening its European pillar. The assumption here is that the US will remain the indispensable leader in the Alliance. In this spirit, the Alphen Group propose specific timelines and numbers to enhance European allies' share of NATO's combined operational capacity for collective defense (67 percent by 2035). They also propose creating a "European-led, division-strength, air, sea, and land force that by 2030 takes the Allied Response Force to a new level of capability to underpin deterrence by denial in all circumstances" (The Alphen Group 2025, p. 8).

Proposals for NATO's Europeanization include a reform of its Command and Control (C2) structure to ensure that the European allies take on more responsibility from the United States. However, as Luis Simon and others stress in a paper published by the Marathon Initiative, "any effort to expand Europe's influence in NATO's C2 architecture should respect the overarching principle of U.S. leadership, embodied in the position of Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR)" (Simon et al. 2023, pp. 12–3). In their view, a European SACEUR would weaken the credibility of US assurances while Europeans might be unable to agree on a replacement from their ranks. According to media reports, the Trump administration is indeed thinking about the option of replacing SACEUR with a European commander (Kube and Lubold 2025).

Another important aspect of NATO reform concerns the Alliance's decision-making process, which is based on the consensus principle, albeit informally for most topics. Some think-tank analysts consider allies such as Hungary and Slovakia as problems for the Alliance's ability to respond to the Russian challenge. Their idea is that the Alliance should introduce a majority voting procedure, especially in the context of critical Article 5 situations. Eric Edelmann, David Manning, and Franklin Miller stress that such a reform "would make it impossible for one member state to serve Russia's interests by insisting on the consensus principle, thereby paralyzing the Alliance's ability to defend an ally from Russian aggression" (Edelman et al. 2024). As Ira Straus points out, NATO has made decisions without consensus in the past, for instance by using a "silent procedure" or the "consensus minus one" rule (Straus 2023). In his view, it would be important to revive this kind of flexibility in NATO's decision-making. However, these reform proposals do not address a situation in which the major political and military power in the Alliance, the United States itself, becomes the major troublemaker.

Trump's return to the White House raises the prospect that NATO will face a much more radical overhaul or even an existential crisis. Anticipating a possible Trump return even before the 2024 elections, Max Bergman saw the status of NATO – whereby "NATO is organized around European forces essentially docking into a U.S.-led campaign plan" – as no longer sustainable. Instead, he recommends taking the

major steps needed to transform the Alliance from a US-led organization to a European-led one. Europe would not only have to create a stand-alone pillar within NATO but also implement a treaty reform "to enable the European Union to adopt a stronger defense role." With a second Trump administration, "Europe would have little choice but to make 'strategic autonomy' a reality" (Bergmann 2024, p. 10).

To date, promoting European strategic autonomy has clearly been a negligible minority position in the US debate. The need for a truly autonomous European defense policy would increase rapidly if the most NATO-skeptical voices in the US debate were to shape official policy under the second Trump administration. Within a strictly realist worldview, Maitra sees the United States' role in European security as being limited to an "offshore balancer" that "serves as a logistics provider of last resort and [...] as the final guarantor of free sea lanes and trade routes." In the longer term, the "likely creation of mini-ententes between various local powers and balancers may eliminate the need for a NATO-like transatlantic alliance altogether" (Maitra 2023).

The War in Ukraine

The US debate on the Ukraine war has shifted significantly over the course of the war since February 2022. Initially there was broad bipartisan support for President Biden's policy of helping Ukraine diplomatically, financially, and with weapons transfers. Between January 2022 and December 2024, Washington provided just under half of all military aid to Ukraine (EUR 64 billion of a total EUR 130 billion). The share of total aid, including financial and humanitarian support, was lower, but still substantial (EUR 114 billion of a total EUR 267 billion) (Kiel Institut für Weltwirtschaft. These numbers refer to sums actually allocated rather than mere commitments.)

Over time, opposition to this aid, initially limited to a small, right-wing group of Republicans in the US House of Representatives, broadened and became much more influential. As Trump tightened his grip on the Republican Party and even more so since his election victory in November 2024, the discourse rapidly shifted against further support for Ukraine. Instead, it has started to revolve more on how to end the war as quickly as possible even if this means accepting Russia's terms. At the beginning of Trump's second term, the prospect of Ukraine becoming a member of NATO is essentially off the table.

The policy shift on Ukraine is also reflected in US think-tank discourse. Between 2022 and 2024, the majority of analysts advocated for a strong US and allied support for Ukraine, defining the war in Europe and Russia's defeat in Ukraine as affecting core US interests. That was true for conservative as well as more liberal-leaning commentators and institutions. For instance, Luke Coffey from the Hudson Institute argued that a "Ukrainian defeat, on the heels of America's disastrous retreat from Afghanistan, will embolden Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela to challenge American influence around the globe" (Coffey 2024). He favored lifting restrictions on weapons transfers to Ukraine (and on how Ukraine might use these weapons). Many, if not all, commentators have argued for maximalist positions, underlining that Ukraine must win the war, which would include regaining full control over its territory in its 1991 borders (Brzezinski 2024).

After it became clear that Trump would steer a different course as president, than his predecessor Biden, some analysts made an effort to frame the US interest in Ukraine in terms more in line with Trump's transactional mindset. Elaine McCusker, Frederick W. Kagan, and Richard Sims from the American Enterprise Institute stress that ongoing support for Ukraine would be a "better deal" for the US than if Russia were to defeat Ukraine. "Right now," they write, "by providing aid to Kyiv, the United States is preventing Russia from directly menacing eastern and central Europe – something thatwould doubtlessly consume more American resources." The authors calculate that it would cost the United States an additional $800 billion in defense spending over five years in order to maintain "security in a strategic environment in which Russia is victorious over Ukraine" – many times of what the US has been spending on military aid for the country (McCusker et al. 2025, p. 1).

Beyond the aid issue, members of think-tanks have discussed at length the options and arrangements for offering Ukraine security guarantees – especially future membership of NATO. Most analysts agree that membership would only be possible after the war has ended. One point that has been subject to some debate, however, is how NATO should offer a "clear membership perspective."

One proposal has been to either offer Ukraine a Membership Action Plan (MAP), which is NATO's formal bureaucratic way to prepare a country for accession, or even a fast-track procedure that would bypass the MAP (Binnendijk and Franklin D. Kramer 2023). Steven Pifer, a former career diplomat and now associated researcher at Brookings, has been an influential voice on this topic. He proposed to start accession talks with Ukraine in order to work towards a formal invitation (Pifer 2023, p. 1). Some, like Peter Rough from Hudson, have argued that NATO should not wait to welcome Ukraine as a member state until there is a comprehensive peace agreement in place with Russia. "NATO's security umbrella could still be applied to the areas under the control of the Ukrainian Armed Forces when major operations cease" (Rough 2024, p. 26).

Republican circles criticized former President Biden for never managing to come up with a diplomatic "endgame" that would help end the Ukraine war. It is also true for most think-tank contributions that the focus has been on how Ukraine can defeat Russia rather than on specific diplomatic steps to end the conflict. Many ana-

lysts have shared the assumption that military support for Ukraine would eventually enable a peace that is lasting and just. Few have spent much energy, however, on discussing details and a specific pathway toward that end or on describing the possible trade-offs and dilemmas associated with it.

An article by Richard Haass and Charles Kupchan that was published in April 2023 in the *Foreign Affairs* journal (Haass and Kupchan 2023) was one notable exception. When it was published, Haass was president of the Council on Foreign Relations, while Kupchan was and is Professor of International Affairs at Georgetown University. Both argued that the Biden administration's approach of "as long as it takes" with regard to weapon deliveries would not work and that Kyiv would not be able to reconquer all of its territories. The two authors proposed to focus diplomatic energy on a ceasefire, creation of a demilitarized zone, and a role for the UN or the OSCE to monitor such a ceasefire. Should Russia violate the ceasefire, the US and its partners would increase arms deliveries to Ukraine again. Haass and Kupchan also suggested a diplomatic process akin to the "2+4" format that paved the way to German reunification. In this model, Ukraine and Russia would negotiate directly concerning a permanent end to the war, while the US and NATO would talk to Russia about broader European security issues such as arms control. Instead of NATO membership, Ukraine would be offered long-term military and financial support to ensure it would be able to defend itself. At the same time, the European Union would offer Ukraine a clear prospect of accession.

As Trump – first as presidential candidate and then as president – has promised to end the Ukraine war quickly, other commentators more closely aligned with the new administration also came up with specific proposals. A report by Keith Kellogg and Fred Fleitz, published by the America First Policy Institute in April 2024, caused quite a stir. Keith Kellogg was subsequently appointed Special Envoy for Russia and Ukraine by Trump (yet in March he was stripped of his Russia brief) and Fred Fleitz was a high-ranking official during the first Trump administration.

Trump has been – and remains – rather nebulous about his "strategy" to end the war in Ukraine. Against this background, many commentators and officials from the US and abroad took the paper as a guidepost on what to expect from a second Trump administration. Kellogg and Fleitz outline a strategy that echoes some of the central propositions made a year earlier by Haas and Kupchan. In addition, it emphasizes how lifting of sanctions against Russia and diplomatic normalization in the US-Russia relationship could serve as incentives for Moscow.

Most recently, a team of analysts from the Quincy Institute published a report that also details a "diplomatic endgame" for the Ukraine war. The authors suggest broadening the range of topics beyond Ukraine in order to achieve a breakthrough. For instance, the US and NATO could use their military posture in Europe as a bargaining chip. In that spirit, the United States could "expand or constrain its force posture in Europe depending on Russia's willingness to compromise over Ukraine," offer Moscow the prospect of returning to Western diplomatic forums or "play the China card." The latter would entail offering Beijing a "significant role in postwar reconstruction," a move that in the authors' view would be a "powerful disincentive for Putin to violate the terms of a settlement" (Beebe et al. 2025, p. 2). Ukraine would in turn have to accept "permanent neutrality" outside of NATO.

It is an open question, however, if Trump will act upon any of the ideas raised in think-tank reports or even pursue a coherent strategy at all. What is obvious is that he prefers direct negotiations with Russia over the heads of Ukraine and other European countries. However, even then, it is far from clear that Trump follows the classical script of great power bargaining. If Trump succeeds in brokering an end to the war, Ukraine will need credible security assurances. As the new US administration is unwilling to provide these assurances, this task will most likely fall upon the European part of NATO.

NATO's Engagement with the South

The Alliance has long sought to engage "the South," which has been defined in broad geographical terms to include the area from Western Africa and the Middle East to Central Asia. In 1994 it launched the Mediterranean Dialogue and ten years later the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (which includes several Gulf countries). NATO's shift towards Eastern Europe following the Ukraine war does not mean that the Alliance has abandoned its interest in the South. Quite the contrary: a year-long reflection process was launched at NATO's Vilnius summit in July 2023 on "existing and emerging threats, challenges and opportunities" in its southern neighborhood. A group of experts was tasked by the NATO Secretary General to lead this reflection process and to come up with specific recommendations. One tangible result of this reflection process was NATO's Southern Neighborhood Action Plan, adopted at the Washington Summit in July 2024. Moreover, the NATO Secretary General appointed, for the first time, a Special Representative for the Southern Neighborhood (NATO 2024).

US think-tanks have also contributed to this debate, sometimes inviting European analysts to write or contribute to reports on the topic. However, NATO's engagement with the South did not raise the same level of interest in the US as the war in Ukraine and the alliance's defense and deterrence posture in the east. To the extent that the South has been debated, discussions revolved around the kind of engagement that NATO should seek. Somewhat simplifying, it makes sense to distinguish between threat-oriented and development-oriented approaches (reflecting broader debates about the security-development nexus).

Threat-oriented analysts tend to focus on specific security challenges that NATO needs to address, such as the Russian and Chinese presence in Africa, terrorism, weapons proliferation, irregular migration, piracy and others. In this spirit, analysts such as Jason Davidson, Pierre Morcos, and Luis Simon refer to NATO's "southern flank" rather than its "southern neighborhood" (Davidson 2024). From this perspective, the task is to seek "360-degree deterrence" that covers east, north and south, even if the deterrence challenges vary from region to region. "While allies are strengthening their forward defense along NATO's eastern flank, including by deploying additional forces and capabilities, securing the southern flank requires a different approach based on rotational maritime presences in both the Mediterranean and the Black Sea" (Morcos and Simón 2022, p. 4).

Those, by contrast, who adopt a development-oriented view urge NATO to look beyond operational requirements or military crisis management and to focus instead on the strategic political level (Gerspacher 2024, p. 146). For these commentators, the most important task is to build long-term and inclusive partnerships that take each partner's interests and perspective seriously (Karp and Maass 2024, p. 7). A more holistic approach would aim to develop state capacity and civic institutions in African and Middle Eastern states in order to create stability. As NATO remains primarily a military alliance, this approach necessitates closer cooperation with other institutions, such as the EU and the United Nations (Droin et al. 2024). In their CSIS report, Mathieu Droin and his co-authors welcome NATO's recent "effort to move toward a demand-driven, cooperative approach that factors in 'local contexts'" (Droin et al. 2024).

It is safe to assume that the new Trump administration does not share an interest in a holistic approach towards NATO's southern neighborhood which, in any case, for most Americans smells a lot like "nation building." The latter concept is largely discredited in both political camps after experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. With Trump's decision to dismantle the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and his deep aversion to multilateral organizations and international bureaucracies, the US is currently moving in exactly the opposite direction. If Trump takes an interest in NATO's south at all, it will most likely be through the prism of fighting terrorism as well as securing critical minerals and other resources. Even then, Washington will in all likelihood not pursue its narrowly defined interests through NATO.

Summary

Salience of threats

Unlike all other NATO countries, the United States has had a global national security perspective. The US has defined security interests and entertained alliances or partnerships on a global scale. Since around 2015, the focus has shifted to great power competition with the following order of salience: China, Russia, nuclear weapons, Iran, and North Korea. From 2022 to 2024, tensions in relations with China and Russia were perceived in Washington as very high, with a high to medium risk of war. Nuclear weapons have become even more salient from a US perspective as Russia has issued nuclear threats toward NATO and China has started significantly enlarging its nuclear arsenal. In contrast, security concerns that have been traditionally associated with "the South" or the "arc of instability" – state failure, transnational crime, terrorism – have receded further into the background. Under the new Trump administration, security concerns from "the South" have been narrowly focused on the US' southern border and the topic of migration, policy areas in which NATO does not play a role. Trump has also initiated a significant policy shift vis-à-vis Russia, and it remains to be seen how this shift will impact the overall national security debate in the United States.

Summarizing Predominant Responses

Trump's radical foreign and security policy shift has created a widening gap between official policy and public debates as reflected in think-tank publications. NATO's value base as an alliance of liberal democracies has long been taken for granted by most analysts but is now seriously challenged by the most important Alliance member. In the 2022 to 2024 timeframe, deterrence-oriented views clearly dominated national discourse with regard to Russia (and China). In contrast, the second Trump administration is now redefining the relationship with Russia and lowering the threat perception. There has been a broad consensus among US analysts that European allies will have to share a greater part of the defense burden on the European continent. Under Trump, demands are becoming more radical and the approach is less cooperative and more confrontational (pivoting from burden sharing to burden shifting). One question that still remains open is whether the US under Trump will also abandon its hegemonic ambition in NATO and force Europeans to either create a truly European-led alliance or build defense structures completely outside of NATO. On Ukraine, US discourse has been shifting from support (even though it never was "all in" to begin with) towards "get out fast." Since Obama declared the US "pivot to Asia" in 2011, it has become a shared assumption in both political parties that China is the most relevant challenge and competitor for the US. As a consequence, Washington has put pressure on its NATO allies to take the China challenge more seriously and to adopt a more confrontational language and policy vis-à-vis the People's Republic. Most US analysts do not expect NATO to assume a military-operational role in the Indo-Pacific, however. Rather the idea is to relieve the US in the European theatre, allowing Washington to focus its conventional military resources on Asia.

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The Future of NATO – Country Report USA

NATO has been a key security pillar of German and European defence policy from the very outset. Since the end of the Cold War, however, it has undergone a series of international transformations and realignments, driven by developments in the global security environment and pressure from its own member states.

While the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has strengthened NATO's self-perception as a key guarantor of collective security, the change in US administration at the beginning of 2025 raises fundamental questions once again. What role will the US play in Europe's future security, and how might European nations respond to the situation?

This publication is part of a Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study entitled "The Future of NATO", which summarises and analyses the ongoing debates on the Alliance and current security challenges in 11 member and 4 non-member states. These country studies form the basis of an overarching publication which seeks to provide possible answers to the unresolved questions and propose potential scenarios for the future of NATO.

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