



NATO IN 2025 AND BEYOND: SUCCESS AND PERIL GO HAND IN HAND

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Against the backdrop of an impressive string of achievements, including the recent enlargements to Finland and Sweden, NATO is poised to remain the dominant force in the post-Russian invasion European security landscape. Indeed, NATO's self-styled description as "the most successful alliance in history" has never seemed more apt. (Stoltenberg, 2024). Yet questions and doubts about NATO's future are to resurface in 2025, possibly forcefully so: how will the Alliance cope with the return of NATO skeptic Donald Trump to the White House? And will Europe be able to meaningfully step in to compensate for a less Atlantic-oriented America? As the rise of populist nationalism is a key factor behind both America's returning temptation to go it alone (McConnell, Foreign Affairs, 2025) and the inclination of a growing number of European politicians to define strategic policy in narrow national terms, a crucial test for the coming years is to what extent a shared vision of Euro-Atlantic security is still possible – and what it would look like. The roles and agendas of both NATO and the European Union in the evolving political context remain open questions.

NATO's Previous Inflection Point

French President Emmanuel Macron's famous 2019 comment (The Economist, 2019) about NATO's "brain death" may have been an overstatement. Yet before Russian President Vladimir Putin's 2022 fateful decision to attack Ukraine, the Atlantic Alliance was undoubtedly undergoing one of its recurrent cycles of soul searching. President Macron was mainly referring to disagreements over Middle East policy. At the root of the crisis, however, were unprecedented questions about the US commitment to European security as well as

the growing tendency in Washington and other NATO capitals to pursue national agendas at the expense of transatlantic alignment.

The famous "raison d'être" question for NATO—first come to the surface after the fall of the Berlin Wall—was back on the table. Trump was on a mission to make the long-standing sticking point of burden-sharing the litmus test for future US support to NATO, revealing a predominantly transactional approach. The President's America First agenda looked at the Atlantic Alliance – disparagingly – as a relic of the past and a business of dubious value, not a strategic investment in America's own security. With NATO's record in Afghanistan showing all its limits well before the 2021 withdrawal, the notion of "European strategic autonomy" (EU Global Strategy, 2016) gaining steam, and discrepancies about the Alliance's exact priorities coming into plain sight, NATO's future looked anticlimactic at best.



Questions and doubts about NATO's future are to resurface in 2025

NATO Reborn

Since the outbreak in 2022 of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the largest and bloodiest inter-state military confrontation on the European continent since World War II, NATO has experienced nothing short of a formidable revival. Under the Atlanticist leadership of US President Joe Biden, but with significant impetus from European allies as well, the Alliance has reestablished its rationale as a collective defense agreement chiefly preoccupied with the territorial defense of

its members and with supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression. In addition to coalescing around a new strategic concept (NATO, 2022), which designates Russia as the “most significant and direct threat”, NATO has expanded to include thirty two members (from the original twelve in 1949), adding militarily capable Sweden and Finland to its lineup.

This latest round of enlargement is of major significance not only in that it signals that the security calculus of two key traditionally neutral countries has decisively changed, but in that NATO now shares a much longer border with its strategic adversary. In a major defeat to Moscow’s own self-declared aims, Russia’s assault on Ukraine has not stopped NATO expansion. It has, on the contrary, led the Alliance to buttress the line of containment in Eastern and Northern Europe. Sweden’s and Finland’s accession has also reduced the discrepancy between NATO and EU overlapping memberships, while prompting other neutral European countries to reassess the cost-benefit analysis of their status, sometimes adopting exceptions to complete neutrality and military non-alignment.

Since 2022, moreover, NATO has delivered an impressive series of consequential summits, including the 2024 Washington summit which marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the North Atlantic Treaty. The summit was substantive, not just celebratory (Moyer, 2024). The Alliance further operationalized its strategic doctrine while giving NATO structures a central coordinating role for Ukraine support. A growing number of NATO members have met the two percent defense expenditure over GDP benchmark established in 2014. And the Alliance has made strides towards better preparedness, including through the adoption of regional defense plans (Loorents, 2024).

Gathering Clouds

Turning to 2025 and beyond, NATO’s undeniable recent successes do not necessarily indicate a solid path forward. At the very least, the Alliance cannot afford complacency as various new challenges come to test it again. In particular, the credibility and durability of the US commitment are once again a major concern as Donald Trump returns to the White House with a self-declared plan to double down on its America First agenda; recent statements about Canada, Greenland, and Panama provide a taste of the disruptive approach the US President might adopt in key relationships. While it is true that during his first term President Trump ultimately did not pull the plug from NATO and actually increased America’s contributions to European security, the President’s transactional and unsentimental approach to the Alliance may nonetheless further erode its most important asset: trust.

Trump’s unpredictability when it comes to transatlantic relations, his compromise-oriented approach to Putin and Russia, and his predominant focus on China are prompting European leaders to prepare responses to partial US disengagement, with recommendations ranging from empowering the European Union to, at a minimum, strengthening NATO’s “European pillar” (Marrone, Aspenia, 2024). While positions differ greatly across European countries and depend on specific affiliations, influential voices believe that “more Europe” is the answer (Gonzales Laya et al, Foreign Affairs, 2025). Yet while it is long overdue that Europe seriously addresses the requirements of its own defense, it would be presumptive to conclude that America’s hesitations mean ipso facto that the time for Europe has finally come.

For starters, transatlantic tensions—and

NATO's history is punctuated by them—have been invariably accompanied by divisions among Europeans. From the crisis around the 2003 US invasion of Iraq to Trump's first term, European unity has been sacrificed by individual European leaders in the attempt to preserve bilateral ties with Washington. Some of the most militarily capable European countries, moreover, from Poland to the non-EU member UK, are also among the most reluctant to do completely without US leadership, however rocky the relationship with the sitting President may be. Furthermore, Eastern and Northern flank countries may disapprove of Trump's views of NATO and Ukraine but are unlikely to place all their bets on the EU instead. As a matter of fact, Sweden and Finland—long-time members of the EU—just recently made a strategic decision to join NATO. With a US administration holding antagonistic views of the EU and a US President keen on cultivating personal relationships with select European policy-makers, Trump's second term risks exposing intra-European divisions like never before.

The foreign policies of NATO and European countries were never fully aligned—even during the Cold War, when the challenge posed by the Soviet Union provided a powerful rationale for strategic convergence. Security and strategic orientations may now increasingly diverge as more and more countries elect populist leaders who often champion a narrow interpretation of the national interest and whose electoral success is driven in no small part by disillusionment with Western norms and institutions and with the European integration project. From Robert Fico's Slovakia to Viktor Orban's Hungary, through the political success of the Freedom Party in Austria, sizable European constituencies no longer subscribe to the beliefs that have guided Western thinking for decades. They instead share at least elements of President Putin's revisionist narrative— one denouncing the

West's double standards and the alleged excesses of Western liberalism, promising instead a return to a traditional social order and a more multipolar international system.

2025 and the following years will provide a crucial test as to the extent to which populism is a phenomenon of strategic and not just political consequence. The evolution of individual European leaders, notably Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni—a right-wing firebrand and Trump supporter who is also an advocate for NATO and the EU—will be a major aspect to follow. And so will the political changes that are expected in Germany in 2025 and in France in 2027. Despite Brussels's best efforts, including the appointment of Europe's first ever Defense Commissioner, the already daunting task of turning the EU into a security actor in its own right would become enormously more difficult with a combination of Euro-skeptic, sovereignty-conscious, and populist leaders sitting in key capitals. For its part, NATO would most likely also suffer from the rise of Trump-like politicians across Europe.

In fact, if more and more leaders across Europe and North America tolerate or enable the dismantlement of the increasingly disliked "international liberal order," the continuation of the West and Europe as security communities will itself come into question. Can NATO survive as a merely transactional alliance if the West's strategic interest is no longer identified with the protection of a transatlantic community united by principles and values but with the narrow agendas of governments putting their own country first? How can Europe reconcile America's growing focus on China and the Indo-Pacific with its own pressing Eurasian and Mediterranean challenges in a realpolitik world in which the distinction between democracies and autocracies is just one of many cleavages and not necessarily a defining one? At a minimum, an entirely new chapter will have to be written, one perhaps

more akin to the less liberal, more nation-centered history of the West before the Cold War, though hopefully a less conflict-prone version.

2025 may start providing clues as to how this new chapter will look. What is certain is that, in addition to very practical decisions about security policy, transatlantic coordination, and defense spending, in the following months transatlantic leaders will be called to make very consequential political choices that will define Europe and the West for decades to come.

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