

NATO AFTER THE SUMMIT IN THE HAGUE. STRATEGIC CHALLENGES AND REGIONAL ADAPTATION

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Edited by **Jakub Bornio**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper examines the current state and evolving policies of the North Atlantic Alliance in the context of the NATO Summit in The Hague. Drawing on the collective expertise of five authors, it addresses the key factors shaping the strategic environment in which NATO operates. The analysis is structured around four principal areas: first, the Summit in The Hague, its resolutions, and their implications in the face of threats emanating from Russia; second, the ambiguous policy of the Donald Trump administration, along with its underlying causes and consequences; third, the resilience of NATO member states in the Baltic Sea region, where the accession of Finland and Sweden has brought about significant geostrategic shifts; and fourth, NATO–Ukraine relations, which will be decisive not only for Ukraine’s resilience and survival in the face of Russian aggression but also for NATO’s own security amid mounting pressure from Russia.

NATO after the Summit in The Hague: Towards a Transatlantic Deterrence Initiative

- The NATO Summit in The Hague was minimalist in both form and content. However, the summit can still be considered a relative success for the Alliance, especially for Europe.
- The summit focused primarily on outlining an unprecedented increase in defence spending by the Allies, who agreed to spend 5% of GDP on defence, which includes 3.5% on core defence and 1.5% on resilience, innovation, cybersecurity, and infrastructure.
- To ensure transatlantic security, focusing on defence spending will not be enough. Therefore, NATO should

launch a Transatlantic Deterrence Initiative that would embrace a larger set of strategic deterrence and defence priorities and would complement the ongoing NATO support for Ukraine.

The dilemma of US strategic absence in Europe

- The multipolarisation of the global order is prompting the US to reconfigure its foreign policy, including its approach to its allies. In Europe, this poses a certain risk, given that the region's policy has been adjusted over the decades to the "peace dividend" approach, with full reliance on the US as a security guarantor.
- Russia's assertiveness and the US's ambiguous policy towards Moscow are causing the European allies to face strategic dilemmas.
- US policy can be interpreted through three, not necessarily mutually exclusive, lenses. Namely, that Donald Trump's ambiguous policy is aimed at pushing allies to take more responsibility for regional security; that he wants to re-establish a tripartite order of checks and balances with Russia and China, resembling Nixon's Cold War strategy; or that the US wants to completely reshape the global order, unveiling its neo-imperialist face.
- The core assumptions of US foreign policy are determined by domestic debates within the Republican camp: "Neo-Reaganists" and "restrained", whose ideas on US global engagement and policy towards Europe differ.

Baltic Sea, a "NATO lake"? A strategic, operational, and political assessment

- The accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO, combined with expanded military cooperation and deterrence measures, has strengthened NATO's dominance in the Baltic Sea region.

- The enduring presence of Russia – via Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg – and its capacity for hybrid and conventional disruption present a continued strategic challenge for NATO.
- The Baltic Sea is increasingly a NATO operational theatre, but the assessment of total sea control is premature and potentially risky. Persistent investment in deterrence, infrastructure security, and multinational coordination remains essential.

NATO-Ukraine cooperation – current prospects and future challenges

- The NATO Summit in The Hague represented a mixed outcome for Ukraine. Politically, it was a step back, but its decisions laid the foundation for practical steps to enhance Ukraine's security, which materialised in the form of the Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List (PURL) arms supply mechanism adopted by the US and NATO.
- Ukraine continues to see NATO membership as the ultimate security guarantee. The summit did not bring this prospect any closer, but the policy that Ukraine will become a member in some unspecified future did not change. The United States appear to have abandoned the idea of giving up the promise of Ukraine's NATO membership in exchange for a deal with the Russian Federation.
- Despite the delay in full membership, practical cooperation between NATO and Ukraine has substantially intensified since 2022. Its valuable battlefield experience, particularly in drone warfare, is being integrated into NATO doctrine and training, and its security is now viewed by officials as “an absolutely integral part of transatlantic European security”.

NATO AFTER THE SUMMIT IN THE HAGUE: TOWARDS A TRANSATLANTIC DETERRENCE INITIATIVE

Dominik P. Jankowski

Introduction

Before the NATO Summit in The Hague, the transatlantic relationship was tense. The US and Europe were on a collision course that could fundamentally transform transatlantic relations. Numerous issues triggered these clashes: from NATO to Ukraine, climate to trade, tech regulations to China.

Due to the self-inflicted transatlantic security crisis, the NATO Summit in The Hague was minimalist in both form and content. It concluded with a record-low five-point declaration¹. This approach was intended to avoid divergences and contentious issues between the European allies and Canada on the one hand, and the new US administration on the other. However, the summit can still be considered a relative success for the Alliance, especially for Europe.

The summit focused primarily on outlining an unprecedented increase in defence spending by the Allies. As expected, they agreed to spend 5% of GDP on defence, which includes 3.5% on core defence and 1.5% on resilience,

¹ See more *The Hague Summit Declaration*, NATO, 25 June 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm [25.07.2025].

innovation, cybersecurity, and infrastructure. This increase will serve to meet NATO capability targets and ensure the Allies can service the new regional plans approved during the 2023 Vilnius summit. It will also start the process of shifting the burden from the US to Europe.

This article focuses on four key issues needed to enhance transatlantic deterrence: defence investment commitment, military capabilities, containment strategy towards Russia, and an economic security agenda for NATO.

Defence investment commitment

At The Hague, the NATO members committed to increasing defence expenditure to 5% of GDP by 2035. Core defence spending is to account for 3.5% of GDP, calculated according to NATO's current methodology². This will be supplemented by 1.5% of GDP allocated to other defence-related objectives. These may include investments in the dual-use infrastructure vital for military planning, the protection of critical infrastructure, cybersecurity, innovation, the expansion of the defence industry, civil defence, and national resilience. At the same time, allies were obliged to present credible plans for reaching the 5% target, including a breakdown of annual spending increases. This is intended to prevent the situation that happened in the decade from 2014 to 2024, during which a sharp rise in defence spending occurred only in the final two years, with many countries achieving the goal at the last moment, in 2024.

At the same time, some experts fear that the massive increase in defence expenditure is fraught with dangers. According to Nick Witney, "for European countries, finding the necessary resources will have a huge impact on national economies, and perhaps even political stability. And,

² See more *Defence expenditures and NATO's 5% commitment*, NATO, 27 June 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49198.htm [5.08.2025].

perversely, a massive crash rearmament programme is as likely to hinder as to help the transformation of European defence, now generally accepted to be essential”³.

Indeed, most allies are currently not prepared to spend the equivalent of 5% of their GDP on defence. Most lack the economic wherewithal to achieve this spending. Many have relatively low economic growth rates that make it difficult to increase defence spending without painful off-sets in other budgetary categories, such as social welfare spending. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect countries that have struggled to reach a 2% defence spending target to credibly embrace a much higher target. Even with the political will, these countries face economic and societal constraints. In fact, as some experts underline, “without mutualisation of defence expenditure, the fiscal trade-offs implied by a 5% target would be indigestible for the public in many EU countries. The goal can be expected to lead governments to turn to creative accounting and handing over of decisions to their successors: ‘extend and pretend’ will likely become the norm”⁴.

Therefore, an innovative approach will need to be introduced to showcase that military expenditure stimulates aggregate demand, creates jobs, and drives investment, particularly during economic downturns. Two solutions are of particular importance for the European allies.

Firstly, in March 2025, the European Commission invited member states to activate the national escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact, which will provide them with additional budgetary space to increase their defence

³ N. Witney, *Too much, too fast: Europe's defence-spending tsunami is coming*, “ECFR Commentary”, 25 June 2025, <https://ecfr.eu/article/too-much-too-fast-europes-defence-spending-tsunami-is-coming/> [25.07.2025].

⁴ R. Beetsma, M. Buti, F. Nicoli, *How Europe can live with NATO's ill-conceived defence spending target*, Bruegel, 1 July 2025, <https://www.bruegel.org/first-glance/how-europe-can-live-natos-ill-conceived-defence-spending-target> [25.07.2025].

spending, within the EU fiscal rules. This move is expected to leverage up to 650 billion EUR across the EU. However, to ensure fiscal sustainability over the medium term, the deviation from the recommended net expenditure path will be limited to a maximum of 1.5% of GDP of additional defence expenditure for each year of activation up to 2028.

Secondly, European officials have considered setting up an intergovernmental financing vehicle for defence that could issue bonds backed by national guarantees from participating countries. Participation in the fund would be voluntary and open to non-EU states like the UK and Norway, bypassing EU restrictions on using common funds for military purposes. Four proposals to scale up public institutional lending are currently on the table. First, to build on national promotional bank institutions. Second, to establish a European Defence Mechanism (EDM) to coordinate procurement. Third, to create a European Rearmament Bank (ERB) modelled on the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Fourth, to establish a global Defence, Security, and Resilience Bank (DSR) which would be open to allies across both the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions⁵. The proposals are not mutually exclusive and build on the principle of competitive tendering without national preference in arms contracts.

Advancing capabilities for deterrence and defence

NATO has needed to reprioritise the threat of conflict with a revisionist, risk-taking, militarily capable, and nuclear-armed Russia, which has committed itself to a war economy and increasingly appears enabled by the technological, industrial, and economic support of Belarus, China, Iran,

⁵ P. Taylor, *Banking on Defence: Can a dedicated bank solve Europe's rearmament financing dilemma?*, European Policy Centre, 22 May 2025, <https://www.epc.eu/publication/banking-on-defence-can-a-dedicated-bank-solve-europes-rearmament-financing-dilemma/> [26.07.2025].

and North Korea. As Angus Lapsley and Pierre Vandier underline, “NATO allies need to rediscover some of the disciplines and structures of the Cold War era – in particular how to fight together at scale, fight at home, and manage deterrence. This means something closer to Cold War levels of effort in terms of finance, people, technology, and industrial planning. It is a return to the Alliance’s original DNA”⁶.

What does it mean in practice? Three elements come to the forefront. Firstly, NATO’s forces need to be larger, have more firepower, be able to prevail in all five domains (land, air, sea, cyber, and space), be able to coordinate and harness all of that in a fully integrated way, and be able to operate across a NATO territory that is a lot larger than it was during the Cold War. All of this needs to be possible in an environment where the Alliance would certainly be subject to attempts at nuclear coercion, as well as sophisticated attempts to disrupt its information environment and the security of the territory through which its logistics and enablement flow.

Secondly, NATO must prioritise systems thinking, integration, and data interoperability within a unified, multidomain digital architecture. This approach is vital to ensuring that collective defence and deterrence capabilities are effective and adaptable to the complexities of modern warfare. These measures can significantly enhance NATO’s deterrence posture by leveraging technology to achieve mass and counter emerging threats. Success hinges on developing common standards, fostering interoperability across national systems, and creating a robust digital ecosystem that facilitates seamless data flow and decision making.

⁶ A. Lapsley, P. Vandier, *Why NATO’s Defence Planning Process will transform the Alliance for decades to come*, Issue Brief, Atlantic Council, 31 March 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/why-natos-defence-planning-process-will-transform-the-alliance-for-decades-to-come/> [26.07.2025].

Thirdly, NATO must make smarter, faster decisions about what capabilities to acquire and how to integrate them within a multidomain force design. Currently, the key capabilities needed include air and missile defence, artillery systems, deep strike weapons, drones and counter-drone systems, and strategic enablers, as well as command and control systems. Every acquisition and force-development decision should be driven by a clear understanding of why it is needed, when it is needed, where it will be deployed, and what mission outcomes are expected. Only by focusing on these key factors can NATO build the warfighting capability and capacity needed for future success within the urgent timelines required.

Containing Russia

At the 2024 NATO Summit in Washington, DC, allies agreed to “develop recommendations on NATO’s strategic approach to Russia, taking into account the changing security environment”⁷ for the next summit in The Hague. This issue was shelved in the run-up to the Hague meeting as it proved difficult to get the US to agree that Russia is a threat at all, let alone how NATO should approach Russia going forward. However, greater strategic clarity is paramount as allies embark on the process of reaching the new defence spending target. To convince European societies that 5% of GDP on defence is necessary, one needs a clear description of the threat and a comprehensive strategy to constrain it. It cannot be denied that NATO and Russia will likely remain antagonists for years to come. The Kremlin possesses immense disruptive global power and is willing to take great risks to advance its geopolitical agenda, including potentially even risking a land incursion into NATO territory.

⁷ *Washington Summit Declaration*, NATO, 10 July 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm [27.07.2025].

A modern containment policy has at least two advantages as a contemporary strategy toward Russia. First, because Russia is expansionary, the spread of Russian political and military power can either be accepted as unavoidable, or it can be contained – within and outside of Ukraine. To accept an expansionary Russia in Europe would be to undermine the foundations of the liberal international order based on sovereignty and territorial integrity. As James Goldgeier underlines, “as long as Russian imperialism lies at the heart of Kremlin policy, the West’s response has to be some version of containment”⁸.

Secondly, containment, if carefully pursued, will keep escalation in check. It will not tip over into calls for regime change, and it will take into account the reality that Putin’s Russia is a nuclear power that also maintains both the conventional capacity as well as the hybrid warfare toolbox to inflict enormous damage on Europe. There is sufficient evidence that Russia is, indeed, containable. When faced with a superior force and resistance, Putin often backs down, as he has from multiple threats of retaliation over US and European support for Ukraine. Containment is not the absence of escalation – it is escalation within strategic and discursive limits.

A modern containment policy should aim to deter Russia militarily, raise the cost for Russia of its destabilising behaviour, including by fortifying deterrence-by-punishment measures against Russia (e.g., sanctions, asset seizures, and cyber offense), and also decouple and isolate Russia from the international community, politically and economically, until Moscow has earned the right to be considered a partner once more. NATO should use its military and non-military instruments of power to achieve this goal. Innovative solutions, such as adopting a NATO economic deterrence

⁸ J. Goldgeier, *No Choice but Containment*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 November 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/11/30/no-choice-but-containment-pub-91149> [2.08.2025].

agenda, should also be introduced. Alexander Vershbow also points out that such a comprehensive strategy “also means taking a patient, long-term approach to the promotion of internal change in Russia. While it may be a generation before such change happens, we should be prepared to act quickly when the Russian people themselves demand leaders who are ready to return to the path of cooperation and integration that Putin has abandoned”⁹.

Economic security agenda

To gain a strategic advantage over competitors and adversaries, there is a critical need for a more coordinated transatlantic approach. Robust economic security instruments can play a key role in complementing military and political means of achieving traditional transatlantic security objectives, including through deterring coercive activities. Fortifying economic deterrence should be a central pillar of NATO’s strategy to enhance transatlantic security. NATO is well-positioned to address economic security issues, supporting the development of credible deterrence while complementing, rather than duplicating, the efforts of the EU.

Firstly, NATO should rebuild economic security capabilities at NATO Headquarters. The dissolution of the Economic Committee in 2010 has left a significant gap in NATO’s capability to conduct thorough economic analysis. This gap can be addressed by establishing a new internal mechanism and a structure dedicated to the coordination of economic topics. This would prevent the duplication of efforts and ensure a unified approach to economic policy, which is essential for managing long-term strategic competition.

⁹ A. Vershbow, *Russia policy after the war: A new strategy of containment*, Atlantic Council, 22 February 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russia-policy-after-the-war-a-new-strategy-of-containment/> [2.08.2025].

Secondly, NATO should strengthen global partnerships. In particular, NATO should enhance its existing strategic partnerships with the EU and Indo-Pacific countries and form new ones, particularly focusing on economic security. Establishing a dedicated task force between these three existing groupings could address shared challenges more effectively. Additionally, fostering relationships with organisations like the OECD, the World Bank, and the European Investment Bank would bring additional value.

Thirdly, NATO should leverage the economic security agenda to synchronise military and non-military instruments of power. In the coming years, NATO will need to better integrate private-sector capabilities across domains, expand industrial base capacity, and protect critical infrastructure from kinetic and non-kinetic attacks.

NATO's renewed focus on economic security should also lead to initiating programs to enhance the security of critical economic infrastructure, particularly in high-tech industries, energy, and telecommunications. Additionally, it should promote joint research initiatives focusing on crucial technologies and prioritise efforts to enhance the transatlantic defence industrial base. These efforts will help boost defence production, strengthen supply chains, increase stockpiles of strategic systems, and improve the quality and quantity of the allied military workforce.

Conclusions and recommendations

It cannot be denied that the NATO Summit in The Hague became a single-issue meeting. Contrary to the two previous summits in 2023 and 2024, it did not outline a clear strategy for the Alliance for the years to come. To ensure transatlantic security, focusing on defence spending alone will not be enough.

Therefore, NATO should launch a Transatlantic Deterrence Initiative¹⁰ that would embrace a larger set of strategic deterrence and defence priorities and would complement the ongoing NATO support for Ukraine. The Transatlantic Deterrence Initiative should focus on four key elements:

- implement the 5% defence investment commitment;
- advance capabilities needed for a credible NATO deterrence and defence posture;
- develop a comprehensive policy for containing Russia;
- develop an economic security agenda for NATO.

Disclaimer: The views in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the institutions he represents.

¹⁰ A term coined by the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. See more *Declaration 496 – Taking NATO Deterrence and Defence to the Next Level at The Hague Summit*, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 26 May 2025, <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2025-declaration-496-taking-nato-deterrence-and-defence-next-level-hague-summit> [25.07.2025].

THE DILEMMA OF US STRATEGIC ABSENCE IN EUROPE

Jakub Bornio, Marek Stefan

Introduction: Research problem, research objective

In the fourth decade following the collapse of the bipolar world order, transatlantic relations are at a critical juncture. The international system is currently experiencing significant transformations, characterised by the mounting influence of China and the growing assertiveness of Russia. The unipolar moment, i.e., the system based on the primacy of the United States (US), is evolving, which, from Washington's perspective, poses the risk of the US losing its global influence. The war in Ukraine, particularly its large-scale phase, has brought to the fore the fragility of the regional security system in Europe and the gravity of the threat posed by Russia. This occurrence coincides with the United States' declaration of its strategic focus on the threat posed by China (pivot to the Pacific). It would be a gross oversimplification to assume that the security situation in these two areas is unrelated. However, the limited resources of the US and the sometimes open articulation by its representatives of prioritising the Pacific at the expense of Europe creates a dilemma for the US's European allies of strategic loneliness. This dilemma has become even more pronounced in the face of the ambiguous policy of Donald Trump's administration.

In this chapter, the potential and most likely causes of US policy towards Europe in the era of multipolarisation are analysed. They do not always constitute an alternative set of mutually exclusive options. It should be noted that this list is by no means exhaustive. In certain instances, the question of the consequences of these actions for Europe is also addressed, and possible scenarios for the withdrawal of some US troops from Europe are presented. The present study adopts a neorealist paradigm, focusing on structural causes originating from the international system¹. However, given that theories of international relations are merely simplified models of reality, which generate cognitive limitations, the analysis is supplemented with internal factors, including, primarily, the ongoing debate within the Republican Party on the vision of US foreign policy. The chapter is founded on the rational choice theory, which is employed for the purpose of foreign policy analysis².

Geopolitical background

The return of Donald Trump to the US presidency on 20 January 2025 marked a qualitative shift in the manner in which the US conducts its foreign policy towards its allies. A series of decisions taken in the first months of his term gave rise to ambiguity in interpretation among both politicians and analysts. The aforementioned decisions were predominantly associated with the US customs regime, which encompassed not only antagonistic countries but also US allies, including Canada, the European Union (EU), Israel, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. The key decisions regarding the imposition of

¹ E.g., K.N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979, and other works by this author.

² M. Breuning, *Foreign Policy Analysis: A Comparative Introduction*, New York 2007; Ch. Pursiainen, T. Forsberg, *The Psychology of Foreign Policy*, London 2021, pp. 47–87.

tariffs on allied countries were those to impose 25% export tariffs on Mexico and Canada from 1 February 2025³ and to impose “retaliatory tariffs” at various rates from 2 April 2025 (so-called “Liberation Day”) on a group of 57 US trading partners⁴. It is evident that a number of these and other customs decisions were introduced in an unstructured manner, subsequently announced and then suspended for a specified period of time. In certain instances, the classification of goods subject to sanctions has been subject to alteration. The tariffs were imposed on goods from both countries with which the US has a trade deficit and those with which it has a trade surplus. This has had a detrimental effect on the already challenging process of interpreting the trade policy, and more generally, the foreign policy, of the Trump administration, which has been explained far too often on the basis of foreign policy exclusively.

A further qualitative shift occurred in the domain of security policy, notably with respect to the European theatre of operations. The core of the matter pertained to a revision of the extant policy of support for Ukraine. The stated objective of this revision was to bring about a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine, an objective which had thus far proven ineffective. In the initial months of his presidency, it was evident that Trump’s foreign policy placed a premium on fostering ties with Russia, thereby marginalising Ukraine in both the narrative and diplomatic spheres. The inaugural telephone conversation between the Russian and US

³ The White House, *Imposing Duties to Address the Flow of Illicit Drugs Across Our Northern Border*, 1 February 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/imposing-duties-to-address-the-flow-of-illicit-drugs-across-our-national-border/> [3.08.2025].

⁴ The President of the USA, Executive Order 14257 of 2 April 2025: *Regulating Imports With a Reciprocal Tariff To Rectify Trade Practices That Contribute to Large and Persistent Annual United States Goods Trade Deficits*, “Federal Register”, 7 April 2025, vol. 90, no. 65, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2025-04-07/pdf/2025-06063.pdf> [3.08.2025].

presidents transpired on 12 February 2025⁵, with this format being repeated on several subsequent occasions⁶. Consequently, a meeting was held on 18 February 2025 between a US delegation led by Secretary of State Marco Rubio and a Russian delegation led by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. These constituted the inaugural official meetings and publicly announced dialogues between the leaders of the two countries since the commencement of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine. The dialogue was initiated without any preconditions being imposed on Russia or any clear concessions being made by it. The bilateral negotiations on the war in Ukraine represented a deviation from the prevailing US doctrine on the matter, as previously established by President Joe Biden, which stipulated that any decisions pertaining to the conflict must be made in consultation with Ukraine⁷. Not only Ukraine but also the European part of NATO was excluded from the initial phase of crisis consultations, which prompted negative reactions from political leaders. The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Kaja Kallas, articulated her stance on the matter in a distinctly indignant manner, asserting that "It is clear that any deal behind our backs will not work. You need the Europeans, you need the Ukrainians" and referring to the US policy as the policy of appeasement⁸. All these efforts eventually led to the Trump–Putin summit in Alaska,

⁵ President of Russia, Telephone Conversation with US President Donald Trump, 12 February 2025, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/76259> [3.08.2025].

⁶ Further talks were held on 18 March, 19 May, and 14 June 2025.

⁷ J. Biden, *What America Will and Will Not Do in Ukraine*, "The New York Times", 31 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/opinion/biden-ukraine-strategy.html> [3.08.2025].

⁸ E. Giordano, *EU's Top Diplomat Accuses Trump of "Appeasement" with Putin*, "Politico", 13 February 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/kaja-kallas-donald-trump-vladimir-putin-russia-war-in-ukraine-peace-deal/> [3.08.2025].

followed by D. Trump's meeting with V. Zelensky and other European leaders⁹.

The critique directed at European countries, particularly concerning their perceived inefficacy from the standpoint of the United States, was prominently articulated in the address delivered by US Vice President James David Vance at the Munich Security Conference on 14 February 2025¹⁰. This provoked a series of anxious responses from European leaders, who initiated a series of ad hoc diplomatic measures, including the meetings organised by French President Emmanuel Macron¹¹. At the same time, the Trump administration exerted constant pressure on Ukraine, as demonstrated by its refusal to designate Russia as an aggressor, its controversial vote at the United Nations¹², an incident during the meeting between Presidents Zelensky and Trump at the White House¹³, the suspension and subsequent announcement of restrictions on future military aid to Ukraine,

⁹ See more on the summit and its outcomes in: <https://ies.lublin.pl/en/comments/extraordinary-meeting-of-european-leaders-with-u-s-president-donald-trump-prior-to-the-russia-united-states-summit-in-alaska/> and <https://ies.lublin.pl/en/comments/diplomatic-manoeuving-over-the-question-of-peace-in-ukraine-the-trump-putin-and-trump-zelensky-meetings/> [28.08.2025].

¹⁰ J.D. Vance, *Munich Security Conference Speech*, 14 February 2025, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2025/02/14/full_speech_vice_president_jd_vance_addresses_munich_security_conference.html [3.08.2025].

¹¹ J. Bornio, A. Tatarenko, *Europejska (nie)jedność. Szczyt w Paryżu a wyzwania dla bezpieczeństwa regionalnego*, "Komentarze IEŚ" 2025, no. 1297, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/europejska-niejednosc-szczyt-w-paryzu-a-wyzwania-dla-bezpieczenstwa-regionalnego/> [3.08.2025].

¹² On 24 February 2025, the United States voted against Resolution (A/ES-11/L.8) of the 11th extraordinary session of the UN General Assembly, which condemned Russia for invading Ukraine. On the same day, the UN Security Council presented Resolution 2774, which called for an immediate end to the war, but without pointing to Russia as the aggressor.

¹³ C-SPAN, Full Meeting between President Trump, VP Vance, and Ukrainian President Zelensky in Oval Office, 28 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7pxbGjvcdyY> [3.08.2025].

including intelligence support, and the conditional provision of support upon the conclusion of an agreement on mineral resources under specific conditions¹⁴.

Significant changes or announcements of changes also concern material military support and US involvement in Europe. Since the resumption of his presidential term, the administration under Donald Trump has repeatedly suspended military assistance to Ukraine, mostly on a temporary basis. The first such occurrence transpired a mere week after his inauguration, at which time the delivery predominantly of artillery shells, which had been approved by the preceding president, Joseph Biden, was suspended¹⁵. In early July 2025, the Department of Defence formally declared the cessation of deliveries of PAC-3 missiles, Hellfire missiles, and guided artillery ammunition, amongst other military supplies. Elbridge Colby, Undersecretary of Defence for Policy (and considered to be a proponent of the limitation of military support for Ukraine, as outlined in the subsequent subchapter), elucidated that this did not signify a total cessation of assistance. Rather, it pertained to the necessity of assigning precedence to alternative domains of activity that impacted US security¹⁶. However, it should

¹⁴ *Agreement between the Government of Ukraine and the Government of the United States of America on the Establishment of a United States-Ukraine Reconstruction Investment Fund*, 30 April 2025, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/storage/app/uploads/public/681/33c/e8f/68133ce8f2e82842702204.pdf> [3.08.2025].

¹⁵ *Pentagon Stopped Ukraine Military Aid Shipments in February Without Trump's Approval*, "The Guardian", 6 May 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/may/06/canceled-ukraine-military-aid-shipments-trump-hegseth> [3.08.2025].

¹⁶ "Department of Defense continues to provide the President with robust options to continue military aid to Ukraine, consistent with his goal of bringing this tragic war to an end. At the same time, the department is rigorously examining and adapting its approach to achieving this objective while also preserving U.S. forces' readiness for administration defense priorities". F. Tanyos, *U.S. Halting Some Weapons Shipments to Ukraine, White House Says*, "CBSNews", 2 July 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-halting-some-weapons-shipments-ukraine/> [3.08.2025].

be noted that this decision did not only concern Ukraine and was presented as part of a broader review of the US's ability to supply this type of weaponry to other countries as well¹⁷. Despite the fact that, after only a few days, Donald Trump announced that defensive weapons supplies would continue, such action by his administration raised legitimate concerns about the nature of the US partnership with its allies in Europe¹⁸.

Furthermore, the long-term financing and future of the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) remain uncertain. As recently as 2023, Austin Dahmer, the Deputy Under Secretary of Defence for Policy, advocated for the limitation or complete abandonment of the EDI, with a view to the allocation of the freed-up funds to the Indo-Pacific region¹⁹. Circles associated with E. Colby have been known to explicitly advocate for a reduction in the military involvement of the United States in Europe²⁰. In the course of delivering the FY '26 National Defense Budget, the request was made for

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ In accordance with reports disseminated by CNN, Defense Secretary Peter Hegseth proceeded with the suspension of deliveries, seemingly without prior consultation with the president. See N. Bertrand, Z. Cohen, *Hegseth Did Not Inform the White House Before He Authorized Pause on Weapon Shipments to Ukraine, Sources Say*, "CNN", 8 July 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/07/08/politics/hegseth-did-not-inform-white-house-ukraine-weapons-pause> [3.08.2025]. This can be interpreted as yet another manifestation of divergent views on US foreign policy within the Trump administration itself, which is in turn part of a broader debate taking place throughout the Republican camp. An alternative interpretation could be the intentional creation of an impression of unpredictability and controlled chaos, which could bring certain benefits in terms of negotiation strategy.

¹⁹ A.J. Dahmer, *Resourcing the Strategy of Denial: Optimizing the Defense Budget in Three Alternative Futures*, The Marathon Initiative, 1 February 2023, p. 18, https://themarathoninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/FINAL_Resourcing-the-Strategy-of-Denial_Dahmer.pdf [3.08.2025].

²⁰ J. Kavanagh, D. Caldwell, *Aligning Global Military Posture with U.S. Interests*, Defense Priorities, 9 July 2025, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/aligning-global-military-posture-with-us-interests/> [3.08.2025].

a level of 2.4 billion USD for EDI funding²¹. This represents a reduction of almost 18% from the budget allocated to this initiative the previous year²². However, it should be noted that EDI funding had already been reduced in previous years during Joe Biden's presidency²³, although this was not solely determined by political factors. Operations undertaken under the auspices of EDI (particularly the deployment of troops on NATO's eastern flank) necessitated increased funding, especially during their initial stages, for operational development and logistics. Subsequent years witnessed a reduction in these costs. The Trump administration is currently engaged in a review of US global engagement, termed the Global Force Posture Review. According to certain reports, this review may result in a reduction of up to 30,000 US troops in Europe²⁴. It is important to note that the Defence Budget also announced a reduction in funding for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which is one of the main instruments of US military support for Ukraine. Simultaneously, a substantial proportion of the budget was designated as being subject to ongoing review ("reconciliation")²⁵. In pre-

²¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Background Briefing on FY 2026 Defense Budget*, 26 June 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/4228828/background-briefing-on-fy-2026-defense-budget/> [3.08.2025]. For the purpose of comparison, the Department of Defense (DoD) requested funding for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative to the amount of 10 billion USD. See Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, *United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Request*, 1 July 2025, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2026/FY2026_Budget_Request.pdf [3.08.2025].

²² Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), *European Deterrence Initiative, Department of Defense Budget FY 2025*, March 2024, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/FY2025_EDI_JBook.pdf [3.08.2025].

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ C. Lunday, *Berlin Left in the Dark as Washington Weighs Troop Cuts in Europe*, "Politico", 28 July 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-guessing-trump-us-troop-cuts-europe-military-defense-pete-hegseth-boris-pistorius-nato/> [3.08.2025].

²⁵ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, *United...*, p. 5.

vious years, this part was allocated, among other things, to support Ukraine and Overseas Contingency Operations. The latter also made a financial contribution to the EDI. This may be indicative of a strategic intent to utilise this as a bargaining chip in negotiations with partners – see further in the sub-section on exerting pressure on Europe.

Debate within the Republican Camp and US Foreign Policy

In order to provide a comprehensive analysis of contemporary American foreign policy, it is essential to consider the various tensions and divergent viewpoints that exist among the different factions within the political sphere of President Trump. With regard to the views expressed by the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement on the purpose and form of further political and military involvement in Eurasia, two informal groups can be distinguished. These groups are attempting to gain dominant influence over President Trump and, consequently, over the shape of US foreign and security policy.

The first is a group that can be described as “neo-Realists” or neoconservatives. However, it would be an oversimplification to describe this group as supporters of the United States maintaining global primacy in the style of Washington’s policy at the height of the “unipolar moment”. For proponents of this particular standpoint, the period of territorial expansion of the Pax Americana has reached its culmination. The present moment, they argue, must be dedicated to the demarcation of the lines of the “empire”, with a concomitant increase in the involvement of allies, and the undertaking of measures to ensure domestic stability. This approach is seen as necessary in order to prepare for the anticipated rise in pressure, chiefly from China²⁶.

²⁶ S. Cropsey, *Why We Need a Trillion-Dollar Defense Budget*, National Review, 14 February 2025, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2025/02/why-we-need-a-trillion-dollar-defense-budget/> [3.08.2025].

The “Neoreagans” are proponents of maintaining America’s military involvement in Eurasia, particularly in three key strategic theatres of this supercontinent: Europe, the Middle East (with particular reference to the Persian Gulf region), and East Asia. This faction is predominantly comprised of neoconservatives affiliated with the Republican Party, who – if one bases their assumptions on Trump’s and his associates’ rhetoric – seem to be in a defensive position at present, increasingly marginalised by supporters of substantial changes in the United States’ foreign policy²⁷.

The second faction within the Republican political camp is a group referred to as the “restrained”. The “restrained” advocate for the limitation of the United States’ involvement, primarily of a military nature, in Eurasia. They propose that Washington should instead direct its attention towards the resolution of domestic issues, the fortification of borders, and the cultivation of influence in the Western Hemisphere²⁸. Other members of this informal group argue that the United States should focus its attention and forces on containing China. This would include increasing its military presence in East Asia at the expense of other strategic theatres, such as Europe and the Middle East²⁹.

The dispute between “neoconservatives” and “restrained” parties concerns issues such as the degree and form of threat posed by a group of countries demanding revision

²⁷ Conversely, Trump’s foreign policy is ambiguous. His support for Israel in its conflict with Iran, coupled with the deployment of nuclear capabilities in the UK, may suggest that the US does not want to distance itself from neoregionalists at this stage. It is important to acknowledge that the United States Congress continues to be significantly influenced by neoconservatives.

²⁸ S.P. Rosen, *A Better Way to Defend America: Base More U.S. Forces in the Western Hemisphere – and Fewer in Asia and Europe*, Foreign Affairs, 13 March 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/better-way-defend-america> [3.08.2025].

²⁹ E.A. Colby, *Only One Priority Makes Sense for American Foreign Policy*, American Compass, 10 July 2024, <https://americancompass.org/only-one-priority-makes-sense-for-american-foreign-policy/> [3.08.2025].

and changes to the international system. The countries in question are Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran. The deepening of economic and military cooperation between these countries in recent years has led to the emergence of terms such as “axis of autocracy” and “axis of revisionists” in the discourse of neoconservatives and supporters of US global primacy within the Democratic Party³⁰. The emphasis placed on the collaboration between these states was intended to provide a justification for the continuation and, even, the reinforcement of American military involvement in three primary geographical areas in Eurasia: Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. The withdrawal of the United States from one of these geopolitical areas could result in a weakening of deterrence in the other two strategic theatres, they argue. Consequently, there have been calls from supporters of maintaining American primacy and neoconservatives for the rapid rebuilding of the American military-industrial base (“arsenal of democracy”) in order to restore deterrence in all three of the aforementioned areas of Eurasia³¹.

Conversely, the “restrained” viewpoint perceives cooperation between the “axis of autocracy” as exaggerated. While acknowledging the existence of cooperation between Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, it is posited that this falls short of a formal alliance, particularly in comparison to the level of cooperation exhibited by Western countries within frameworks such as the G-7 or NATO³². Furthermore, a section of the “restrained” faction have

³⁰ B. Crane, *Hal Brands on the Axis of Autocracies*, The Wire China, 9 March 2025, <https://www.thewirechina.com/2025/03/09/hal-brands-on-the-axis-of-autocracies/> [3.08.2025].

³¹ M. Brown, *The Empty Arsenal of Democracy: How America Can Build a New Defense Industrial Base*, Foreign Affairs, 22 April 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/empty-arsenal-democracy-michael-brown> [3.08.2025].

³² D. DePetris, *There Is No “Axis of Autocracy”*, Defense Priorities, 1 July 2025, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/opinion/there-is-no-axis-of-autocracy/> [3.08.2025]. This may be confirmed by the lack of a coordinated response, as well as the weak nature of the unilateral reactions

expressed their consent with the proposal to rebuild the American industrial base. However, they have emphasised that this process will require decades to materialise and that the challenges posed primarily by China in the East Asian region necessitate immediate action. They advocate for the concentration of existing resources and means in the Indo-Pacific region, as opposed to their utilisation to support allies and partners in less significant areas of engagement such as Europe and the Middle East³³. The primary argument of the “restrained” faction in favour of the United States centring on containing China in Asia is firmly embedded in the neorealist paradigm of international relations³⁴. This constitutes the underlying rationale for American engagement in Eurasia, as articulated by neorealists such as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt. This engagement is predicated on the necessity to counterbalance the predominance of a regional power within one of the three pivotal theatres of Eurasia: Europe, the Middle East (particularly the Persian Gulf), and East Asia. The significance of these geopolitical regions is attributable to their pivotal function within the global economy, encompassing industrial activities and international trade. The domination of these states by a regional power would provide a basis for further geopolitical expansion towards global hegemony³⁵. According to proponents of neorealist

of the representatives of the “Axis of Autocracies” following the US attacks on Iran’s nuclear infrastructure on 22 June 2025.

³³ C.S. Chivvis et al., *Strategic Change in U.S. Foreign Policy*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 23 July 2024, https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Chivvis_Strategic%20Change_final-202407.pdf [3.08.2025].

³⁴ See references to neorealism, including J. Mearsheimer S. Walt, and R. Gilpin in: E.A. Colby, *The Denial Strategy: American Defence in the Age of Great Power Conflict*, Yale University Press, 2021, p. 22; *The New Republican Statecraft with Elbridge Colby*, YouTube, 24 October 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCfjIhAyZQw> [3.08.2025].

³⁵ J. Mearsheimer, *Liberal Hegemony & the Present Crisis in U.S. Foreign Policy*, YouTube video, 1:20:27, posted by Agora Institute at Johns Hop-

theory, the United States is the only nation that has successfully attained a position of regional hegemony, given its preeminence within the Western Hemisphere. From this standpoint, the primary objective of the US is to counteract any endeavours to establish additional regional hegemonies. The involvement of the United States of America in the Eurasian region during the 20th century was driven by this perspective. This involvement served to prevent Germany, Japan, and subsequently the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) from gaining dominance over significant strategic regions of Eurasia on two separate occasions³⁶. In this context, proponents of “restraint”, drawing upon neorealist theories, assert that China is currently the only regional power with both the capacity and the intention to achieve regional hegemony in East Asia. Conversely, neither Russia nor Iran possesses such capabilities within their respective regions. This, in turn, would justify a reduction in military involvement in these areas of Eurasia³⁷ and a transfer of greater responsibility to allies who, until now, have resembled “vassals” more than partners, with their political status being akin to that of a “protectorate”³⁸.

The core of the dispute between the “restrained” and neoconservatives regarding the vision and shape of American foreign and security policy lies in the understanding of the evolution of the international system and the global

kins University, 18 March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-bfV4CirSsg> [3.08.2025].

³⁶ C. Layne, *From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy*, “International Security” 1997, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 86–124.

³⁷ J. Kavanagh, D. Caldwell, *Aligning Global Military Posture with U.S. Interests*, Defense Priorities, 9 July 2025, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/aligning-global-military-posture-with-us-interests/> [3.08.2025].

³⁸ S. Maitra, *The Difference Between an “Ally” and a “Protectorate”*, The American Conservative, 28 June 2025, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/daddy-issues-2/> [3.08.2025].

balance of power. The dispute can also be interpreted as a clash between two different approaches to strategy. The first group defines strategy as a mutual and equal relationship between goals, means, and resources for their implementation. In contrast, the latter group defines strategy as a hierarchical relationship, where goals are superior to the means and resources available to the state, and the latter must be strictly adapted to the former³⁹.

It is not possible to state definitively whether President Trump is more in favour of the policy proposed by the “restrained” faction or the “neoconservatives”. The American attack on Iran in June 2025 serves as a prime example of the manner in which both ideological factions are engaged in a struggle for predominant influence over the president’s decision-making processes⁴⁰. In terms of foreign and security policy, it can, therefore, be posited that Donald Trump moves within a certain spectrum, with the “hawkish” neo-conservatives, who are mainly concentrated in Congress, on one extreme, and the “restrained” ones, who are attempting to build their position based on federal institutions such as the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) or the Department of Defence, on the other⁴¹.

³⁹ M. Stefan, *On Strategic Goals and the Means of Their Implementation*, Strategy&Future, 27 August 2024, <https://patronite.pl/post/68727/strategyfuture-o-celach-strategicznych-i-srodkach-ich-realizacji> [3.08.2025]. See also TVP World, *Prof. Andrew Michta Talks Europe, the U.S., and the War in Ukraine*, YouTube, 27 August 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHNhV2SW8t8> [3.08.2025].

⁴⁰ B. Smith, *Pentagon Split Over Trump’s Israel Policy*, “Semafor”, 14 June 2025, <https://www.semafor.com/article/06/14/2025/a-split-in-trumps-israel-policy> [3.08.2025].

⁴¹ M. Stefan, *On the Balance of Power in the Republican Camp in the Context of Foreign and Security Policy*, Strategy&Future, 22 April 2025, <https://patronite.pl/post/80407/o-ukladzie-sil-w-obozie-republikanow-w-kontekście-polityki-zagranicznej-i-bezpieczeństwa> [3.08.2025].

Selected plausible explanations and their consequences

Putting pressure on Europe

The primary rationale underpinning the Trump administration's approach towards its European allies is the hypothesis that it is intended to compel these nations to assume a more active role in the stabilisation of the regional and global security architecture. The United States is encountering challenges in maintaining its international preeminence, primarily due to the growing influence of China and the assertive policies of Russia. This is compounded by the country's own limited resources⁴². In various theatres of operation, it is, therefore, seeking to relieve its efforts and gain the support of countries willing to engage in maintaining the post-Cold War status quo with the US as its hegemon⁴³, or in reconfiguring it in a way that favours American interests. However, it should be noted that allied countries are not always willing to engage in such activities. With regard to Europe and the international reality prior to 2022, this pertained to the ambiguous policy of European allies towards Russia, particularly in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea⁴⁴, as well as the policy towards

⁴² See more R.D. Blackwill, R. Fontaine, *Lost Decade: The U.S. Pivot to Asia and the Rise of Chinese Power*, Harvard University Press, 2024.

⁴³ M. Mastanduno, *Partner Politics: Russia, China, and the Challenge of Extending US Hegemony after the Cold War*, "Security Studies" 2019, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 479–504.

⁴⁴ Among other things, doubts were raised about the continuation of the policy of some European countries prioritising Russia over Ukraine, their opposition to the militarisation of the eastern flank, their reluctance to spend on defence, their development of infrastructure projects with Russia (such as Nord Stream 2), their maintaining of a business-as-usual approach, and their pursuit of "Wandel durch Handel". See more T. Casier, *Not on Speaking Terms, but Business as Usual: The Ambiguous Coexistence of Conflict and Cooperation in EU–Russia Relations*, "East European Politics" 2020, vol. 36, no. 4, pp. 529–543; S. Rynning, *NATO: Ambiguity About Escalation in a Multinational Alliance*, [in:] S. Fröhling, A. O'Neil (eds.), *Alliances, Nuclear Weapons, and Es-*

China⁴⁵. In both instances, the US administration exerted pressure on its European allies to modify their respective policies in a manner consistent with the administration's own priorities⁴⁶.

In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it became evident that Europe's security is predominantly assured by the capabilities, guarantees, and authority of the United States. The policy of supporting Ukraine (to which the US was the main donor of weapons and ammunition⁴⁷) exemplifies this, as did the increasing of the size of the American contingent in Europe to deter Russia by a total of about 20,000, with a doubling of the number on NATO's eastern flank to almost 20,000⁴⁸.

The invasion of Ukraine triggered a substantial re-evaluation of Russia-related policies across a considerable number of European countries, leading to the conclusion that

calation: Managing Deterrence in the 21st Century, Australian National University Press, 2021, pp. 67–75.

⁴⁵ This is mainly in the context of economic cooperation, trade policy and joining the customs regime, as well as pushing Chinese suppliers out of the advanced technology market (5G).

⁴⁶ E.g., see the analysis by the Director of the EU Delegation to the PRC from 2014 to 2018: H.D. Schweisgut, *The European Union: Caught Between the United States and China*, "Politique Étrangère" 2021, no. 3, French Institute of International Relations, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/pe3_2021_article_schweisgut.pdf [3.08.2025]; A. Small, B. Glaser, G. Mohan, *Closing the Gap: US-European Cooperation on China and the Indo-Pacific*, February 2022, The German Marshall Fund of the US, <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Small%20et%20al%20-%20China%20Indo-Pacific%20-%20paper%20NEW.pdf> [3.08.2025]; H. Liu, *China-EU Relations in the Context of China-US Strategic Competition*, [in:] Y. Li, F.J.B.S. Leandro, J. Tavares da Silva, C. Rodrigues (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook on China-Europe-Africa Relations*, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore 2024.

⁴⁷ See the level of military support in: Kiel Institute for the World Economy, *Ukraine Support Tracker: A Database of Military, Financial and Humanitarian Aid to Ukraine*, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/> [3.08.2025].

⁴⁸ M. Carlough, B. Harris, A. McGowan, *Where Are U.S. Forces Deployed in Europe?*, Council on Foreign Relations, 27 February 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/article/where-are-us-forces-deployed-europe> [3.08.2025].

Russia represents a significant challenge to European security, if not a threat. In view of the profound shortcomings and years of neglect in the structure and capabilities of the armed forces of some European NATO countries⁴⁹, it has also become clear to political leaders that Europe's capabilities to deter Russia are insufficient. These concerns were further strengthened by the presidency of Donald Trump and the uncertainty it brought. The recent declarations pertaining to the cessation of military assistance to Ukraine, in conjunction with the anticipated non-compliance with the stipulations of the Washington Treaty by nations exhibiting inadequate engagement in the enhancement of NATO capabilities, have given rise to valid apprehensions concerning the security of the region and the exacerbation of the prospect of strategic loneliness. The prevailing uncertainty has been further compounded by the chaotic decision-making of the Trump administration (e.g., on customs policy and arms supplies to Ukraine), pressure in the form of tariffs imposed on allies, and revisionist rhetoric towards Canada and Greenland (Denmark).

In the scenario under consideration here, all of the above would be intentional actions aimed at compelling allies in Europe to undertake actions deemed desirable from the US perspective in order to satisfy the demands of the Trump administration. The chaos should be regarded as illusory. In reality, the controlled chaos, the announcements of the US withdrawal from Europe, or the ostentatious treatment of some politicians⁵⁰ would raise uncertainty and fears, which would then prompt allies to increase investment in their own security. This would alleviate the US's burden, potentially result in financial gains from arms acquisitions, or as evidenced by the case of Ukraine, culminate in the

⁴⁹ During the so-called "peace dividend" period, they became better suited to expeditionary missions than to their statutory defence objectives.

⁵⁰ See footnote 23.

establishment of an agreement that would partly compensate for American assistance⁵¹. In July 2025, the media published a recording in which Donald Trump is heard boasting that he had threatened to bomb Moscow in order to influence Vladimir Putin's perception of him⁵². This appears to confirm the hypothesis that the US president is using his unpredictability as a bargaining chip.

The mere announcement of Trump's actions had the desired effect, even before his re-inauguration. By the close of 2024, the declarations had already prompted an intensified discourse on the mandatory increase in military expenditure by NATO countries, the establishment of the so-called European Big Five format, enhanced military assistance to Ukraine, and the emergence of the French concept of security guarantees for Ukraine in the event of a forced peace plan⁵³. In the subsequent period, analogous initiatives only intensified. Following the Zelensky-Trump-Vance meeting at the White House on 2 March 2025, a summit was convened in London, leading to the establishment of the so-called coalition of the willing format. In the aftermath of the NATO Summit in The Hague on 24–25 June 2025, the allies committed to an increase in military expenditure to 5% (*de facto* 3.5%). The July 2025 disagreement over the suspension of US arms supplies to Ukraine led to a declaration by Germany to purchase two Patriot systems and Norway to purchase one.

⁵¹ *Agreement between the Government...*

⁵² A. Cancryn, *Trump Said He Threatened to Bomb Moscow if Putin Attacked Ukraine, 2024 Fundraiser Tapes Show*, "CNN", 8 July 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/07/08/politics/trump-tape-putin-bomb-fundraiser> [3.08.2025].

⁵³ J. Bornio, *Wzmożenie w zakresie inicjatyw dotyczących bezpieczeństwa w Europie – efekt Trumpa?*, "Komentarze IEŚ" 2024, no. 1257, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/wzmozenie-w-zakresie-inicjatyw-dotyczacych-bezpieczenstwa-w-europie-efekt-trumpa/> [3.08.2025].

Reversed Nixon

In certain respects, the approach adopted by the Trump administration in regard to its European NATO partners appears to bear some similarities to the strategy previously employed by President Richard M. Nixon in how it deals with its allies in Asia.

Nixon's victory in the presidential election occurred during a period of significant socio-political crisis in America, a situation that was exacerbated by the ongoing war in Vietnam. The Republican dedicated a substantial portion of his presidential tenure to the objective of ending and withdrawing the United States from the conflict⁵⁴, with a view to rebuilding America's potential. A fundamental element of the strategy was to establish détente in relations with the USSR, whilst concomitantly fostering new relations with the People's Republic of China. A lesser-known aspect of Nixon's vision for US foreign policy is the so-called "Guam Doctrine", also referred to as Nixon's Doctrine, which was announced in 1969⁵⁵. In straightforward terms, the core of the doctrine was Nixon's intention to reduce America's engagement in the security of the Asia-Pacific region and to transfer a substantial part of this responsibility to Washington's local partners and allies⁵⁶. The Republican president unveiled the strategy's framework during a visit to the American military base in Guam. In subsequent speeches, he elucidated the most crucial assumptions of this concept⁵⁷.

⁵⁴ H. Kissinger, *On China*, New York 2012, pp. 213–214.

⁵⁵ Department of State, Document 29, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969–1972*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d29> [3.08.2025].

⁵⁶ H. White, *How To Defend Australia*, La Trobe University Press, 2019, chapter *How We Got Here*.

⁵⁷ In a speech to the nation delivered in the Oval Office on 3 November 1969, Nixon said: "First, the United States will keep all of its treaty commitments. Second, we shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us or of a nation whose survival we consider vital to our security. Third, in cases involving

A closer observation reveals a striking parallel between Nixon's "Guam Doctrine" and the strategic recommendations put forth by certain analysts within the Trump administration. A common thread in both of these cases is "deprioritisation"⁵⁸. Throughout the annals of history, superpowers with numerous commitments and facing a growing number of problems have usually undertaken the difficult task of narrowing their goals, while subjecting other areas of political activity to deprioritisation, i.e., a structured process of reducing their involvement. This is the antithesis of a sudden retreat or abandonment of allies, which could have undesirable consequences for the deprioritising power, such as the creation of a "security vacuum"⁵⁹. Consequently, a fundamental component of this strategy is for the formerly dominant power to maintain a degree of its influence, among other considerations, in order to effectively manage the evolving regional balance of power.

The present study seeks to demonstrate that there are numerous parallels to be drawn between the policy adopted towards European allies in NATO by Trump and that of the Nixon administration towards American allies in Asia. The policy towards European allies in NATO has so far focused on encouraging greater transatlantic burden sharing in order to maintain collective security, whilst simultaneously indicating the possibility of a decrease in the US military

other types of aggression, we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense". The same words could easily be uttered by Donald Trump today, primarily addressed to America's NATO allies.

⁵⁸ W. Mitchell, J. Grygiel, E. Colby, M. Pottinger, *Getting strategic deprioritization right*, The Marathon Initiative, 23 June 2023, <https://themarathoninitiative.org/2023/06/getting-strategic-deprioritization-right/> [4.08.2025].

⁵⁹ E.g., see the theory of hegemonic stability C.P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression 1929–1939*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1986.

presence in Europe⁶⁰. The strategy pursued by the Nixon–Kissinger team was characterised by a marked deprioritisation of the region, as evidenced by the United States’ withdrawal from Vietnam and the adoption of the Guam doctrine, which compelled the United States’ allies in Asia to modify their security policies. The paradox is that the desired results were not achieved at the time, primarily because the US quickly recovered from its humiliation in Indochina and challenged the USSR with an arms race that ultimately led to its collapse.

Nixon and Kissinger’s objective was to implement a strategy that was more appropriate to a multipolar world than a bipolar one⁶¹. At that time, despite the occurrence of periodic problems and failures, the United States still had a clear advantage over most countries in the system, based largely on a solid domestic industrial base, including the arms industry. In the contemporary multipolar geopolitical landscape, the strategic assumptions that guided Nixon and Kissinger in their respective eras, if reinterpreted, have the potential to serve as a source of inspiration for the current elite of the Republican Party in formulating America’s global presence. A close examination of the Trump administration’s policy towards Europe thus far reveals striking parallels between Nixon’s approach towards Asia and Trump’s towards NATO. This should not be interpreted as an endeavour to establish an alliance with Russia, as is frequently the case. Rather, it should be regarded as an attempt to establish a check and balance mechanism within a trilateral arrangement. It is important to acknowledge the distinction between the trilateral dynamic between China,

⁶⁰ A. Sytas, *US to start European troop withdrawal discussions later this year, US NATO ambassador says*, Reuters, 16 May 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-start-european-troop-withdrawal-discussions-later-this-year-us-nato-2025-05-16/> [4.08.2025].

⁶¹ *De facto* tripolar, with China as the third element necessary to maintain the system of checks and balances. See more H. Kissinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 213–215, 273.

Russia, and the US in the context of Russia's large-scale offensive in Ukraine and during the Cold War. The former is characterised by a divergence from the dynamics of events during the latter, which were predominantly driven by the Sino-Soviet split. At present, Sino-Russian relations are far from that state, although such a scenario cannot be ruled out in the future. Despite the absence of any overt interest in Russia's triumph, China is not pursuing its downfall either. Therefore, the nature of these relations does not bear the hallmarks of a strategic alliance⁶².

Reconfiguring the Global order / Paradigm shift

A further explanation for the Trump administration's attitude towards its allies and partners in NATO and other regions of the world is a paradigm shift in the manner in which American influence and power on the global stage is conceptualised and managed. Should the hypothesis that the United States is moving away from global primacy be accepted, then this process may also be considered to include the abandonment of the previous model of leadership, which was primarily exercised by Washington within the Western community. It may be posited that the actions of the current administration, particularly with regard to trade, economics, and technology⁶³ could be indicative of a shift in policy by the United States towards an imperialist approach⁶⁴.

⁶² A.J. Motyl, *What China really wants for Russia and Ukraine*, The Hill, 26 July 2025, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/5418921-what-china-really-wants-for-russia-and-ukraine/> [4.08.2025]; J. Piekara, *Czy Chiny boją się "odwróconego Kissingera"? Chińska dyplomacja wobec Rosji po zmianie amerykańskiej polityki zagranicznej*, "Komentarze IES" 2025, no. 1343, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/czy-chiny-boja-sie-odwroconego-kissingera-chinska-dyplomacja-wobec-rosji-po-zmianie-amerykanskiej-polityki-zagranicznej/> [4.08.2025].

⁶³ The White House, *White House unveils America's AI action plan*, 23 July 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/07/white-house-unveils-americas-ai-action-plan/> [4.08.2025].

⁶⁴ Here, we are using a dictionary definition, not a scientific one. See more about the USA as an empire in: H. Münkler, *Empires: The Logic of World Domination from Ancient Rome to the United States*,

The shift can be characterised by the abandonment of the liberal ideological framework as a means of influence and control⁶⁵ within the context of primacy (soft power). This has been superseded by a purely transactional approach that underscores the primacy of national interests, which are now defined more narrowly than before. These interests are predicated on the reindustrialisation of America, the reconstruction of the middle class, the reduction of the foreign trade deficit⁶⁶, and the security of the United States' borders and territory. The "trade war" initiated by Trump with most countries in the world, and the harsh terms of the trade agreements he has proposed⁶⁷, seem to confirm the current administration's new "imperial" approach to foreign policy. This attitude is exemplified by the robust rhetoric employed, which, rather than being liberal, is realistic in nature. This is evidenced by the suggestion that the United States should assume control of Greenland or Canada⁶⁸.

The simultaneous raising of the issues of the future of Greenland and the Panama Canal by Donald Trump cannot be considered to be without cause⁶⁹. The strategic importance of these two locations, in terms of their proximity

trans. P. Camiller, Polity Press, 2007; and about the very concept of empire/imperialism in: M.W. Doyle, *Empires*, Cornell University Press, 1986.

⁶⁵ S. Maitra, *What's Next for Europe?*, The American Conservative, 17 June 2025, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/whats-next-for-europe/> [4.08.2025].

⁶⁶ S. Miran, T.J. Duesterberg, *Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers Stephen Miran on the Trump administration's economic agenda*, Hudson Institute, 7 April 2025, <https://www.hudson.org/events/chairman-council-economic-advisers-stephen-miran-trump-administrations-economic-agenda> [4.08.2025].

⁶⁷ *EU-US trade deal: The biggest losers and (a few) winners*, "Politico Europe", 29 July 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/winners-losers-eu-von-der-leyen-us-donald-trump-trade-deal-tariffs/> [4.08.2025].

⁶⁸ C.R. Fee, *Why Greenland Matters: Trump's Imperial Pretensions in the Arctic*, High North News, 26 February 2025, <https://www.high-northnews.com/en/why-greenland-matters-trumps-imperial-pretensions-arctic> [4.08.2025].

⁶⁹ And even the Gulf of Mexico, which was renamed the American Gulf.

to US territory, has long been recognised by the government of the United States. Consequently, the geopolitical status of these regions and the security situation in their vicinity have been, and continue to be, a source of concern for the Washington administration. Following the initial months of Trump's second term in office, it was conceivable to hypothesise that the United States, under Republican governance, had accorded priority to enhancing the security of its borders and the immediate vicinity. This approach aligns with the concept of "concentric circles", which posits the existence of geographical zones surrounding countries that are recognised as pivotal in terms of their significance for the foreign and security policy of a specific nation⁷⁰. This concept has been employed in the analysis of imperial policies, including those of 19th-century Great Britain⁷¹ and the Soviet Union⁷². To illustrate this point, one may consider the case of Great Britain, which initially established a defensive perimeter consisting of the British Isles themselves. This perimeter necessitated protection against potential invasions and other forms of aggression. The second circle of responsibility encompassed continental Europe, while the third circle comprised the British Empire's global territories.

It appears that this approach is closely associated with the perspective of Donald Trump's inner circle. During the election campaign, the Republican president frequently emphasised that a key priority for him would be to enhance the

⁷⁰ See, e.g., B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge 2003, pp. 301–302, 335, 353, 364–369.

⁷¹ H. White, op. cit., chapter *Geography*; chapter *The Concentric Circles Model*.

⁷² А. Салмин, *Союз после Союза. Проблемы упорядочения национально-государственных отношений в бывшем СССР*, "Полис" 1992, no. 1–2, pp. 34–55 as referenced by: P. Kowal, *Pięć kręgów imperium. Długi koniec Rosji*, Wrocław–Wojnowice 2023, pp. 7–11; K. Świder, *Geopolityczne imperatywy polityki zagranicznej Federacji Rosyjskiej*, [in:] L. Sykulski (ed.), *Geopolityka Rosji i obszaru postsowieckiego*, Warszawa 2023, p. 35.

missile defence capabilities of the United States. Trump's statements calling for the strengthening of American influence in Greenland and the Panama Canal align with the conceptual framework of America's second "concentric circle". In this sense, Trump's calls are unsurprising, except for the bizarre nature of his rhetoric. It is possible that Trump's remarks on the Panama Canal and Greenland may also indicate that, under his leadership, the United States may seek to strengthen its control over and around most of the world's key choke points, including the Strait of Malacca. This artery represents a significant bottleneck for energy supplies imported by China from the Middle East. In the context of the issues discussed here, it is not inconceivable that the Trump administration will exert pressure on Singapore and Malaysia, among others, to obtain either better conditions for stationing its own armed forces (Singapore) or to limit these countries' cooperation with China and the presence of Chinese investments there.

In this context, one could also interpret trade activities with the EU, the US's continued commitment to its role as a European security donor, and its ongoing support for Ukraine through the lens of neo-imperialism. Also, customs regulations, arms purchases from American suppliers, and agreements on mineral resources could be seen as payment for services provided by the US. Furthermore, these actions would not be motivated by a community of values (in the liberal sense), which could only serve as a rhetorical and illusory facade for the real motives behind them. As a typical empire, the US would also use coercion rather than diplomacy and persuasion to maximise profits, even if its allies' actions were conducive to US objectives, e.g., by selling weapons systems at high prices.

A further component of the Trump administration's novel "imperial" policy could be interpreted as a demonstration of a readiness to engage in dialogue and negotiations, in addition to delineating spheres of influence, without giving rise to ideological disputes with other imperial powers, such

as Russia and China⁷³. This prompts further consideration of the prospect of the present administration in Washington resurrecting the notion of a “concert of powers”⁷⁴, in which a *modus vivendi* would aim to be established with prominent world powers, thereby forestalling the prospect of yet another systemic war. The establishment of such a new reality would necessitate constant monitoring of changes in the balance of power – a key mechanism for regulating the stability of an international system. This standpoint offers an explanation for Trump’s endeavours to normalise relations with Russia and bring the war in Ukraine to a conclusion.

Outcomes and conclusions: What strategy for Europe?

The European allies of the United States find themselves in a complex position, a consequence of the erosion of the international security architecture. Post-Cold War policy, based on reliance on the US as a security provider in the region and a supplier of global public goods, while focusing on prosperity and the pursuit of its own interests, mainly economic, is now confronted with new international realities. This phenomenon is influenced by objective factors, namely the evolving balance of power in the international system and the growing assertiveness of international actors, as well as the “subjective” paradigm shift in American foreign policy. The latter is the result of two factors. Firstly, the personal characteristics and political vision of Donald Trump’s camp. Secondly, the limited resources of the US no longer seem sufficient to stabilise Eurasia. This is mainly in contrast to China’s growing potential. This situation is

⁷³ *Secretary of State Marco Rubio with Matthew Boyle for Breitbart News Network*, U.S. Department of State, 24 February 2025, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-with-matthew-boyle-for-breitbart-news-network> [4.08.2025].

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

compelling Europe to rethink its current approach to global affairs and to take substantive action in the face of these circumstances.

In light of the recent declarations pertaining to a reduction in the American military presence on the European continent, it is conceivable to hypothesise on some of the probable course of events that may ensue.

The primary scenario entails the Trump administration declaring a reduction of approximately 30% in conventional military capabilities in Europe, while upholding its commitment to NATO's nuclear sharing programme and military command system within the alliance.

A second scenario could involve a limited reduction in military capabilities, primarily involving the 20,000 military personnel deployed in Europe by the Biden administration following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Both options could entail modifications in the geographical deployment of forces, which would encompass:

The transfer of the majority of conventional capabilities (primarily land-based) to the NATO eastern flank. This option would be the result of a possible hardening of Washington's stance towards Moscow and a desire to improve deterrence against Russia.

As an alternative option, it is possible to consider the opposite scenario. This would involve a reduction in the US presence on the eastern flank, with forces being transferred from this region of Europe to Western European countries or withdrawn to the United States. The plausibility of this option is predicated on the occurrence of a potential reset in US-Russian relations, consequent to the establishment of accords aimed at the reduction of strategic tensions between the two powers.

The third option involves a more radical reduction, which would entail the almost complete withdrawal of forces from Europe and a shift by the United States towards a strategy of offshore balancing; that is, influencing the military balance of power in Europe primarily from a position outside

the continent and without an extensive military presence in the form of permanent bases and military installations in allied countries⁷⁵.

It is imperative to consider not only the potential military manoeuvres by the United States but also the responses that European NATO members might adopt in the event of such actions. It is conceivable that they will respond to the policy of reducing American military capabilities in Europe by employing three different but not necessarily mutually exclusive strategies:

“anchoring” – that is the strategy of attempting to halt or postpone the withdrawal of American forces by increasing arms purchases from the United States and demonstrating political subservience and/or the importance of the relationship to American strategic interests;

“strategic autonomy” – defined as the pursuit of maximum military independence from the United States in the conventional domain. This could be complemented by attempts to acquire military nuclear capabilities;

“balancing” – a political strategy of hedging against potential geopolitical tensions with a given adversary, primarily Russia, through a range of incentives and concessions such as sanctions relief and promises of future economic cooperation.

As demonstrated in the historical record, the aforementioned models of response to the reduction of military presence and involvement by the current patron and guarantor

⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the possibility that the US might maintain its current levels of troop deployment in Europe, or indeed increase its military contingents temporarily or indefinitely, with a view to deterring Russian forces, cannot be ruled out. Here, we are only considering the scenarios that pose the greatest risk from Europe's perspective. It is also conceivable that the US will deploy some of its resources to the area under direct threat, i.e., the eastern flank, while continuing lower-cost strategic initiatives (e.g., manoeuvres involving strategic bombers). In this case, the security umbrella over Europe would be maintained based on US authority, while conventional deterrence would rely on European capabilities.

of security have their origins in the past. In the 1960s, in response to the announcement of a reduction in the military presence in Germany by the United States, the then West German authorities applied elements of the “anchoring” strategy in combination with “balancing”. The latter resulted in the crystallisation of the Ostpolitik strategy, whose legacy is still extant in German strategic culture. In turn, South Korea and Japan’s reactions to Nixon’s “Guam doctrine” were, in the case of Seoul, an attempt to gain “strategic independence” through its own nuclear weapons programme, and in the case of Tokyo, a combination of “anchoring” with elements of expanding its own independence. In addition, both South Korea and Japan endeavoured to mitigate tensions with their respective primary adversaries, namely North Korea and China⁷⁶.

European countries may adopt similar strategies in response to the reduction of US military involvement on the continent. A salient factor influencing the selection of strategy in accordance with the aforementioned models pertains to the perception of threats posed by Russia and its actual policy. It is evident that the activities of the European part of NATO are still predominantly characterised by a state-centric approach. This phenomenon is predicated on divergent geopolitical situations, which in turn engender disparate perceptions of threats. It is also evident that not all European countries require the United States’ involvement in Europe to the same extent. This is primarily the desire of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and Northern Europe. It is also possible to include Greece in this group, given that the country perceives the United States as a stabilising factor in its relations with Turkey and a deterrent to Ankara’s revisionist ambitions. The countries

⁷⁶ M. Priebe et al., *Balancing act – how allies have responded to limited U.S. retrenchment*, RAND Research Brief RBA739 3, RAND, 8 July 2025, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA739-3.html [4.08.2025].

of the western part of the continent are not, at the present moment, facing an existential threat from the USSR, as was the situation during the Cold War. Contemporary Russia is but a remnant of its former Soviet power. However, until the next “smuta” (period of decline), the Russian Federation, like many other declining powers in the past, may cause considerable harm to its immediate surroundings and attempt to obtain certain concessions from other powers by using its military potential, including its nuclear arsenal, in negotiations.

The considerations set out in this chapter provide a foundation for the following conclusions. Regardless of the manner in which the underlying rationales behind US foreign policy are interpreted, from a European standpoint, it does not constitute a policy predicated on isolationism in its classical sense. Consequently, European security and the international situation in the region remain significant to the US, as they are part of a broader global architecture. However, the conditions of the US interest in Europe and its actions towards it are changing. The United States is exerting clear pressure on its European allies to assume greater responsibility for security in the region, both militarily and economically, in order to protect against threats from Russia and China. From the perspective of the United States, the objective of this initiative is to ease the burden on the country, thereby enabling it to prioritise the most pressing threat, which is China. The primary focus of European allies on their own area of responsibility is likely to be significantly more beneficial to the US than, for instance, the deployment of symbolic units to the Pacific, where European countries lack substantial capabilities for power projection.

The absence of clarity regarding the trajectory of the erosion of the world order – or, in a more favourable scenario, its reconfiguration based on some kind of international agreement – poses a significant risk to Europe’s security strategy, which is currently reliant on the capabilities of the US. Conversely, a scenario involving strategic autonomy in

the spirit of De Gaulle, followed by a desire to sever ties with the US, would also be risky for Europe, as the US will remain the main security guarantor for Europe in the coming years. In light of the prevailing circumstances, it appears that a more suitable option would be strategic independence, defined by Hugh White as “significant capacity to fight alone, if necessary, to resist direct military threats to one’s territory and most critical strategic interests”, which “does not necessarily imply strategic isolation. It also encompasses the capacity to work with others where that is possible and cost-effective”⁷⁷. After all, it is evident that Europe is deficient in terms of diversity in its options. Confronted with the challenges posed by Russia and the potential implications of the United States’ withdrawal, it is imperative for Europe to take a substantial share of the responsibility for ensuring regional security.

⁷⁷ H. White, op. cit., chapter *Strategic risks*.

BALTIC SEA, A “NATO LAKE”? A STRATEGIC, OPERATIONAL, AND POLITICAL ASSESSMENT

Louis Wierenga

Introduction

When discussing the Baltic Sea from a strategic perspective, it is tempting to use the terminology “NATO lake”. But is it? This paper argues that the answer is “rather yes, than no”, although this remains an unfolding story. The terminology risks oversimplifying the complex geopolitical reality. NATO has indeed been reinvigorated following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and subsequent summits have resulted in decisive collective action¹. Finland and Sweden’s accession significantly altered the strategic geography of the Baltic Sea. However, the persistent presence of Russia – including its hybrid tactics and naval assets in Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg – means that complacency would be a strategic error. This paper assesses whether the Baltic

¹ S. Savitz, I. Winston, *A Brief Naval Overview of the Baltic Sea Region*, RAND, 13 June 2024, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2111-1.html>.

Sea can be considered a NATO lake by examining current military dynamics, hybrid threats, and broader regional cooperation, offering two perspectives: that the Baltic Sea is a NATO lake from a geographic and political standpoint, but that it is not fully so from a strategic and operational perspective².

The post-2022 security environment in the Baltic Sea Region

The Baltic Sea Region (henceforth, the BaSR) has evolved into NATO's northeastern flank, particularly since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in eastern Ukraine. The region's significance surged further following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia's war of aggression resulted in two significant transformations for the BaSR.. The first is a change in NATO's strategic thinking and subsequent posture towards Russia. Following the high-intensity kinetic war of aggression against Ukraine, NATO decisively shifted its strategic posture from deterrence by punishment to deterrence by denial³. The second – and one of the most visible effects of this shift – was the accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO. The inclusion of Finland and Sweden has turned the Baltic Sea into an almost fully enclosed maritime domain – eight out of nine littoral states are now NATO members, with Russia being the obvious exception⁴. This development transformed the power geometry of the region, converting the Baltic Sea into a nearly-enclosed NATO space. To complement these structural changes, NATO significantly upgraded its military infrastructure.

² J. Pawlak, *No, Don't Call the Baltic Sea a "NATO Lake"*, RUSI, 5 September 2022, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/no-dont-call-baltic-nato-lake>.

³ J. Gustafsson, E.H. Frissel, *A New Generation of Forward Defence: NATO in the Baltic States*, FOI, <https://foi.se/en/foi/reports/report-summary.html?reportNo=FOI-R--5765--SE>.

⁴ S. Savitz, I. Winston, op. cit.

Poland and the Baltic states now host the Forward Land Forces (FLF, expanded from the eFP). The creation of a NATO naval command in Rostock, Germany, and the launch of initiatives like Baltic Sentry and BALTOPS have further bolstered regional defence⁵. These improvements have created a more integrated and interoperable security apparatus in the region⁶. But is it correct to call and think of the Baltic Sea a NATO lake? Certainly, this has been heralded as the case throughout international media outlets, research outlets, and think tanks⁷. Yet, several commentators have challenged or questioned this notion⁸. Before drawing any conclusion, there are some areas for consideration which need to be explored. To answer this, one must take into account Russian capabilities, especially A2/AD capabilities and their strategic intent. But we must also focus on NATO capabilities.

Russia's capabilities and strategic intentions

Despite suffering [heavy] losses in Ukraine, Russia remains a potent threat to allied countries in the BaSR through a blend of conventional strength and hybrid warfare.

⁵ K. Maciata, *Fortifying the Baltic Sea – NATO's defence and deterrence strategy for hybrid threats*, “NATO Review”, 5 May 2025, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2025/05/05/fortifying-the-baltic-sea-natos-defence-and-deterrence-strategy-for-hybrid-threats/index.html>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ J. Pawlak, op. cit.; S. Magnuson, *NATO SUMMIT NEWS: Baltic Sea Now Called a “NATO Lake”*, “National Defence”, 10 July 2024, <https://www.national-defense-magazine.org/articles/2024/7/10/baltic-sea-now-called-a-nato-lake>.

⁸ See N. Childs, *Security Threats and Challenges in the Baltic, High North and Indo-Pacific: Common Connections and Shared Concerns*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 17 June 2025, <https://www.kas.de/en/monitor/detail/-/content/security-threats-and-chances-in-the-baltic-high-north-and-indo-pacific>; S. Savitz, I. Winston, op. cit.; J. Pawlak, op. cit.; S. Torset, I. Bowers, *The Case for a Baltic SNMG-3: Developing Regional NATO Forces at Sea*, CIMSEC, 22 April 2025, <https://cimsec.org/the-case-for-a-baltic-snmg-3-developing-regional-nato-forces-at-sea/>.

Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg remain strategic hubs for Russia's naval presence, hosting anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems, complemented by missile batteries, radar installations, submarines, and surface vessels⁹. These capabilities allow Russia to impose sea denial tactics even if full sea control is unattainable¹⁰.

Recent Russian naval exercises in mid-2025 emphasised anti-submarine warfare and electronic disruption in the Gulf of Finland, rejoining its intent to project pressure even in a NATO-dominated area. Additionally, the Baltic Fleet continues to operate a lean but capable submarine force, relying heavily on stealth and proximity to disrupt NATO command of the sea¹¹. Russia's capacity to threaten NATO is further amplified by its hybrid strategies. Since Russia can deny access to the Baltic Sea but cannot establish control over it – and would face strong and capable opposition from NATO – it has redirected its efforts toward hybrid attacks on critical undersea infrastructure.

Russia's strategy increasingly relies on blending conventional deterrence with hybrid tools. In addition to sabotage of undersea infrastructure, instances of sabotage also include interference in democratic processes, cyberattacks on civilian and military systems, and GPS jamming or spoofing. Notably, such incidents have underlined Russia's ability to inflict disruption below the threshold of overt conflict¹².

⁹ S. Torset, I. Bowers, op. cit.

¹⁰ S. Savitz, I. Winston, op. cit.

¹¹ S. Wills, *Kaliningrad: Impregnable Fortress or "Russian Alamo"?*, CNA, 15 May 2023, <https://www.cna.org/our-media/indepth/2023/05/kaliningrad-impregnable-fortress-or-russian-alamo>.

¹² E. Lucas, *Russia's War in the Grey Zone is Chipping Away at NATO*, "The Times", 29 November 2024, <https://www.thetimes.com/comment/columnists/article/russias-war-in-the-grey-zone-is-chipping-away-at-nato-w2wngch7g>.

Critical Undersea Infrastructure (CUI)

The security of Critical Undersea Infrastructure (CUI) has so far emerged as a frontline concern in NATO’s Baltic posture. CUI such as communication cables and energy pipelines are vital to the BaSR’s economic and military functionality. The 2023 Balticconnector pipeline sabotage, numerous incidents of cable cutting, and GPS jamming incidents in the BaSR exposed serious vulnerabilities in the region’s undersea cables and energy networks. These infrastructures are foundational not only to economic stability but also to military coordination, as secure communications and energy transmission underpin NATO command-and-control (C2) systems. Such incidents have been occurring since 2021, with a noted uptick in 2022, coinciding with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and have been attributed to both Russia and China¹³.

NATO’s response has been multi-layered; to counter these threats, NATO has launched new initiatives. These include the Critical Undersea Infrastructure Coordination Cell (CUICC) in Brussels and the UK-led Maritime Centre for the Security of Critical Undersea Infrastructure in Northwood, UK. Furthermore, Nordic Warden – an AI-based surveillance network which integrates satellite, sonar, and seabed sensors, launched by the multinational Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) – is enhancing real-time detection and threat analysis capabilities¹⁴. NATO launched Baltic Sentry in January 2025, which combines NATO naval efforts and private sector operators to rapidly respond to destabilising

¹³ L. Wierenga, *Louis Wierenga: NATO, EU and the Evolving Baltic Sea Security Landscape*, ERR News, 17 April 2025, <https://news.err.ee/1609667384/louis-wierenga-nato-eu-and-the-evolving-baltic-sea-security-landscape>; G. Gricius, *Hybrid Attacks Rise on Undersea Cables in Baltic and Arctic Regions*, The Jamestown Foundation, 5 February 2025, <https://jamestown.org/program/hybrid-attacks-rise-on-undersea-cables-in-baltic-and-arctic-regions/>.

¹⁴ L. Wierenga, op. cit.

acts¹⁵. These advancements signify an important institutional shift in the security posture of NATO, which now treats CUI security as an integrated part of its deterrence posture. This posture integrates CUI protection into NATO's broader deterrence doctrine. The alliance's current approach aims to ensure not only rapid detection but also attribution and response capabilities that raise the threshold for Russian grey-zone operations.

Is the Baltic Sea a NATO lake? Competing perspectives

The characterisation of the Baltic Sea as being transformed into a "NATO lake" has gained rhetorical momentum, particularly following Finland and Sweden's accession into NATO. However, the reality is more complex and nuanced, requiring a careful assessment of both structural and operational conditions to paint the full picture. From a geographical and political perspective, NATO's presence is undeniably dominant: eight of nine littoral states are now NATO members. Major sea lines of communication (SLOCs) are under NATO observation, and exercises like BALTOPS and Baltic Sentry showcase the interoperability of the Alliance and regional cohesion¹⁶.

However, from a strategic and operational lens, the picture is more complex. Kaliningrad remains a heavily fortified enclave, featuring dense layers of A2/AD systems that can contest NATO access in crisis scenarios. According to a 2024 RAND report, while NATO enjoys escalation dominance, Russia's ability to impose local sea denial through missile threats and electronic warfare (EW) remains credible. FOI and CSIS assessments also highlight Russia's

¹⁵ K. Maciata, op. cit.

¹⁶ A. Brzozowski, *How NATO's Northern Enlargement Changes the Power Balance in the Region*, EURACTIV, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence/news/how-nato-northern-enlargement-changes-the-power-balance-in-the-region/>; K. Maciata, op. cit.

capacity to disrupt maritime domain awareness using submarine activity, cable tampering, and shadow fleet logistics to circumvent sanctions¹⁷. Despite being geographically surrounded, Russia retains significant military and hybrid capabilities that can threaten Baltic stability. Kaliningrad, heavily militarised with Iskander missile systems, S-400 air defence batteries, as well as second-strike nuclear capability in Murmansk, and electronic warfare (EW) equipment, forms the centrepiece of Russia’s regional A2/AD strategy¹⁸.

Strategic and operational complexity: CSIS, FOI, and RAND perspectives

While NATO enjoys a geographic advantage in the Baltic Sea, leading analysts caution against assuming uncontested maritime dominance. According to the Swedish Defence Research Agency, Russia retains a layered A2/AD network in Kaliningrad capable of challenging NATO’s ability to operate freely during a crisis¹⁹. These systems include the S-400 air defence system, Bastion-P coastal missile batteries, and Iskander-M short-range ballistic missile, offering sea-denial capability.

The Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) emphasises that Russia’s Baltic Fleet – although reduced in size – remains functional, particularly through its Kilo-class submarines, which provide stealth and disruption potential for undersea infrastructure, which is an ongoing issue that

¹⁷ *Missile Threat, Missiles of Russia*, CSIS Missile Defense Project, 10 August 2021, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/russia/>; R. Dalsjö, C. Berglund, M. Jonsson, *Bursting the Bubble? Russian A2/AD in the Baltic Sea Region: Capabilities, Countermeasures, and Implications*, Swedish Defence Research Agency, 3 April 2019, <https://www.foi.se/en/foi/reports/report-summary.html?reportNo=FOI-R--4651--SE>.

¹⁸ S. Savitz, I. Winston, op. cit.

¹⁹ R. Dalsjö, C. Berglund, M. Jonsson, op. cit.; C. Wall, N. Wegge, *The Russian Arctic Threat: Consequences of the Ukraine War*, CSIS, 25 January 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-arctic-threat-consequences-ukraine-war>.

the Allies are addressing and will likely continue to address in the foreseeable future²⁰. CSIS also notes that Russia leverages a “risk manipulation” strategy: conducting non-lethal grey-zone operations just below the threshold of triggering Article 5, including cable interference and signal spoofing.

Additionally, RAND²¹ highlights that while NATO has superiority in force projection, this does not guarantee persistent access or control during crisis scenarios. Their findings suggest that during the opening stages of a conflict, NATO would be forced to focus significant effort on neutralising Kaliningrad’s integrated fire and surveillance network before it could freely manoeuvre naval forces across the region. These perspectives converge on a crucial point: sea denial is not the same as sea control. Russia cannot dominate the Baltic Sea, but it retains sufficient capabilities to disrupt and degrade NATO operations, especially through asymmetric means and rapid escalation dynamics.

Russian naval activity – particularly its submarine fleet – and grey-zone tactics such as cable sabotage, GPS spoofing, and the operation of “shadow fleets” of commercial tankers remain persistent challenges to NATO’s control and monitoring capacity. Russian losses in Ukraine do not affect the Baltics. Russia’s Baltic Fleet remains very active and exercises in the Baltic Sea²². Further, Kaliningrad’s armaments pose a threat to the resupply of the Baltic states and Finland²³.

Yet, despite such threats and challenges, NATO is not at a disadvantageous position. The submarine force which Sweden now brings to NATO presents a counterbalance to this, and until Russia is able to develop a larger submarine force, the primary threat they pose stems from air and missile components, though there is still a threat posed by the Russian navy in this theatre. Due to Swedish

²⁰ *Missile Threat...*

²¹ S. Savitz, I. Winston, op. cit.

²² S. Wills, op. cit.

²³ Ibid.

membership, NATO is in an advantageous position thanks to its ability to close the sea to Russian activities²⁴.

Critically, from a legal standpoint, the Baltic Sea remains an international waterway under UNCLOS. Thus, NATO cannot impose full maritime exclusion even if it controls the surrounding territory. Strategically, branding the Baltic Sea as a “NATO lake” may embolden Kremlin narratives of encirclement. As Julian Pawlak warns²⁵, such framing risks strategic complacency – obscuring the very real vulnerabilities NATO still faces in maintaining situational dominance across multiple domains. This means that military dominance does not equate to exclusionary control.

Yes, the accession of Finland and Sweden in 2023–2024 significantly reshaped NATO’s strategic perimeter in the region, turning the Baltic Sea into a near-enclosed maritime zone dominated by Allied forces²⁶. Annual NATO-led military operations such as BALTOPS and the newer Baltic Sentry demonstrate interoperability, high readiness, and control over key sea lines of communication (SLOCs). These exercises are conducted in partnership with allies and often feature naval drills, amphibious landings, and cyber-defence simulations. The island of Gotland is now fully integrated into NATO’s regional defence planning, and is of crucial importance because it would play a central role in helping NATO secure the region in the event of a kinetic confrontation with Russia – whoever controls Gotland would be able to dominate both the air and maritime domains in the southern Baltic²⁷.

²⁴ S. Baker, *Sweden Says its Stealthy Submarines are Key to Shoring up NATO Defence in Strategic Waters*, Business Insider, 15 April 2025, <https://www.businessinsider.com/swedens-new-capabilities-nato-include-killer-submarines-baltic-sea-russia-2025-4#:~:text=Sweden%20says%20its%20stealthy%20submarines,NATO%20defenses%20in%20strategic%20waters&text=Sweden%20said%20it%20possesses%20unique,ideal%20for%20the%20Baltic%20Sea.>

²⁵ J. Pawlak, op. cit.

²⁶ A. Brzozowski, op. cit.

²⁷ Ibid.

Further, Sweden's naval capabilities and Finland's significant artillery and air defence capabilities enhance NATO's deterrence posture and significantly strengthen the Allied capabilities should Russia attempt to encroach on NATO territory²⁸. Retired US Army General David Petraeus recently warned that the Baltics are appealing to Putin, both in terms of a potential test of Western resolve but also as a precursor for a wider offensive²⁹.

Much of NATO's focus on potential Russian aggression towards NATO naturally concerns the northeastern flank. However, it should not be ignored that in the view of the Russian General Staff, interdiction of NATO forces would require striking into NATO's rear, which includes Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Great Britain, as they play a vital role in sustaining operations in the BaSR³⁰. This comes in addition to warnings of the strong possibility of the Kremlin attempting to test NATO resolve in the region within 3–5 years.

Paying close attention to perspective – from Russia's perspective, they view the area as a NATO lake³¹, however, from the Western standpoint, there is still debate over the extent of NATO's advantage, despite its strength. Succinctly put, viewing the Baltic Sea as a "NATO lake" will, arguably, lead to complacency, and there is still work ahead for NATO in this theatre³². Moreover, the challenge of deterrence is likely to persist well into the future, barring significant internal change within Russia. The power balance in terms of naval capability was altered in NATO's favour when Finland

²⁸ S. Torset, I. Bowers, op. cit.

²⁹ A. Stewart, *Defending NATO's Front-Line?*, CHACR, 18 June 2025, <https://chacr.org.uk/2025/06/18/defending-natos-front-line/>.

³⁰ F. Wintermans, N.G. de Wolf-Fabricius, *NATO Force Projection and Russian Military Interdiction*, "Militaire Spectator", 17 June 2024, <https://militairespectator.nl/artikelen/nato-force-projection-and-russian-military-interdiction>.

³¹ A. Brzozowski, op. cit.

³² Ibid.

and Sweden joined the alliance, which will be further explored in the ensuing section.

Poland as a growing naval power

Poland’s evolving naval posture illustrates a broader shift in NATO’s eastern flank and has emerged as a pivotal actor in NATO’s eastern security posture broadly, including in NATO’s eastern maritime strategy. With defence spending exceeding 4% of GDP – the highest in NATO as of 2025 – Poland is undergoing a rapid modernisation and expansion of its naval forces. No longer solely a land-based bulwark, Poland is positioning itself as a maritime enabler and logistical backbone for NATO’s northern tier. Central to this is the acquisition of cutting-edge systems like *Miecznik*-class frigates and Patriot missile batteries³³.

The acquisition of the aforementioned will substantially increase Poland’s ability to project naval power and conduct air-defence and ASW operations in the BasSR. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the region has also advanced significantly, and Poland’s growing alignment with Sweden, Germany, and the Baltic states has led to concrete steps in interoperability.

The 2024 Polish-German Naval Cooperation Plan and the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) have added layers of interoperability and resilience. Poland leads an initiative under NORDEFCO+, collaborating with Finland and Norway, which focuses on seabed surveillance and CUI protection. Another way Poland is strengthening its capabilities is by upgrading ports in Świnoujście, Gdynia, and Gdańsk to serve as logistical hubs for NATO forces, enabling rapid reinforcement of Allied naval assets³⁴. As a result, Po-

³³ K. Maciata, op. cit.

³⁴ Ibid.; *Terminals in Świnoujście and Gdynia to Compete with NATO’s Largest Maritime Hubs*, Poland at Sea, 25 July 2025, <https://www.polandatsea.com/terminals-in-swinoujscie-and-gdynia-to-com->

land is increasingly seen not only as a frontline state but as a potential maritime integrator, bridging Nordic, Baltic, Central European, and NATO-wide defence strategies. Its growing capacity and institutional linkages ensure that it will be central to any future NATO efforts to deter, defend, or respond in the Baltic maritime theatre.

The Baltic Sea, the High North, and the Indo-Pacific

As its name suggests, the Baltic Sea has a specific geographic location, but in the increasingly interconnected geopolitical landscape of the 21st century, its significance extends far beyond its immediate region. Though geographically confined, the Baltic Sea is increasingly linked to global security dynamics – particularly with the High North and Indo-Pacific regions. As geopolitical competition intensifies, NATO and its partners increasingly recognise that actions in one theatre – whether in the Baltic Sea, the High North, or the Indo-Pacific – can have cascading effects across others.

NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, reinforced by policy outputs in 2024–2025, explicitly frames the interconnectedness of theatres. As such, actions in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic, and policy in the Indo-Pacific, affect European threat perceptions³⁵. In the High North, Russian submarine activity originating from the Kola Peninsula, the largest military force in the Arctic region, presents a substantial threat to NATO maritime operations³⁶.

Russia's submarine deployments from the Northern Fleet based in the Kola Peninsula routinely patrol across Arctic

pete-with-natos-largest-maritime-hubs/#:~:text=In%20this%20context%2C%20according%20to,for%20road%20and%20rail%20transportation.

³⁵ N. Childs, op. cit.; *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_210907.htm.

³⁶ K. Friis, *Arctic Spillover? Military Signalling in the European Arctic Before and After the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*, "Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies", <https://sjms.nu/articles/10.31374/sjms.375>.

and Baltic waters³⁷. In parallel, NATO allies and partners increasingly view hybrid maritime threats – such as sabotage of critical undersea infrastructure – as a global phenomenon. Lessons drawn from Russian sabotage of Baltic seabed infrastructure are now being applied to Indo-Pacific planning, where similar threats exist to undersea cables which link Southeast Asia, Australia, and Japan.

Emerging technologies piloted in the Baltic Sea could be considered for adaptation in the Indo-Pacific, where vast ocean spaces pose surveillance and coordination challenges. Strategically, the Baltic Sea can be increasingly viewed as a model of forward deterrence and multinational resilience. The cross-theatre coordination among NATO, the EU, and Indo-Pacific partners reflects a growing consensus that authoritarian revisionism, grey-zone coercion, and infrastructure vulnerability are shared global threats.

Conclusions

The Baltic Sea is steadily evolving into a NATO-dominated operational space, marked by increased interoperability, strategic infrastructure investment, and comprehensive maritime awareness. The accession of Finland and Sweden has redefined the region’s geopolitical geometry, transforming the BaSR into a near-enclosed NATO maritime zone. However, full control of the sea, either legally or operationally, remains elusive.

Russia’s enduring capacity for sea denial, hybrid sabotage, and strategic disruption via Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg demonstrates that military dominance does not equate to strategic certainty. As recent exercises, infrastructure attacks, and jamming incidents show, the region remains contested across both conventional and grey-zone dimensions. Moreover, the risks of strategic complacency

³⁷ Ibid.

and rhetorical overreach – such as definitively labelling the region a “NATO lake”, must be managed with care.

The Baltic Sea is no longer a peripheral theatre but rather a crucial ground for proving NATO’s force posture, hybrid defence strategies, and global maritime coordination. Ensuring its stability will require sustained political will, doctrinal innovation, cross-theatre planning, and whole-of-society resilience. By treating the Baltic as a dynamic (especially when it comes to the use of AI and emerging technologies in deterrence and defence) and strategic frontier, NATO can reinforce deterrence and avoid escalation traps. NATO’s current posture is meaningful and should be protected through vigilance and continuing to remain several steps ahead of Russia.

NATO-UKRAINE COOPERATION – CURRENT PROSPECTS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

Yuliya Kazdobina

Introduction

The NATO Summit in The Hague took place at a pivotal moment. By June 2025, it appeared that even the most optimistic observers had concluded that Russia was not planning to stop its aggression against Ukraine. Donald Trump, the US President, however, remained committed to continued dialogue and improved relations with the head of the Russian State. Trump was also reluctant to call Russia an aggressor state and to impose additional sanctions on it so as not to derail the “peace process”¹. President Trump’s territorial claims against NATO allies, his clearly stated intention to reduce the US presence in Europe, and underdeveloped European military capabilities sowed doubt in NATO’s ability to defend its members. To complicate things even more, an increasing number of European intelligence services warned about a possible Russian attack on a NATO country². Despite Russian

¹ See more in the second chapter by J. Bornio and M. Stefan.

² F. Gardner, T. Wong, *Russia may attack NATO in the next four years, German defence chief warns*, BBC, 1 June 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c62v63gl8rvo> [6.08.2025]; K. Jochecová, *Russia could*

objections and the uncertainty surrounding NATO's future, Ukraine sees its Alliance membership as an ultimate security guarantee. This chapter addresses the questions of where NATO–Ukraine relations stand after the NATO Summit in The Hague and whether the summit brought Ukraine's desired membership any closer.

US efforts to end the war in Ukraine

Through its aggression against Ukraine, Russia challenges Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and right to determine its own security arrangements. Russian officials have claimed on multiple occasions that NATO's eastward expansion posed a threat to the Russian Federation. The ultimatum Russia presented to NATO two months before launching its full-scale invasion, on 17 December 2021, demanded a legally binding commitment that NATO would cease its eastward expansion and would not admit any other states, including Ukraine, as members.

On his campaign trail, Donald Trump promised to end the war in 24 hours. Trying to achieve this goal, he drastically shifted from President Biden's commitment to Ukraine and attempted to coerce it into a deal favourable to Russia. He blamed Ukraine for starting the war and echoed the Russian narrative that Ukraine's desire to join NATO was the reason for the conflict. Trump also engaged with Putin, talking about the "great benefits" of the US and Russia working together and ending Russia's diplomatic isolation. His administration suspended military aid to Ukraine, cut intelligence sharing, demanded reimbursement for past aid, and immediately conceded on Ukraine's NATO membership, with Defence Secretary Peter Hegseth

start a major war in Europe within 5 years, Danish intelligence warns, "Politico", 11 February 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-war-threat-europe-within-5-years-danish-intelligence-ddis-warns/> [6.08.2025].

stating that it wasn't "a realistic outcome of a negotiated settlement"³. The US also considered recognising Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and discussing NATO non-enlargement with the Russian Federation, despite them being red lines for the EU⁴.

Ukraine accepted the US proposal for a complete and unconditional ceasefire in March 2025. Russia, on the other hand, intensified its attacks on Ukrainian civilians. In a clear mockery of the US President, Russia followed each Putin–Trump phone call with a massive strike. The Russian delegation at negotiations with Ukraine was led by a low-level official, namely the historian and presidential advisor Vladimir Medinsky, known for promoting Russian historical narratives. Russia continued demanding that Ukraine recognise Crimea's annexation and withdraw troops from the four Ukrainian regions that Russia claims, even though it does not fully control them. It also wanted to leave Ukraine defenceless by demanding that Ukraine cut down its army and remain permanently neutral with no security assistance from its partners. Russia continued to build up its military and boost its military production. In addition, an intensification of the violent campaign of sabotage and subversion against European NATO members and US facilities in Europe was recorded⁵.

³ *Hegseth rules out NATO membership for Ukraine and says Europe must be responsible for country's security*, CNN, 12 February 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/12/politics/hegseth-ukraine-rules-out-nato-membership> [15.06.2025].

⁴ Kh. Bondarieva, S. Pohorilov, *FT: EU will not support Trump's Crimea deal, even though it could lead to NATO crisis*, Ukrainska Pravda, 24 April 2025, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/04/24/7508973/> [12.06.2025].

⁵ S.G. Jones, *Russia's Shadow War Against the West*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 18 March 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-shadow-war-against-west> [25.05.2025].

Ukraine's changing role

On the eve of the Russian full-scale invasion, US intelligence assessed that Ukraine would fall within 72 hours⁶. Believing that Russia would seek a diplomatic settlement and was interested in managing escalation with a nuclear power, the US and its allies provided military aid to Ukraine insufficiently and incrementally. They also restricted Ukraine's ability to strike deep into Russian territory using Western arms. In response, Ukraine started innovating and developing its own defence industry. Ukraine remains critically dependent on Western military aid, specifically intelligence, air defence systems, long-range artillery and ammunition, etc. At the same time, the results it has achieved are impressive.

According to Ukrainian officials, its defence production has increased 35-fold since the start of the full-scale war⁷. In 2024 alone, its defence industry production capacity increased from 12 billion USD to 35 billion USD. Ukraine made considerable progress in producing all types of unmanned systems and is actively integrating AI into them. Solutions for the autonomous targeting of strike FPV drones have been developed, and the next step will be the deployment of drone swarms. Ukraine's defence industry can produce not only drones but the full spectrum of modern weapons and ammunition, including 155 mm artillery shells, armoured vehicles, missile systems, and more⁸.

⁶ J. Heinrich, A. Sabes, *Gen. Milley says Kyiv could fall within 72 hours if Russia decides to invade Ukraine: sources*, Fox News, 5 February 2022, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/gen-milley-says-kyiv-could-fall-within-72-hours-if-russia-decides-to-invade-ukraine-sources> [8.08.2025].

⁷ Шмигаль: Українське виробництво зброї зросло у 35 разів [Shmyhal: Ukrainian weapon production increased 35-fold], Ukrinform, 19 July 2025, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-economy/4016715-smigal-ukrainske-virobnictvo-zbroi-zroslo-u-35-raziv.html> [19.07.2025].

⁸ Ракетні дрони та рої безпілотників: Кашин розповів у Брюсселі про нову зброю, яку виробляє Україна [Missile drones and drone swarms: Kamyshin spoke in Brussels about new weapons produced by Ukraine], Ukrinform, 12 May 2025, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/>

As a country engaged in a modern war, Ukraine has accumulated valuable experience in warfighting and resilience. A pioneer in drone warfare, Ukraine is developing the UAV doctrine which, according to Maj. Brovdi, Commander of Ukraine's Unmanned Systems Forces, may become a blueprint for the NATO doctrine⁹. Ukraine continues to fight and has carried out several daring operations from which NATO is already learning lessons. Among them are maritime operations in the Black Sea, the August 2024 offensive into the Russian Kursk Oblast, a drone attack on Russian air bases that destroyed almost a third of Russian strategic aviation, known as operation "Spiderweb", etc. Despite Donald Trump's claims that it "has no cards", Ukraine has continued to strike Russian air defences, military enterprises, and oil refineries, eroding Russia's ability to continue the war.

The importance of these achievements to the Alliance has been acknowledged by NATO officials. Patrick Turner, the head of the NATO representation in Ukraine, said that Ukraine's actions in the war with Russia are "an absolutely integral part of transatlantic European security and critically necessary for NATO". He also stressed that supporting Ukraine is a part of NATO's deterrence efforts¹⁰. This perspective is substantiated by the fact that Ukraine's fight keeps Russian forces engaged and causes them to suffer heavy manpower and materiel losses. This weakens

rubric-economy/3992034-raketni-droni-ta-roi-bezpilotnikiv-kamisin-rozpoviv-u-brusseli-pro-novu-zbrou-aku-viroblae-ukraina.html [12.05.2025].

⁹ *LANDEURO 2025: Ukraine's wartime innovation reshapes modern defence strategy*, Defence Industry Europe, 17 July 2025, <https://defence-industry.eu/landeuro-2025-ukraines-wartime-innovation-reshapes-modern-defence-strategy/> [18.07.2025].

¹⁰ Голова Представництва НАТО назвав засоби, які Альянс реалізує для стримування Росії [The Head of the NATO Representation named the measures the Alliance is implementing to deter Russia], Ukrinform, 9 May 2025, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-politics/3991063-golova-predstavництва-nato-nazvav-zasobi-aki-alans-realizue-dla-strimuvanna-rosii.html> [12.05.2025].

Russia's military power and reduces the direct threat it poses to NATO countries.

While NATO develops defence plans and sets capability targets, it does not have an army of its own. Armies for NATO missions and exercises are provided by its members, and the members are responsible for the generation of defence capability. With heightened recognition of the Russian threat, the European Union increasingly assists them in this responsibility. The EU has adopted a Defence Industrial Strategy and developed a White Paper for European Defence whose goal is to enhance Europe's defence readiness. Both documents provide for Ukraine's participation and some practical cooperation mechanisms, e.g., the EU–Ukraine Task Force on Defence Industrial Cooperation, have been set up. In the Task Force's June 30 meeting, Ukraine submitted a series of defence-industrial projects for potential financing under the EU's Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument. Ukraine has also launched two defence sector initiatives, "Build with Ukraine" and "Test in Ukraine", aimed at developing cooperation with Western partners. Standardisation, an essential element of interoperability, is an important part of these efforts.

Ukraine's quest for NATO membership

After Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukrainian public support for NATO membership surged to over 80% (compared to between 16 to 19% before 2014 and a little over 40% after Crimea's attempted annexation)¹¹. The Ukrainian government symbolically applied for expedited NATO membership on 30 September 2022, and launched an aggressive lobbying campaign. NATO continued to provide non-lethal assistance to Ukraine under the Comprehensive Assistance

¹¹ A. Grushetskiy, V. Paniotto, *How the War in Ukraine Has Changed Ukrainians*, Foreign Affairs, 30 December 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/how-war-ukraine-has-changed-ukrainians>.

Package (CAP) framework launched in 2014 in response to Russia’s attempted annexation of Crimea.

The NATO 2023 Vilnius Summit saw the most active lobbying for a NATO invitation. The US and Germany were openly opposed, which made an invitation impossible because NATO makes such decisions by consensus. In general, the Alliance was reluctant to welcome a new member while it was under continuing Russian assault, because this would bring NATO in direct confrontation with Russia, a development it is determined to avoid. Consequently, it was made clear to Ukraine that no membership was possible before the end of the war. The Alliance affirmed its “unwavering solidarity” and committed to supporting Ukraine’s self-defence. The Summit Communique stated that Ukraine’s future was in NATO and made a vague promise that the Allies “will be in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when Allies agree and conditions are met”¹².

NATO was not in a position to extend security guarantees to Ukraine; however, several steps were made to facilitate closer integration. The NATO–Ukraine Council was established, allowing Ukraine and NATO member states to participate as equals. Since then, it has developed into a place for joint consultations, decision-making, and a crisis consultation mechanism. NATO also recognised that Ukraine had moved beyond the two-stage accession process, and the Membership Action Plan was replaced with the Adapted Annual National Program (aANP). CAP became a multi-year program of assistance to facilitate Ukraine’s recovery and reconstruction, institutional transformation, and transition towards NATO interoperability. The G7 countries also launched a Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine in which they pledged long-term security assistance to Ukraine, which Ukraine viewed as a bridge to NATO.

¹² *Vilnius Summit Communiqué*, NATO, 11 July 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm.

The NATO 2024 Washington summit took place when the presidential campaign in the US was underway. Hedging against a possible re-election of Donald Trump, NATO established the Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU) in Wiesbaden, Germany, to “support the transformation of Ukraine’s defence and security forces, enabling its further integration with NATO”. It was supposed to take over from the US if needed. The NATO–Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training, and Education Centre (JATEC) was also established in Bydgoszcz, Poland. “It advances NATO’s long-term goals by translating Ukraine’s battlefield experience into doctrine, training, and capabilities that benefit all Allies and partners”¹³. It also supports defence reforms in Ukraine and fosters the development of cutting-edge military technologies.

The NATO–Ukraine Innovation Cooperation Roadmap was also unveiled in Washington. It includes lessons learned, experimentation, and technology testing in combat conditions. The aim of this Roadmap is “to enhance two-way cooperation between NATO and Ukraine on innovation in a coherent manner, ensuring interoperability and predictability – with a focus both on meeting urgent requirements and ensuring long-term cooperation”¹⁴.

Although the Alliance was reluctant to invite Ukraine to join, Ukraine continued to argue that its membership would stabilise the continent. Having heard “no” on other issues which subsequently became a “yes”, Ukrainian officials believed their insistence would pay off. In their meetings with NATO, Ukrainian officials insisted that Ukraine must receive a NATO invitation soon, independent of summit schedules. The invitation should cover Ukraine’s entire

¹³ *The NATO–Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training & Education Centre: Closer Partnership, Stronger Alliance, Safer Future*, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/nato-ukraine-joint-analysis-training-education-centre-closer-hjule/>.

¹⁴ *Summary of the NATO–Ukraine Innovation Cooperation Roadmap*, NATO, 5 August 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_228255.htm.

territory within internationally recognised borders. Subsequent practical integration details could be worked out afterwards using existing platforms like the NATO–Ukraine Council and other relevant dialogue formats. The aANP is seen by Ukrainian officials as an auxiliary instrument to prepare Ukraine for the accelerated completion of the NATO accession talks once conditions permit. It defines Ukraine’s EU and NATO membership as “fundamental national interests”¹⁵.

After Trump’s re-election, there were multiple signals that the Alliance’s position on Ukraine was changing. In contradiction to NATO’s stated policy on Ukraine’s membership, Trump said “I don’t think they’ll ever be able to join NATO”¹⁶. In their communications, NATO officials echoed Donald Trump and started emphasising the need to make a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine rather than continue to provide military support to Ukraine. NATO Secretary General reports for 2023 and 2024 are quite different in their treatment of Ukraine; the 2024 report makes no mention of Ukraine’s future membership.

At the same time, working-level cooperation is ongoing, and Ukraine continues to provide updates to NATO on aANP implementation. Among practical steps advancing NATO integration is connecting Ukrainian air defence systems and fighter jets to NATO’s unified Link-16 digital network and aligning Ukrainian military education with NATO standards through an institutional audit. Ukraine also demonstrates growing interoperability by contributing to a draft NATO

¹⁵ Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, *Adapted Annual National Programme for 2024*, <https://nato.mfa.gov.ua/storage/app/sites/115/ukraine-adapted-annual-national-programme-2024.pdf> [23.06.2025]. The aANP for 2025 was adopted by the Ukrainian government and presented to NATO, but it is a lot less public than aANP 2024 as its text is not freely available.

¹⁶ *Read the Full Transcript of Donald Trump’s “100 Days” Interview With TIME*, Time, 25 April 2025, https://time.com/7280114/donald-trump-2025-interview-transcript/?itm_source=parsely-api [6.08.2025].

Science & Technology Strategy, collaborating on new military technologies, and participating in joint cyber exercises like Locked Shields. Providing continued support, NATO, via NSATU – which assumed responsibility from the US in the spring of 2025 – coordinates military aid to Ukraine provided by Capability Coalitions¹⁷.

The Hague Summit and its aftermath

The days before the 2025 NATO Summit were marked by uncertainty and anxiety. Ukrainian President Zelenskiy even considered not coming to The Hague because his role would be significantly reduced compared to the 2023 and 2024 meetings. Ultimately, largely due to NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte's diplomatic skills, Ukraine's presence at the summit was quite prominent. Although Ukraine was not represented at the NATO heads of state meeting, President Zelenskiy attended the pre-summit dinner with world leaders. He also conducted several bilateral meetings, including one with President Trump, which went quite smoothly. The NATO–Ukraine Council met at the foreign minister level and Zelenskiy and Rutte made a joint press appearance¹⁸. Mr. Rutte also announced that before July, European and Canadian Allies had pledged more than 35 billion EUR in support for Ukraine, which meant that most likely by the end of the year they would exceed 50 billion EUR support provided in 2024.

¹⁷ See H. Maksak, *Capability Coalitions: From Addressing Ukraine's Immediate Needs to a Long-Term Vision of Regional Cooperation*, "The Future Europe Journal", 24 July 2024, <https://feu-journal.eu/issues/issue-5/capability-coalitions-from-addressing-ukraines-immediate-needs-to-a-long-term-vision-of-regional-cooperation/> [10.08.2025].

¹⁸ *Rutte to Zelensky: Ukraine's NATO Future Is "Irreversible"* – NATO Summit in Hague, Europe Pulse YouTube Channel, 23 June 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXQo9TGVDto>.

Trying not to irritate President Trump, known for his dislike of prolonged meetings, the Allies made the summit short. Its Communique was also short, containing only 5 points. It reaffirmed the Allies' commitment to collective defence under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty and mentioned Russia as a long-term and persistent threat. The allies agreed to raise defence spending to 5% of GDP, a major win for President Trump. Direct support for Ukraine and its defence industry is also included in this percentage¹⁹. The Allies acknowledged that Ukraine's security contributes to their own and pledged continued support. They also pledged to rapidly expand transatlantic defence industrial cooperation.

The summit's Communique did not mention Ukraine's future membership. Secretary General Rutte, however, said on many occasions that the Alliance's policy on the issue had not changed. At the Bucharest 9 + Nordic 5 meeting on June 2²⁰, he emphasised that Ukraine's membership could not be part of peace negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow. He stressed that it was agreed on in Washington and that Ukraine and NATO "are building that bridge as we speak"²¹. Addressing journalists on the eve of the summit, Rutte stressed the irreversibility of Ukraine's path despite objections from the US, "That is still true today, and it will still be true on Thursday after this summit".²²

¹⁹ See more in first chapter by D. Jankowski.

²⁰ See J. Bornio, *Szczyt Bukareszteńskiej Dziewiątki i państw nordyckich w Wilnie – przygotowania do szczytu NATO w Hadze*, "Komentarze IEŚ" 2025, no. 1377, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/szczyt-bukaresztanskiej-dziewiatki-i-panstw-nordyckich-w-wilnie-przygotowania-do-szczytu-nato-w-hadze/> [6.08.2025].

²¹ A. Stankevičius, *All allies agreed on Ukraine's NATO membership, says Rutte in Vilnius*, lrt.lt, 2 June 2025, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2580055/all-allies-agreed-on-ukraine-s-nato-membership-says-rutte-in-vilnius>.

²² J. Detsch, C. Körömi, *NATO chief: Ukraine's path to alliance still "irreversible"*, "Politico", 23 June 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-chief-ukraine-alliance-irreversible-donald-trump-us-mark-rutte-eu-canada-russia-defense/>.

Many in Ukraine criticised the summit for failing to mention the irreversibility of Ukraine's path to NATO, but Ukraine's newly appointed Ambassador to NATO, Alyona Getmanchuk, stressed its positive sides. She pointed out that Russia was the only country identified as a long-term threat in the final communiqué. She asked if any other recent summits with the US leader had mentioned Russia in this way. Ukraine, on the other hand, became the only partner country to receive a separate mention in the communiqué. "And not just a mention: Ukraine was included in the paragraph that reflects the summit's main outcome – namely, the increase of defence spending to 5% of member states' GDP"²³.

The Hague summit decision laid the groundwork for a new weapons procurement mechanism known as the Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List (PURL), launched by the US and NATO. Under this arrangement, Ukraine submits requests for American equipment and ammunition, which are confirmed by the SACEUR. NATO will coordinate deliveries through NSATU. Aid packages worth about 500 million USD each will be announced regularly, funded through a special mechanism that allows Alliance members and partners to make voluntary contributions. To speed up delivery, supplies will come directly from US stockpiles. The Netherlands agreed to finance the first package, and on 6 August 2025, US State Department Spokesperson Tammy Bruce announced that Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands will collectively fund over 1 billion USD worth of American weapons for Ukraine. The erratic US behaviour, exemplified by an abrupt decision of the US administration to suspend the delivery of weapons promised to Ukraine by the Biden Administration, only a week after

²³ A. Getmanchuk, Facebook post, 25 June 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/jxapmcse>.

the Hague summit, unfortunately, does not add confidence to the arrangement.

Despite these tumultuous processes taking place in European security, Ukraine continues to define its NATO membership as its fundamental national interest. On July 21st, President Zelenskiy told the annual gathering of Ukrainian heads of diplomatic missions that NATO remains the strongest, and likely the most effective, security architecture in Europe and the world. He stressed that Ukraine's relations with NATO are now filled with more substance than at any point during Ukraine's independence and added that at the working level, Ukraine's integration with NATO continued. Zelenskiy encouraged Ukrainian diplomats to take all possible political steps and to convey to their counterparts that NATO enlargement ensures peace in Europe. "...it is precisely where NATO has advanced that decades of peace have taken hold, while in places where NATO is slow to act, peace is often scarce" Zelenskiy said²⁴.

Conclusions

The primary purpose of the NATO Summit in The Hague was to strengthen the Alliance itself. Its goal was to send a signal to Russia that the transatlantic bond remains strong, and that the Alliance is going to take its security seriously. Neither Ukraine's membership nor an invitation to NATO were on the agenda. Politically, it was a step back for Ukraine, but the summit's decisions laid the foundation for practical steps to enhance Ukraine's security. In addition, none of the previously institutionalised cooperation and integration mechanisms were dismantled and cooperation at

²⁴ Office of the President of Ukraine, *Address by the President to the Participants of the Annual Meeting of the Heads of Ukraine's Foreign Diplomatic Missions: "From the Power of Diplomacy to the Diplomacy of Power"*, 21 July 2025, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zvernennya-prezidenta-do-uchasnikiv-shorichnoyi-naradi-keriv-99093> [8.08.2025].

the working level continues. After the summit, NATO has become an essential part of the new PURL mechanism for providing military assistance to Ukraine.

Ukraine's NATO membership appears to no longer be a bargaining chip in talks with Russia. The fact that the Secretary General made an announcement that the Alliance's policy on the issue had not changed without raising objections indicates that there was a shift in the US stance. It does not mean, however, that Ukraine's membership has become any closer. Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty stipulates that a unanimous agreement of its members is needed to extend an invitation to a non-member country to join the Alliance. Unanimous agreement is clearly out of reach, with some leaders such as Hungary's Orban expressing their open opposition, and some, like the newly elected Polish President, Nawrocki, expressing doubts. In addition, Russian hybrid warfare and influence operations in Europe continue, and the position of other NATO countries may still change. Given the volatility of his character, Trump may revisit the issue in pursuit of a deal with Russia, even though it may strain the Alliance because some allies, particularly the Baltics, strongly support Ukraine's membership.

In a wider context, it is now clear that post-Cold War hopes of integrating Russia into the European security order have failed. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia chose to reconstitute itself as an empire and make a claim to its former colonies, including some Eastern European countries. By refusing to take Donald Trump's more than generous offers in exchange for stopping the war, and by intensifying its military preparations and hybrid warfare in Europe, Russia is clearly signalling its aggressive intent. Seeking an accommodation rather than stripping Russia of its ability to continue the fight, the approach adopted by the US Administration will allow Russia to reconstitute after securing its gains in Ukraine if an accommodation is reached. Ukraine's capitulation will have the same result. This approach does not lead to stable security in Europe.

Current NATO policy towards Ukraine is based on the assumption that Russia will escalate in response to NATO offering Ukraine Alliance membership. This is certainly the case if the Alliance's offer is not backed up by the necessary capabilities and resolve to fight Russia. To date, despite his strong statements, Putin has not crossed the retaliation threshold in his attacks on NATO countries. This is a sign that he is not willing to get involved in a fight with a stronger opponent. Although Ukraine has evolved from being a net recipient of security assistance to a contributor to European and NATO's security, its capabilities still remain inferior to Russia's, and it risks losing if the war grinds on. Ukraine's inclusion into the Alliance (if at the time of the decision it is interoperable with NATO, and all relevant defence plans are made) is going to increase NATO strength, thus deterring Russia. So, it is hard to disagree with President Zelenskiy, who believes that NATO enlargement to include Ukraine will lead to peace.

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NATO AFTER THE SUMMIT IN THE HAGUE. STRATEGIC CHALLENGES AND REGIONAL ADAPTATION

This paper represents a significant contribution to NATO's ongoing strategic analysis. A key contribution of the study is its ability to combine institutional insights with theoretical sophistication, while yielding practical implications for policymakers. [...] The study's originality, comprehensiveness, and factual accuracy make it essential reading for understanding NATO's strategic evolution since The Hague. Moreover, it successfully balances academic rigor with political relevance, offering both in-depth analysis and practical recommendations for adapting the Alliance to an increasingly complex security environment.

From the review by Dr. Wojciech Michnik

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