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Between resilience and adaptation? NATO's frontline states in an era of Euro-Atlantic uncertainty¹

Między odpornością a adaptacją? Państwa frontowe NATO w dobie niepewności euroatlantyckiej

ABSTRACT:

This article examines the multifaceted strategic dilemmas facing North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) frontline states in the face of the deteriorating security situation in Europe and uncertainty surrounding Donald Trump's second term in office. NATO, widely recognised as the cornerstone of transatlantic security for more than seven decades, is facing a complex geopolitical challenge characterised by a resurgent Russia, the disintegration of the liberal rules-based order, and evolving global threats. The apparent radical shift in US foreign policy under the second Trump administration introduces an additional element of unpredictability with regard to Washington's commitment to collective defence, burden-sharing expectations, and NATO's strategic priorities. This analysis delves into the implications of this uncertainty for NATO's core pillars, including Article 5, defence spending targets, and the alignment of member states' strategic objectives. In addition, the article focuses on the specific challenges facing NATO's frontline states (with Poland as a case study), examining their unique geostrategic situation and the adaptation efforts they are undertaking.

KEYWORDS:

NATO, Alliance Politics, Euro-Atlantic Security, Collective Defence, Russia, Frontline States

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STRESZCZENIE:

Artykuł analizuje wielowymiarowe dylematy strategiczne, z jakimi mierzą się państwa frontowe Organizacji Traktatu Północnoatlantyckiego (NATO) w obliczu pogarszającej się sytuacji bezpieczeństwa w Europie oraz niepewności związanej z drugą kadencją Donalda Trumpa na stanowisku prezydenta Stanów Zjednoczonych. Zasadnicze pytanie badawcze brzmi: w jaki sposób nieprzewidywalność polityki USA wpływa na strategie adaptacyjne państw frontowych NATO, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem Polski. NATO, od dekad uznawane za fundament bezpieczeństwa transatlantyckiego, konfrontuje się z odrodzeniem potęgi Rosji, erozją liberalnego porządku międzynarodowego oraz ewolucją globalnych zagrożeń, co wymusza redefinicję dotychczasowych założeń odstraszania i obrony zbiorowej Sojuszu. Artykuł analizuje konsekwencje tej sytuacji dla kluczowych filarów NATO, w tym interpretacji Artykułu 5, wymogów dotyczących wydatków obronnych oraz kształtowania wspólnych priorytetów strategicznych państw członkowskich. Szczególna uwaga poświęcona jest państwom frontowym, których specyficzne położenie geostrategiczne wymusza przyspieszoną modernizację sił zbrojnych, wzmacnianie odporności państwa oraz intensyfikację współpracy dwustronnej i wielostronnej, co zostaje zilustrowane na przykładzie Polski jako studium przypadku.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

NATO, polityka sojusznicza, bezpieczeństwo euroatlantyckie, obrona zbiorowa, Rosja, państwa frontowe

1. The frontline states' strategic dilemmas²

For much of the past 76 years, NATO has been the cornerstone of security in the Euro-Atlantic realm. But that familiar sense of strategic clarity is giving way to something far less stable. The post-Cold War consensus that once held the transatlantic relationship together has begun to unravel, pressured by a more assertive Russia, shifting global power dynamics, and a notable reorientation in US foreign policy priorities³. This growing uncertainty affects the entire Alliance, of course, but it lands with particular weight on NATO's eastern flank. For the frontline states of Estonia, Finland, and Latvia, as well as Lithuania, Poland, and Romania, the combination of an assertive Russia

² The publication was funded under the program "Excellence Initiative – Research University" at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow.

³ M. Bergmann, *The Transatlantic Alliance in the Age of Trump: The Coming Collisions*, CSIS, 14 February 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/transatlantic-alliance-age-trump-coming-collisions>.

and the changing role of the United States in Europe has created a serious challenge⁴. These states now find themselves caught between two hard realities: a Russia that continues to pose a direct and credible threat, and a United States whose long-term reliability as a security guarantor no longer feels entirely assured. That combination has produced what might best be described as a strategic paradox, one that this article attempts to address.

This paradox is defined by the simultaneous pursuit of two seemingly contradictory security strategies. On one hand, these frontline states are engaged in a form of **hyper-resilience**, a policy of dramatically increasing their national defence capabilities and deepening their military and political integration with the very US security structures whose long-term commitment is now in question. This involves unprecedented levels of defence spending, large-scale procurement of American military hardware, and the establishment of permanent US military bases on their soil. On the other hand, they are pursuing **strategic adaptation**, a hedging strategy that involves investing in alternative security frameworks, primarily through enhanced regional cooperation and cautious engagement with European Union (EU) defence initiatives⁵.

This article suggests that the evolving strategies of Poland and other frontline states reflect a calculated response to a deteriorating trust in the stability of American security guarantees. How has the heightened uncertainty surrounding the US commitment to NATO reshaped the strategic calculus and security policies of NATO frontline states, particularly Poland? That is a central (research) question of this article. By forging a web of military and political interdependence, frontline states are effectively trying to make US disengagement too costly to consider. But at the same time, they are quietly building pathways toward greater regional and European cooperation in the realm of defence, just in case that bond does not hold. This balancing act is fraught with trade-offs, and it also raises difficult questions about the future coherence of NATO and the feasibility of a stronger, more autonomous European defence framework.

⁴ On the concept of a frontline state, see A. Mazurkiewicz, W. Michnik, *Towards the Frontline States Concept: Understanding the Responses to Russia's War Against Ukraine* (PeaceRep report), Conflict and Civiness Research Group, London School of Economics, 2023.

⁵ For a detailed explanation of hedging in IR see J.D. Ciorciari, J. Haacke, *Hedging in international relations: An introduction*, "International Relations of the Asia-Pacific" 2019, vol. 19, issue 3, pp. 367–374, DOI: 10.1093/irap/lcz017.

This article further argues that the strategy of Poland – as a frontline state – represents a complex, simultaneous pursuit of both resilience and adaptation, born of deep-seated historical anxieties and acute geopolitical necessity⁶. This dual approach aims to bind the United States to European security through the creation of deep-seated military interdependence, making an American withdrawal a strategically costly endeavour. Additionally, it seeks to build viable contingency options through European and regional partnerships should that transatlantic bond ultimately fail. This strategy, however, is fraught with internal tensions and significant risks. The very act of “Americanizing” their military capabilities to enhance resilience may practically hinder their ability to contribute to and integrate with a more autonomous European defence pillar. In strictly political terms, for European NATO members, it seems to be difficult (if not impossible) to rekindle the defensive focus on European states without weakening the US-oriented transatlantic links in the frontline states. This dynamic has profound implications for the future cohesion of NATO, the trajectory of European defence integration, and the overall stability of the transatlantic security architecture.

To explore this central argument, this article will proceed in several stages. First, it will address the research gap by situating the analysis within the existing literature on alliance theory, NATO adaptation, and European security. Second, it will analyse the source of the contemporary uncertainty by examining the erosion of the US commitment to European defence and its potential corrosive effect on the credibility of NATO’s Article 5. Third, it will present a detailed case study of Poland as a NATO frontline state, dissecting the specific mechanisms of its dual-track strategies of resilience and adaptation. Finally, the article will analyse the inherent contradictions and dilemmas of this dual strategy, concluding with an assessment of its broader implications for the future of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

The academic premise of this paper is rooted in a conceptual–interpretive exploration of how NATO’s frontline states (those that, before the War in Ukraine, were perceived as the alliance’s strategic periphery) redefine their roles and security postures amid systemic uncertainty. Rather than pursuing a hypothesis-testing design typical of alliance theory, the study contributes to the growing qualitative literature examining the intersection of structural insecurity, national role conception, and discursive adaptation. In an era

⁶ W. Michnik, *Poland as a new frontline state*, “New Eastern Europe” 2022, no. 3(51).

marked by the erosion of the liberal order, renewed Russian assertiveness, and shifting US strategic behaviour under President Trump's second administration, this inquiry seeks to understand how frontline states interpret and navigate these transformations. The central analytical construct – “double adaptability” – captures two overlapping logics of strategic behaviour visible in these states' security practices. On the one hand, hyper-resilience reflects the effort to enhance deterrence credibility through military preparedness, institutional entrenchment, and intensified alliance signalling. On the other hand, adaptive hedging encompasses pragmatic diversification strategies, including regional alignments, European defence initiatives, and autonomous resilience-building. The concept becomes an exploratory lens through which the ambiguity of current Euro-Atlantic relations can be interpreted. Through Poland's case, the paper demonstrates how a frontline state operationalises double adaptability as both a response and a narrative, simultaneously asserting reliability within NATO while pragmatically recalibrating to a less predictable strategic environment. This interpretive framing underscores that frontline states are not merely reactive security consumers but active narrators and agents of alliance transformation. The paper thus offers a conceptual synthesis bridging strategic practice, identity construction, and discursive resilience, situating the agency of frontline states at the centre of understanding NATO's evolving adaptation in an age of uncertainty.

Three main bodies of literature inform this analysis. The first, alliance theory, explores the enduring tension between abandonment and entrapment⁷. Classic alliance theory explores how states balance these risks, often through signals of commitment and burden-sharing⁸. This translates well into strategic dilemmas for NATO frontline states, especially after Russia's annexation of Crimea and then the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The contemporary debate has been heavily influenced by the rhetoric of the Trump presidency, which has reframed the transatlantic bargain in transactional terms, emphasising burden-sharing not as a measure of collective resolve but as a condition for continued US protection⁹. The second, literature on NATO adaptation¹⁰, has documented the Alliance's return to collective

⁷ See A. Lanoszka, *Military Alliances in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge 2022.

⁸ G. Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, Ithaca 1997; S.M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca 1987.

⁹ M. Bergmann, op. cit.

¹⁰ For example: H. Larsen, *Adapting NATO to Great-Power Competition*, “The Washington Quarterly” 2022, no. 45(4), pp. 7–26.

defence and the evolution from “deterrence by punishment” to “deterrence by denial”, aimed at defending every inch of Allied territory¹¹. Scholars like Timothy Sayle expand NATO’s role beyond deterrence, framing it as “Pax Atlantica”, a stabilising force that enabled non-military cooperation and intra-alliance cohesion across changing geopolitical contexts¹². Finally, research on European security architecture traces the push for strategic autonomy, long driven by France but reinvigorated by Brexit, the Trump presidency, and Russia’s aggression¹³. Yet, the perspectives of frontline states, often sceptical of decoupling from the US, remain underexplored despite their critical position in the evolving European security¹⁴.

While these three streams of scholarly literature are substantial, they tend to operate in parallel, analysing the “Trump effect” on transatlantic relations, the defence and deterrence on the eastern flank, and the policy debates around the evolution of the European security architecture as separate phenomena. A research gap exists in scholarship that systematically connects these threads to analyse the interplay between NATO frontline states’ dual strategies. Specifically, existing analyses have yet to adequately account for the interaction between what might be called hyper-resilience, an intensified reliance on the US security guarantee, and adaptive hedging, defined here as efforts to broaden security partnerships and invest in alternative frameworks, including those rooted in European defence cooperation¹⁵. The contradiction at the heart of this approach has not been fully explored: how do frontline states manage the tension between doubling down on a hegemon whose future commitment is uncertain, while simultaneously laying

¹¹ Z. Szenes, *Reinforcing deterrence: assessing NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept*, “Defense & Security Analysis” 2023, no. 39(4); T. Tardy (ed.), *The Nations of NATO: Shaping the Alliance’s Relevance and Cohesion*, Oxford 2022.

¹² T.A. Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order*, Ithaca–London 2019, p. 9.

¹³ L. Retter et al., *European Strategic Autonomy in Defence: Transatlantic visions and implications for NATO, US and EU relations*, RAND Corporation, 2021, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1300/RR1319-1/RAND_RR1319-1.pdf.

¹⁴ R. Pszczel, *Europe’s security without America: an imperative of the moment or a dangerous idea?*, Centre for Eastern Studies, 15 November 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-11-15/europes-security-without-america-imperative-moment-or-a>.

¹⁵ On the concept of hedging, see, for instance, J. Ringsmose, M. Webber, *No time to hedge? Articulating a European pillar within the Alliance*, NDC Policy Brief, no. 5, NATO Defence College, 2020.

the groundwork for a post-American or semi-American European security order? This article aims to address that gap by offering an analysis of the policy choices undertaken by Poland, with a focus on how its government attempts to balance, reconcile, or compartmentalise its dual strategies. In doing so, it assesses the internal coherence of this approach, the frictions it generates, both domestically and within NATO, and its potential long-term sustainability in the context of the shifting transatlantic dynamics.

2. NATO frontline states and the growing US unpredictability

The strategic dilemma confronting NATO's frontline states stems largely from a deepening crisis surrounding one of the Alliance's most foundational pillars: the credibility of the US security guarantee as articulated in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. While no US administration, including that of Donald Trump, formally renounced the commitment to collective defence, elements of the presidential rhetoric and policy behaviour have, at times, cast doubt on Washington's long-term reliability. This growing uncertainty has unsettled allies, particularly those closest to Russia's border. Importantly, this erosion of trust did not originate with the Trump administration. However, his presidency markedly accelerated and, to some extent, institutionalised a broader shift in US foreign policy, away from the post-Cold War liberal internationalist consensus and toward a more transactional, unilateralist approach encapsulated in the "America First" doctrine¹⁶. For frontline NATO members, the implications of this shift have been especially acute, as they are increasingly forced to confront the possibility that the Alliance's core security guarantees may no longer be as automatic or politically unquestionable as they once seemed.

A second Trump presidency, now underway, is widely anticipated to accelerate the shift toward a more assertive and confrontational US posture within the Alliance¹⁷. This trajectory was evident, for example, during the

¹⁶ A. Ghilescu, *The Foreign Policy of the United States in the Post-Trump Era*, [in:] *Great Powers' Foreign Policy*, Leiden 2022, pp. 23–24.

¹⁷ See C. Laderman, *With Trump's Return, the Transatlantic 'Great Debate' Resumes*, "Survival" 2024, no. 66(6), pp. 7–16.

Munich Security Conference in February 2025, where administration officials signalled a more reserved approach to their European allies. Although the United States reaffirmed its support for the Alliance and the principle of collective defence at the NATO summit in The Hague in June 2025, such declarations have done little to dispel allied concerns¹⁸. Overall, the current administration appears less constrained by the transatlanticist voices that acted as a moderating force during Trump's first term. The absence of institutional counterweights, whether within the executive branch, Congress, or the broader foreign policy establishment, raises the prospect of a more one-sided and unilateral US approach to NATO, with potentially profound implications for the cohesion and credibility of the Alliance.

This shift has transformed the transatlantic relationship from one based on shared values and strategic interests into a collision course across multiple domains, including trade, climate policy, and, most critically, security. The core of this new approach is a transactional view of alliances, in which allies are assessed not as partners in a collective enterprise but as clients who must pay for protection¹⁹. Allies, particularly in Europe, are often characterised as “delinquent” economic competitors and security free-riders who exploit American largesse²⁰. This perspective fundamentally reframes the purpose of NATO, viewing it less as a source of collective strength for the United States and more as a geostrategic burden that risks entangling America in distant conflicts²¹.

This ideological shift has a direct and corrosive impact on the credibility of NATO security guarantees, a dynamic perception held by both allies and adversaries. This perception is a function of at least three critical factors: the guarantor's political will to act, its military capability to intervene effectively, and its demonstrated commitment through forward presence and consistent

¹⁸ D.E Sanger, *Europe's New Reality: Trump May Not Quit NATO, but He's Already Undercutting It*, The New York Times, 20 February 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/20/us/politics/trump-nato.html>.

¹⁹ G. Slattery, *Exclusive: Trump Adviser Proposes New Tiered System for NATO Members Who Don't Pay Up*, Reuters, 13 February 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-adviser-proposes-new-tiered-system-nato-members-who-dont-pay-up-2024-02-13/>.

²⁰ D. Dunn, M. Webber, *Looking Ahead: Imbalance, Dependency and NATO's Uncertain Future*, “Defence Studies”, March 2025.

²¹ Ibid.

policy²². The current political climate of US uncertainty endangers all three pillars simultaneously.

First, public questioning of the US commitment to defend allies who have not met arbitrary defence spending targets directly undermines the perception of political will. When the leader of the Alliance suggests that the collective defence commitment is conditional, it invites adversaries to test that commitment and forces allies to question its reliability²³. This is particularly potent because the text of Article 5 itself contains a crucial ambiguity: it obligates each member to take “such action as it deems necessary” to restore security, which does not constitute an automatic declaration of war²⁴. Second, the potential for a significant reduction of US forces in Europe, a step openly contemplated during the first Trump administration, would degrade the military capability for a swift and decisive response²⁵. The US military provides critical enablers for NATO operations that European allies currently cannot replicate at scale. A US pullback would, therefore, create “enormous gaps in European defence”, severely hampering the Alliance’s ability to execute its defence plans for the eastern flank²⁶.

Third, the transactional approach erodes the demonstrated commitment that underpins deterrence. The constant emphasis on burden-sharing, particularly the demand for allies to meet the 2% of GDP defence spending target, is more than a budgetary dispute. It functions as a political tool that provides a ready-made pretext for withholding support or withdrawing from the Alliance altogether. For frontline states, this creates a coercive dynamic where they feel compelled to over-comply, not just to strengthen their own defences, but to continuously prove their value and justify the continued existence of the security guarantee they depend on. The foundation of the

²² M. Overhaus, *A Matter of Credibility, Conventional and Nuclear Security Commitments of the United States in Europe*, SWP Research Paper, 2019, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2019RP10/>.

²³ K. Raik, M. Terlikowski, M. Baumann, *Beyond Burden Sharing: Conceptualizing the European Pillar of NATO*, DGAP, 17 June 2025, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/beyond-burden-sharing-conceptualizing-european-pillar-nato>.

²⁴ P. Jonson, *The Debate About Article 5 and its Credibility*, NDC Research Paper, no. 58, May 2010, pp. 1–11.

²⁵ *American Troops in Europe Are Not ‘Forever,’ US Defense Chief Hegseth Warns*, POLITICO, 14 February 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/america-military-presence-europe-not-forever-us-pete-hegseth-warns/>.

²⁶ M. Bergmann, op. cit.

transatlantic bargain, an American commitment to European security in exchange for European political alignment and a forward defensive posture, is thus being systematically unravelled, forcing the most exposed allies to prepare for a future in which they may have to stand alone.

3. Case study: Poland's strategy of hyper-resilience and regional leadership

In response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and amid growing uncertainty within the Euro-Atlantic security environment, Poland has undertaken one of the most ambitious military transformations in modern European history. Driven by a strategic culture deeply informed by a history of invasion and abandonment, and an acute contemporary threat perception of a neo-imperialist Russia, Warsaw's strategy can be viewed as a case of hyper-resilience²⁷. It is not merely a defensive reaction but a proactive bid to fundamentally alter the security architecture of NATO's eastern flank, transforming Poland from a "security consumer" into the region's primary "security provider" and a linchpin of the Alliance's deterrence posture. This strategy unfolds along two main axes: a deep military and political alignment with the United States, and a parallel effort to cultivate regional leadership and diplomatic hedges within Europe.

The centrepiece of Poland's strategy is a substantial military buildup, underwritten by a commitment to defence spending that is unparalleled in the Alliance²⁸. With expenditures projected to reach 4.7% of its GDP in 2025, Poland is not only far exceeding the NATO 2% guideline but is also outspending the United States as a percentage of its economy²⁹. Unlike many allies still adjusting to new defence spending expectations, Poland is already well ahead of the curve. With defence expenditures approaching nearly 5% of GDP, Warsaw has solidified its status as one of NATO's most committed

²⁷ M. Kamiński, Z. Śliwa, *Poland's Threat Assessment: Deepened, Not Changed*, "PRISM" 2023, vol. 10, no. 2, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3323942/polands-threat-assessment-deepened-not-changed/>.

²⁸ K. Kvasha, 'Security, Europe!': *Poland's Rise as NATO's Defense Spending Leader*, Wilson Center, 6 March 2025, <https://diplomacy21-adelphi.wilsoncenter.org/article/security-europe-polands-rise-natos-defense-spending-leader>.

²⁹ Ibid.

members, far exceeding the Alliance's prior 2% benchmark and setting a performance standard for others to follow³⁰. The adoption of the new 5% spending pledge during the NATO Summit in The Hague, comprising 3.5% for core military capabilities and up to 1.5% for broader resilience measures, was not a departure for Poland but rather a formal endorsement of policies already in place. Accordingly, Polish officials welcomed the agreement as recognition of the security logic Warsaw has long advanced: that credible deterrence on NATO's eastern flank requires persistent, high-level investment, not just rhetorical commitment. The question for NATO and its member states is how to translate spending targets into tangible capabilities, especially for countries directly exposed to Russian hybrid and conventional threats³¹. For Poland and other frontline states, the debate surrounding NATO's new defence spending framework extends well beyond headline percentages; as a frontline state bordering both Russia and war-torn Ukraine, Warsaw has repeatedly underscored that credible deterrence cannot rest on symbolic commitments or politically flexible interpretations of defence investment. From this standpoint, contributions will be measured by the timely delivery of concrete military capabilities. These concerns reflect a broader consensus among NATO's eastern members, who remain acutely aware of the immediate and multidimensional threat posed by Russia.

Poland's military modernisation is closely linked to a political strategy of binding the United States to Polish security through deep, institutionalised interdependence. Warsaw has actively pursued a bilateral security relationship that goes beyond standard NATO arrangements. One striking example was the establishment of the first permanent US forces on NATO's eastern flank, including the forward headquarters of the US Army's V Corps in Poznań, which is responsible for commanding rotational US forces in Europe³². By making itself an indispensable partner, Poland's strategy aims to render the American security guarantee "too big to fail", A purely political

³⁰ *Poland to Increase Defence Spending Plans in 2025*, Euractiv, 16 April 2025, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/poland-to-increase-defence-spending-plans-in-2025-media-reports/>.

³¹ Government of the Republic of Poland, *Minister Radosław Sikorski Takes Part in NATO Summit in The Hague*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10 July 2025, <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/minister-radoslaw-sikorski-takes-part-in-nato-summit-in-the-hague>.

³² *U.S. Security Cooperation With Poland*, United States Department of State, 20 January 2025, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-poland>.

commitment from Washington can be altered or abandoned by a change in administration. However, a deep military and logistical entanglement is far more difficult and costly to reverse. By hosting permanent US command-and-control structures, becoming a major and lucrative customer for the American defence-industrial base, and positioning itself as the central logistical hub for all military aid flowing to Ukraine, Poland elevates its importance from a simple treaty ally to a critical strategic asset for the United States in Eastern Europe. This approach is designed to fundamentally shift the withdrawal of security commitments from Poland would not be a simple political decision, but a significant strategic, logistical, and economic setback for the United States itself.

While Poland's security and defence policy is overwhelmingly US- and NATO-centric, its diplomatic strategy demonstrates a clear-eyed recognition of the need for adaptation and hedging. In this context, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has repeatedly emphasised the “paradox” of current transatlantic security arrangements, stating that “500 million Europeans are asking 300 million Americans to protect them from 140 million Russians”³³. This rhetorical figure reinforces Warsaw's advocacy for greater European responsibility in defence and for strengthening both NATO and EU security capabilities, including the 800 billion EUR “ReArm Europe” plan of the European Commission³⁴. Tusk has made it clear that Poland's EU presidency in 2025 would be marked by a priority on collective security and a drive for greater (European) strategic autonomy. In addition, Warsaw is actively working to build political capital and create alternative security cooperation networks within Europe. This includes efforts to revitalise the Weimar Triangle, a trilateral format with France and Germany, to coordinate policy on key European security issues. In 2024, Poland and France signed a new Treaty on Enhanced Cooperation and Friendship, explicitly designed to upgrade their bilateral relationship in the fields of defence and energy, recognising Poland as a key strategic partner for Paris³⁵.

³³ M. Toth, J. Sweet, *Europe's thin red line in Ukraine*, The Hill, 6 March 2025, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/5178860-europes-thin-red-line-in-ukraine/>.

³⁴ European Parliament, *Verbatim report of proceedings*, 11 March 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-10-2025-03-11_EN.html.

³⁵ A. Dziubińska, A. Kacprzyk, *Poland and France Sign Treaty on Enhanced Cooperation and Friendship*, PISM, 13 May 2025, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/poland-and-france-sign-treaty-on-enhanced-cooperation-and-friendship>.

Furthermore, Poland's political, military, and humanitarian support for Ukraine since the 2022 invasion serves a dual strategic purpose. It directly weakens Russia, Poland's primary adversary, while also demonstrating Warsaw's credibility and leadership as a regional security actor. Poland is a leading advocate for Ukraine's integration into NATO and the EU, even though the recent political climate indicates a more reserved societal approach to Ukraine. Yet, this large-scale regional engagement – as Ukraine's staunchest supporter and a logistical and military hub – serves as a crucial hedge, strengthening Poland's position within Europe and building a network of partners that share its threat perception, thereby reducing its absolute reliance on a recently unpredictable Washington. The latest political discourse in Warsaw around potentially joining NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements further underscores the deep-seated anxiety about the ultimate credibility of the US nuclear umbrella and the search for more tangible security guarantees³⁶.

4. Europeanisation of NATO?

For much of NATO's post-Cold War history, European defence efforts were frequently criticised by scholars and policymakers for their inertia and underperformance. The critique was straightforward: as Europe grew wealthier and more stable, it ought to have developed the capacity to defend itself. In material terms, the resources were there, or at least within reach. Yet, paradoxically, the continued dominance of US military power in Europe created strong disincentives for meaningful change. Washington's security umbrella not only guaranteed protection but also allowed European governments to avoid the politically sensitive and economically burdensome task of re-arming and restructuring their national defence systems. This asymmetry, while often acknowledged, was rarely challenged. European societies, shaped by decades of relative peace and prosperity, saw little reason to disrupt the favourable terms of the transatlantic bargain. As long as the United States

³⁶ For a detailed analysis of the debate see M. Sus., Ł. Kulesa, *Breaking the silence: Explaining the dynamics behind Poland's desire to join NATO nuclear sharing in light of Russian aggression against Ukraine*, "The Non-Proliferation Review" 2023, no. 30(4–6), pp. 241–263.

remained willing to underwrite Europe's security, there was little domestic pressure to pursue genuine strategic autonomy. Calls for fairer burden-sharing, repeatedly voiced by American political leaders and senior military officials, particularly in the post-Cold War era, were largely ignored or deflected. For most European governments, preserving the existing arrangement made more sense than confronting its imbalances³⁷. And so, the transatlantic status quo endured, at least until the arrival of the first Trump administration, which marked a more confrontational US stance on alliance commitments.

The same external shocks that have prompted hyper-resilience on the eastern flank, namely, the uncertainty surrounding the US commitment and Russia's aggression, have also breathed new life into the long-stalled project of European defence integration. The concept of a European defence build-up and subsequent independence has evolved rapidly from a narrow, defence-industrial focus to a broad, holistic ambition for Europe or European NATO allies to act as a coherent geopolitical player across domains, including security, technology, energy, and trade³⁸. Key initiatives like the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) have been launched to provide the institutional and financial architecture for this ambition, aiming to foster collaborative capability development, enhance industrial competitiveness, and ultimately enable the EU to act autonomously when necessary.

From the perspective of NATO's frontline states, however, European defence and security independence is a profoundly double-edged sword. On the one hand, a militarily more capable and coherent Europe is unequivocally in their security interest³⁹. Not only does this enable Europeans to defend themselves, but it also strengthens Europe's role within NATO. In this view, a stronger Europe, supported by a more robust European pillar in NATO, becomes a more attractive and capable partner for the United States, thereby reinforcing rather than weakening the transatlantic bond. On the other

³⁷ See D. Dunn, M. Webber, *Looking Ahead: Imbalance, Dependency and NATO's Uncertain Future*, "Defence Studies", March 2025, pp. 2–4.

³⁸ S. Kilic, *Half-Hearted or Pragmatic? Explaining EU Strategic Autonomy and the European Defence Fund through Institutional Dynamics*, "Central European Journal of International and Security Studies" 2023, vol. 18, issue 1, pp. 43–72.

³⁹ E. Brattberg, *Beyond European Versus Transatlantic Defense*, GMF Policy Brief, no. 003, 2018, <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Beyond%2520European%2520Versus%2520Transatlantic%2520Defense%2520edited.pdf>.

hand, the political rhetoric surrounding Europe's stronger defence posture, particularly as championed by France, often stokes deep-seated anxieties in Poland and other frontline states. The dominant fear is that the pursuit of "autonomy" could be interpreted in Washington not as "autonomy to act" but as "autonomy from the United States". This concern is amplified by persistent American scepticism toward EU defence initiatives, which are often viewed as efforts that will duplicate NATO structures, divert scarce resources, and discriminate against the US defence industry, ultimately leading to the decoupling of transatlantic security⁴⁰.

This reveals a fundamental strategic disconnect within Europe. For some core EU powers, particularly France, they see it as a form of strategic autonomy, that is, a geopolitical project aimed at establishing the EU as an independent pole in a multipolar world, capable of defending its interests without reliance on the United States. For states on NATO's north-eastern flank, the only acceptable vision for a European defence project is one that functions exclusively as a stronger European pillar within NATO⁴¹. Their goal is not to create an alternative to the US security guarantee but to supplement it and make Europe a more effective and self-reliant partner for Washington. This fundamental divergence in strategic objectives explains their cautious and often ambivalent engagement with grand EU defence projects like PESCO, which they contrast with their enthusiastic embrace of more pragmatic, NATO-compatible formats like enhanced Nordic-Baltic cooperation. For the frontline states, European defence is a means to an end; a stronger, more resilient NATO, and not an end in itself.

5. Conclusions

As argued above, the dual-track strategy of Poland – one of the NATO frontline states – is not a product of confusion but rather a rational, if highly challenging, response to an increasingly unstable security environment.

⁴⁰ For more, see L.S. Schuette, *Shaping Institutional Overlap: NATO's Responses to EU Security and Defence Initiatives since 2014*, "The British Journal of Politics and International Relations" 2022, vol. 25, issue 3, pp. 423–443, DOI: 10.1177/13691481221079188.

⁴¹ N. Tocci, *The Paradox of Europe's Defense Moment*, "Texas National Security Review" 2023, vol. 6, issue 1, pp. 101–103, <https://tnsr.org/2023/01/the-paradox-of-europes-defense-moment/>.

The policy of hyper-resilience is a direct and logical reaction to the primary military threat from Russia, aiming to maximise deterrence by binding the Alliance's most powerful member, the United States, as tightly as possible to its defence. The policy of adaptive hedging is an equally logical insurance plan against the primary political threat: the potential failure of that same US commitment. While rational, the simultaneous pursuit of these two tracks creates a series of profound and unresolved tensions that will shape the future of the eastern flank and the Alliance as a whole.

The first and most significant tension is the capability-cohesion dilemma. By prioritising the rapid acquisition of high-end military hardware, particularly from the United States, the frontline states are dramatically enhancing their combat power and interoperability with US forces. This serves the goal of hyper-resilience. However, this "Americanisation" of their armed forces risks creating a de facto two-tiered military structure within. This dynamic could inadvertently undermine the very European defence industrial cooperation that initiatives like the EDF and PESCO are designed to foster⁴². In effect, the choice to buy American hardware to ensure the US security guarantee today could complicate the creation of a coherent European defence capability that might be needed tomorrow.

A second tension arises from the rhetoric-reality gap. As members of both NATO and the EU, the frontline states must rhetorically support European defence initiatives in order to be seen as constructive European partners. Their leaders regularly endorse the need for a stronger, more capable Europe. However, their practical actions, from massive US arms purchases to the prioritisation of bilateral agreements with Washington and London, demonstrate a clear and overwhelming preference for the transatlantic security pillar. This can create friction and mistrust within both the EU and NATO. European partners may question their commitment to collective EU projects, while Washington may view their engagement in EU defence formats with suspicion. Navigating these competing political demands requires a delicate diplomatic balancing act that can be difficult to sustain, especially in a crisis.

⁴² I. Marinova, J. Moyer, *Transatlantic Relations Under New US and EU Leadership: Europe's Defense Industrial Base*, Wilson Center, 31 January 2025, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/transatlantic-relations-under-new-us-and-eu-leadership-europes-defense-industrial-base>.

Finally, the dual-track strategy imposes an immense financial and administrative strain. The commitment to spend between 3% and 5% of GDP on defence, while simultaneously contributing personnel and resources to NATO missions, EU initiatives, and various regional formats, places a significant long-term burden on the economies and defence establishments of these nations⁴³. While Russia's aggression has created the political will for such expenditure in the short term, its long-term sustainability is a critical question. Future economic downturns or shifts in domestic political priorities could force governments into difficult trade-offs between their transatlantic commitments and their European or regional ones, potentially undermining the coherence of their carefully constructed dual strategy. The success of this ambitious approach depends not only on strategic acumen but also on sustained economic growth and unwavering political consensus, neither of which can be guaranteed indefinitely.

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⁴³ K. Marcinek, S. Boston, *Polish Armed Forces Modernization: A New Cornerstone of European Security?*, RAND, 29 May 2025, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2971-1.html.

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