



## ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 04 No. 01. July-September 2025. Page#.1428-1439

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)

## The Perceived US Withdrawal from NATO: Challenges and Opportunities for European Union (2016-2024)

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### ABSTRACT

*With an emphasis on the European Union's (EU) reaction and changing security framework, this paper examines the strategic, political, and normative ramifications of a possible US exit from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) between 2016 and 2024. By applying the classical realist theoretical framework this article identifies three main aspects through thematic analysis of primary and secondary sources of data. The research concludes that despite increased attempts to integrate the EU's defense, the EU's strategic independence is still constrained by internal political division, disparate threat perceptions, and operational constraints. In the conclusion, this paper argues that the threat of a real or hypothetical US exit serves as both a problem and a stimulus for rethinking European security. The bloc's capacity to balance conflicting national interests with shared strategic goals will determine whether this results in a more unified and independent EU defense identity or strengthen reliance on transatlantic cooperation.*

**Keywords:** US, NATO, European Union, Trump Administration.

### Introduction

For more than 70 years, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), formed after World War II, has been an essential element of European security. After the Cold War, NATO underwent considerable transformations, adjusting to emerging threats and geopolitical transitions (Rynning, 2014). Its strength arises from its ability to deliver "soft power," connect with allies, uphold transatlantic values, and incorporate partners, providing perspectives for addressing present mission and unity challenges (Wenger, 2007). Since 1989, the shifting political landscape in Europe has sparked hopes that NATO could dissolve or weaken (Woodliffe, 1998). The alliance encounters persistent demands for change to adequately meet current security needs, evolving past its role as merely a "toolbox" for the United States (Hallams, 2009). The fast-changing security landscape requires prompt and effective changes in alliances (Ibrahimi & Plaku, 2013).

The Trump administration frequently indicated the waning of the liberal international order, a contradiction since this order has traditionally benefited the US. Although often linked to an erratic, chaotic presidency, a more profound reasoning could support Trump's foreign policy. Throughout his campaign, Trump sought to "revamp America's foreign policy" by departing from the bipartisan agreement on the nation's international role. Regardless of his rhetoric, his

administration maintained numerous long-standing agreements, including those he persistently criticized. Trump's foreign policy is frequently characterized as transactional, focusing on costs and benefits instead of principles and standards. He often condemned NATO ally nations for failing to achieve the 2% GDP defense expenditure goal, cautioning that the US could "choose its own path" (Baker, 2018).

Reports from 2018 and 2019 indicated that Trump contemplated pulling the US out of NATO in private (Cooper, 2019). During the 2018 Brussels summit, Trump openly cautioned about US unilateral actions if allies failed to substantially boost their spending, which many viewed as a threat of withdrawal (Borger, 2018). Ex-National Security Adviser John Bolton recalled that Trump almost declared a withdrawal at that summit (Bolton, 2020). Worried about possible abrupt withdrawal, Congress enacted a law in 2019 mandating Congressional consent for any US departure from NATO (Edmondson, 2019). Trump criticized leaders of allied countries such as Canada, Germany, and the UK. The response from numerous advocates of the liberal system was regret and despair. Mainstream media consistently scrutinized the Trump administration. Responses from US allies were more revealing; German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel remarked in December 2017 that the US exit from "Western-influenced multilateralism" was "speeding up the transformation of the global order." (Sperling & Webber, 2019). These views matched those of notable US foreign policy leaders, including fifty ex-Republican national security officials who, during the 2016 election, described a Trump presidency as "the most reckless in American history." Post-election criticism persisted from previous high-ranking national security, military, and intelligence officials, along with numerous Republicans. Trump's authoritarian tendencies generated significant discomfort.

However, two important disclaimers must be kept in mind. First, many of Trump's positions were merely declarative, limited to tweets and rallies. While presidential statements have effects, excessive attention to his bombast can lead to false threats never materializing. Second, Trump largely stayed within well-known bounds regarding US foreign policy, continuing special forces operations, reaffirming security guarantees to allies like South Korea and Japan, and supporting the Saudi relationship. While he deviated from Obama on issues like Israel-Palestine, the anti-ISIS campaign, and defense budget increases, the Republican Party largely supported these post-Obama positions. Secretary of Defense James Mattis's 2018 resignation over decisions to reduce personnel in Afghanistan and remove aid for Syrian anti-ISIS operations, while significant, aligned with a longer-term trend of reducing US overseas obligations following the Iraq intervention. Maintaining previous policy parameters doesn't inherently signal commitment to order, but it suggests a logic beyond a mere desire to subvert.

The present study seeks to understand the implications of a possible US withdrawal from the transatlantic alliance and European security order. It identifies challenges such a withdrawal would pose for the European Union. Concurrently, it explores opportunities for a strengthened European defense and strategic autonomy in NATO's new configuration. The research questions include: What are the possible implications of a US withdrawal from the transatlantic alliance for European security and defense cooperation? What major security/political challenges would the EU face in a post-US NATO scenario? And what potential opportunities could arise for the EU in compensating for the absent NATO member in global security and defense cooperation? On March 4, 2025, Ursula von der Leyen, European Commission head, presented Readiness 2030

(previously ReArm Europe), a strategic defense plan aiming to improve EU military capabilities by mobilizing up to €800 billion for Europe's defense infrastructure (Henley, 2025).

This initiative, rebranded after criticism, responds to geopolitical threats like the Ukraine war and uncertainties over US military support. As the continent prepares to confront Russian aggression, the European Commission proposed a plan potentially freeing over €800 billion (\$841 billion) in defense spending over four years (Commission, 2024). Ahead of an EU leaders' summit, Von der Leyen presented five recommendations, Re-Arm Europe, to finance increased security spending (Von der Leyen, 2024), stating the bloc would "massively" increase defense spending in an era of rearmament. Her proposals include lending member states €150 billion for pan-European capabilities and triggering a budgetary escape clause, potentially freeing around €650 billion in flexibility (Von der Leyen, 2024). This plan emerges amid US President Donald Trump's potential withdrawal of backing for Ukraine and readiness to renounce NATO assurances (Trump, 2024), as he frequently criticized European NATO allies for inadequate defense budgets. Von der Leyen declared, "We are living in the most significant and perilous of times," asserting Europe is "resounding and clear" on its readiness to invest. According to alliance data, few NATO nations spent over 2.5% of GDP on defense in 2024, with almost a third falling short of the 2% NATO target set in 2014 (NATO, 2024). Von der Leyen emphasized Ukraine's immediate needs, but also Europe's long-term security responsibility. Proposed loans aim to reduce costs and enhance interoperability through cooperative armaments investment. Von der Leyen affirmed, "Europe is prepared to take on its responsibilities," adding, "ReArm Europe could mobilize nearly €800 billion in defense expenditures," while maintaining strong collaboration with NATO allies. This paper's primary contribution is informing discussions on EU defense autonomy amid a hypothetical US withdrawal from NATO.

It provides insights into challenges and opportunities for global security, scholarly discourse on transatlantic relations, and the EU's evolving global role. Adopting an institutionalist framework, drawing on Hirschman's "exit, voice, and loyalty," the paper argues voice prevails when exit is unfeasible, reviewing US policy toward NATO and noting "America First" nationalism under President Donald Trump. Since 2017, Trump embraced unilateralism, withdrawing from treaties and disparaging multilateral organizations.

### **Literature Review**

Existing literature on US withdrawal from NATO and its implications for European Union states is extensive and multifaceted, focusing on the Trump administration's transactional foreign policy, "voice" versus "exit," and broader impacts on European strategic autonomy and the transatlantic alliance. The Trump administration's approach to NATO prioritized cost-benefit analyses over traditional norms evident in frequent criticisms of NATO members for not meeting the 2% GDP defense spending benchmark. Scholars argue this transactional stance increased internal pressure on NATO, compelling members to reassess and increase their defense contributions paradoxically strengthening NATO's military posture despite friction. The literature identifies Trump's strategic choice to employ "voice" rather than "exit" with NATO (Chalmers & Kitchen, 2019). By leveraging harsh criticism and withdrawal threats, Trump aimed to push burden-sharing, effectively prompting NATO members to increase defense spending, though introducing significant transatlantic instability (Khan, 2021). Research emphasizes Trump's leadership style in redefining the US-NATO dynamic. His unpredictable and often unilateralist tendencies caused European allies to reevaluate US commitments, especially during Russia's renewed aggression against Ukraine.

This perceived US unreliability led European states to increasingly seek strategic autonomy. The Trump era catalyzed Europe's growing interest in "strategic autonomy". The administration's erratic support for NATO and Ukraine created ambiguity in Western deterrence, emboldening Russia and contributing to conditions for the 2022 full-scale invasion (Wiedekind & Böller, 2025). The literature converges on the perception of the US as an unreliable security partner, reconfiguring alliance behavior since the Trump administration. Even if Trump's presidency inadvertently strengthened NATO's military posture, the psychological and political impacts of his rhetoric withdrawal threats and transactional diplomacy continue to influence Europe's strategic thinking (Chalmers & Kitchen, 2019), evident in efforts like the European Commission's Readiness 2030 plan.

Trump's strategy sparked institutional and policy-level shifts in European defense frameworks. The EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) initiative (2017) gained impetus amid concerns about US commitment (Howorth, 2019). Debates over European strategic autonomy became central to EU security strategy, formalized by the European Commission's 2020 Strategic Compass and its 2022 follow-up (Lippert, 2019). These frameworks reflect Europe's aim to reduce over-reliance on a single security guarantee (Major, 2021).

However, internal opposition to this shift exists. Literature indicates EU member state disagreements on full strategic autonomy. Eastern European nations, like Poland and the Baltic republics, favor a robust US presence and view NATO and American leadership as essential deterrents against Russia (Buras, 2020). Some nations express caution about EU-led defense organizations, fearing they undermine NATO unity or redirect resources. Western European nations like France and Germany show greater willingness to fund independent European defense, but strategic priority and cultural differences remain (Witney, 2019).

The literature also discusses the long-term normative ramifications of Trump's transnationalism for the transatlantic alliance. Academics note NATO's cohesion historically rested on shared destiny and liberal-democratic values. Trump's portrayal of NATO as a financial security agreement weakened this normative basis. This shift could impact alliance stability if future leaders adopt similar transactional stances, eroding mutual trust and deterrence credibility, especially in crises like Ukraine (Rühle, 2020). Alliance signaling and deterrence credibility are also themes; adversarial powers like Russia were emboldened by perceived US security detachment and vulnerable NATO unity. Trump administration's ambiguity weakened NATO's deterrence posture, particularly in areas like the Black Sea and Baltics, where Russia tested resolve (Sakwa, 2021). Unclear messaging and unilateral actions like troop withdrawals caused communication gaps adversaries could exploit (Techau, 2020).

These uncertainties impacted European political discourse and civil society. European public opinion, from 2017-2020 polls by the European Council on Foreign Relations and Pew Research Centre, showed declining trust in the US as a reliable security partner, notably in Germany, France, and Spain (Dennison, 2020). This skepticism increased public support for European defense autonomy and integration, pressuring leaders to reduce US security umbrella dependency.

Lastly, the literature considers Trump's structural impact on NATO's future. One perspective suggests European nations adopt a "hedging" approach, investing in NATO while developing EU-specific capabilities as a precaution against future US disengagement (Simón, 2021). This two-pronged strategy enables Europe to benefit from transatlantic defense while preparing for diminished US leadership. Another view is that Trump's legacy might foster a more equitable

alliance, with Europe becoming a more independent yet cooperative NATO component, reducing strategic asymmetries (Kundnani, 2022).

Overall, research emphasizes Trump's influence on NATO and European security went beyond political theatre. His administration rekindled long-running discussions on burden-sharing, strategic autonomy, and alliance cohesion. The ensuing normative and policy-driven shifts continue to influence Europe's strategic thinking in the post-Trump era, especially amidst persistent security issues like Russia's conflict against Ukraine. The future of transatlantic ties will likely be determined by whether these changes result in a more resilient and independent Europe or increased alliance fracturing.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The strategic ramifications of a possible US withdrawal from NATO and its effect on the security architecture of the European Union are examined in this paper using the Classical Realist perspective. Classical Realism, which has its roots in the philosophical traditions of thinkers such as Hobbes and Thucydides and was later codified by Hans Morgenthau, holds that national interest, the quest for power, and the international system's inherent anarchy and competition are the main forces behind international politics. In a situation where there is no central authority, states prioritize security and survival because they are logical actors.

When this concept is applied to the relationship between the United States, the European Union, and NATO, it becomes clear that strategic calculations based on power preservation rather than moral commitments have always supported America's dominating role in the alliance. Classical Realist behavior is exemplified by Donald Trump's transactional foreign policy, which involves threatening departure and scolding NATO countries for failing to reach defense budget targets. His strategy is consistent with Morgenthau's view that the governing principle of state activity is the national interest, as measured in terms of power. Trump's "America First" strategy, which saw NATO as a tool rather than an alliance based on principles, so represented a realignment of US interests.

According to Classical Realists, the European Union's growing emphasis on "strategic autonomy" through programs like PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) and Readiness 2030 is practical rather than idealistic; it is a power-maximizing reaction to the possible deterioration of US security guarantees. The EU's drive for collective defense spending is a reflection of the age-old Realist principle that nations must adjust to preserve sovereignty and ward off foreign threats in this example, Russia when the balance of power changes or an ally shows signs of unreliability. The internal divide inside the EU is also explained by the idea. With Russia posing a direct threat, nations like Poland and the Baltic states still want a significant American presence in Europe. This supports Morgenthau's theory that states pursue distinct tactics because they perceive threats differently depending on their geographic location, level of capacity, and past experiences. In the meantime, nations like France and Germany advocate for an EU-led defense, not because they are anti-American, but rather because they understand that a lack of authority invites outside pressure, which is a fundamental principle of realist philosophy.

A helpful critique of liberal institutionalist presumptions that alliance coherence is ensured by shared values or norms is offered by classical realism. As demonstrated by Trump's contempt for diplomacy, multilateralism, and established international agreements, alliances only last when they advance the fundamental objectives of powerful nations. From this perspective, NATO

continues to exist because it serves strategic interests rather than because of a common commitment to democracy. The strength of the partnership varies along with these interests. To sum up, Classical Realism emphasizes how important national interest, security, and power are in determining the destiny of the transatlantic alliance. The United States' threat to withdraw from NATO is more of a return to basic Realist dynamics than a disruption. Despite their fragmentation, the EU's strategic recalibrations are logical reactions to systemic uncertainty. This theoretical paradigm predicts more realignment as Europe tries to re-establish itself in a multipolar, interest-driven world, in addition to explaining historical behavior.

### **Methodology**

In order to examine the strategic ramifications of a possible US exit from NATO and to evaluate the opportunities and difficulties that might follow for the EU, this study uses a qualitative research technique. A qualitative technique is suitable to capture the depth and complexity of these changing dynamics, given the political and interpretative character of the study issues, which center on alliance behavior, policy shifts, strategic autonomy, and transatlantic ties. To get a thorough grasp of the topic, the study uses both primary and secondary data sources. Key government speeches, official declarations, and political speeches are the primary source of data, especially those made by former US President Donald Trump, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and other NATO and EU defense ministers from 2016 to 2024. These lectures are essential for encapsulating the strategic goals, policy directives, and rhetorical framing that shape European and American security postures. Examples of foundational materials for examination are von der Leyen's introduction of Readiness 2030 (2025) and Trump's public speeches at the NATO Brussels Summits (2018).

The study makes considerable use of secondary sources in addition to primary materials, such as academic books, magazines, government reports, think-tank publications, peer-reviewed journal papers, and NATO/EU policy documents. These resources include background information, academic analysis, and professional assessments on the changing transatlantic security environment. Determining scholarly and policy-level discussions on strategic autonomy and alliance cohesiveness has been made possible by noteworthy contributions from the Strategic Studies Institute, the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), and the Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft.

The research uses theme analysis as its primary analytical method to evaluate and examine the data that was gathered. Finding, analyzing, and interpreting recurrent patterns or "themes" in qualitative data that are pertinent to the study's goals is made possible by thematic analysis. Getting to know the data, creating preliminary codes, looking for themes, evaluating and identifying themes, and lastly creating the narrative analysis are the steps in the process. "Transactional diplomacy and American retrenchment," "strategic autonomy and EU defense consolidation," "intra-European divergence on NATO dependence," and "normative disruption of the liberal order" are the main issues that arose from this investigation. To assess how political rhetoric, alliance behavior, and institutional adaptability reflect larger security realignments, these themes are cross-referenced with the study topics. With an emphasis on significant events like the 2018 NATO summit, the US legislative debate over NATO exit, the EU's Readiness 2030 initiative, and the Ukraine crisis beyond 2022, this technique also includes a case study component. These examples lend empirical weight to the larger theoretical debate based on classical realism.

The study guarantees a comprehensive, triangulated knowledge of the possible consequences of the United States' exit from NATO by combining primary speech and secondary analysis through thematic interpretation. In addition to descriptive insights, this method offers policy-oriented and normative implications for how the European Union may reinterpret its strategic identity in a multipolar world.

### **Critical Analysis: Strategic Autonomy, Transatlantic Drift, and Europe's Dilemma in a Post-American NATO**

The prospect of a US withdrawal from NATO, though never fully implemented during the Trump administration, exposed serious structural flaws in the organization and compelled a reexamination of long-held beliefs regarding transatlantic security. It exposed Europe's reliance on American military leadership and highlighted shortcomings in its current defense strategy. This section critically examines the EU's strategic reaction, the normative ramifications of Trump's transnationalism, and the larger conundrums surrounding Europe's pursuit of strategic autonomy. Donald Trump's term as president significantly disrupted US leadership in multilateral institutions after 1945. His blatantly transactional approach viewed NATO as an unjust financial burden on the United States, rather than as a collective security community based on shared ideals. For European officials, Trump's constant criticism of partners for not meeting the 2% defense spending level and his threats to leave the alliance amounted to a "strategic shock" (Chalmers & Kitchen, 2019). Although earlier US administrations had expressed similar dissatisfaction with burden-sharing, Trump's strategy was unique in its very public and leveraging approach. This prompted European partners to reevaluate the dependability of US security assurances and cast doubt on NATO's deterrent credibility (Rühle, 2020). The Trump doctrine was more than just rhetoric; it was a realignment of American interests that called into question the value of long-standing partnerships unless they yielded obvious, immediate advantages for the country.

The Trump administration's unpredictability exacerbated NATO's political cohesion and military preparedness crises. Politically, Trump's contempt for multilateralism, exhibited by his withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the Iran nuclear agreement, raised questions about the US commitment to NATO's core values (Ikenberry, 2018). His seeming preference for authoritarian leaders over democratic allies further undermined alliance cohesion, raising concerns over normative deterioration within NATO. Although some alliance countries increased their defense budgets due to Trump's insistence, overall capabilities growth remained unequal. Only a small percentage of NATO nations regularly achieved the 2% goal as of 2024, and European forces' interoperability remained below US-led integrated standards (NATO, 2024). The persistence of structural inequalities despite increasing investment highlights the difficulty of recalibrating NATO without the foundation of US military might.

The European Union has stepped up its long-term attempts to create a more autonomous defense posture in response. Initially dubbed "ReArm Europe," the Readiness 2030 effort marks a paradigm shift in European defense strategy, indicating a willingness to invest over €800 billion over the next four years to improve pan-European military capabilities, especially in areas like ammunition storage, mobility, and air defense (Von der Leyen, 2024). This campaign is a direct response to the perceived deterioration of US security promises as well as external challenges like Russia's aggressiveness. The EU aims to become an actor that can protect its interests without US assistance, and Readiness 2030 is part of a larger movement towards strategic autonomy.

Initiatives like the Strategic Compass and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) support this vision (Fiott, 2018).

However, substantial internal and foreign barriers exist for the EU's quest for strategic autonomy. The union is still split internally on whether it is desirable to replace NATO's security umbrella. States in Eastern Europe, such as Poland and the Baltic nations, have shown skepticism towards EU-led options and still see the United States as an essential guarantor against Russian aggression (Buras, 2020). These divisions reflect deeper cultural, historical, and geopolitical differences within the EU, impeding the creation of a single defense doctrine. Furthermore, the EU still lacks the logistical infrastructure, centralized military command, and nuclear deterrence capabilities needed for large-scale, high-intensity operations despite increased investments. Strategic autonomy is still aspirational without political determination to overcome member state reluctance and build full-spectrum capabilities (Major, 2021). Despite its ideological aspirations for independence, Europe's defense is nevertheless structurally dependent on the United States. Trump's "America First" policy rejected NATO's normative foundation, framing foreign relations in terms of transactional advantage rather than ideological solidarity. This undermined the moral legitimacy of US leadership and, consequently, the normative coherence of the alliance itself. Trump's contempt for liberal internationalism challenged the normative foundation of NATO, prompting existential concerns about its mission and identity among European governments. These unanswered questions highlight the larger crisis of liberal order in a time of great-power rivalry and increasing nationalism. The possible US exit is a test of the EU's defense capability and internal cohesiveness as well as a stimulus for reframing its strategic position in a multipolar world. European countries are taking a twofold approach to confront current uncertainties: the preservation of investments within NATO itself, along with hedging against potential future US disengagement. This approach would provide short-term access to US capabilities but would build over time a structure for acting independently in the longer term. And it is a pragmatic recognition that, even as skepticism deepens over its long-term viability, NATO remains indispensable. My point was that this has always been how we have approached defense spending because if I show the below diagram, I often see people with a fetish for efficiency complain the line should just get bent down throughout the whole chart and that is bloody bullshit. Germany paying more for defense, France needing a pan-European intervention plan, the EU moving to collective R&D and procurement. But these efforts could run the danger of redundancy over resiliency if not long term and integrated. Without deeper political integration, Europe's pursuit of autonomy might in fact exacerbate, rather than resolve, the pre-existing fragmentation, as Kundnani warns.

There was also a shift in European public opinion under the Trump administration. Between 2017 and 2020 polls run by the European Council on Foreign Relations and the Pew Research Centre showed a fall in trust for the US as a reliable ally, particularly in Germany, France, and Spain (Dennison, 2020). This has led to a more assertive European foreign policy and greater public backing for defense initiatives through the EU. Civil society debate has mirrored this, with politicians and thinkers urging a rethinking of Europe's role in global affairs. Since Russia attacked Ukraine, talk of Europe becoming a "geopolitical actor" capable of deciding its destiny has taken on new life. This shift gives those leaders who wish to reduce reliance on America political cover yet also creates demands that are probably much higher than can be met now.

## Discussion



With significant ramifications for the NATO alliance and the European Union's strategic future, the possibility of a US withdrawal from NATO especially under Donald Trump's presidency has become a pivotal moment in the conversation over transatlantic security. With a nuanced analysis grounded in classical realism, this paper critically examines the conflict between the EU's drive for strategic autonomy and America's waning commitment to NATO. The results show that although the United States has not officially left NATO, Trump's verbal hostility and transactional style have functionally destabilized the alliance and sped up Europe's reevaluation of its security reliance. Among the most startling findings is that Trump's foreign policy, which was characterized by demands for higher defense spending, threats of departure, and an open preference for national interests over alliance standards, acted as a strategic wake-up call for the EU. Under Trump's "America First" policy, NATO was reframed as a financial burden that needed to be justified by cost-benefit analysis rather than as a collective security mechanism. This revealed the structural dependence of European defense on American military prowess and called into question the normative coherence of the alliance. In response, the European Union started to develop a countervailing vision through programs like the Strategic Compass, PESCO, and Readiness 2030, all of which sought to strengthen defense cooperation throughout Europe and lessen reliance on security assurances from the United States.

The study also emphasizes how both reactive and aspirational the EU's shift towards strategic autonomy is. In reaction to the alleged decline in American dependability, it exhibits a realism recalibration. Initiatives like Readiness 2030, which call for up to €800 billion in defense spending, represent a shared goal to create a distinct European defense identity. Internal division among member states, especially between Western and Eastern European countries, presents serious difficulties, though. Because of their closeness to Russian threats, Eastern states such as Poland and the Baltics remain steadfastly committed to NATO and US security, making it more difficult for the EU to establish a cohesive defense posture. The study also indicates that alliance politics may be affected in the long run by the normative dissonance brought about by Trump's leadership. The basic tenets of NATO were a sense of shared purpose and liberal democratic values. This basis was weakened by Trump's unilateralism, which refocused the alliance on transnationalism rather than unity. This decline in trust has influenced European elites and the general public, strengthening calls for strategic autonomy and casting doubt on the viability of multilateralism under American leadership. The conversation concludes by highlighting how the upheaval brought forth by Trump has sparked significant institutional and mental changes in Europe. The EU's capacity to overcome internal conflicts and institutional inertia in the post-Trump global security climate will determine whether these changes produce a more independent and cohesive European defense identity or more strategic fragmentation.

### **Findings**

- The possibility of US exits undermined NATO's collective defense guarantee's perceived dependability, raising doubts among European nations about the alliance's capacity to dissuade enemies like Russia.
- By redefining NATO as a cost-benefit agreement rather than a community of shared democratic ideals, Donald Trump's transactional foreign policy upended the normative underpinnings of the transatlantic alliance.

- The EU still lacks critical strategic capabilities including nuclear deterrence, a centralized command structure, and quick deployment capabilities, despite programs like Readiness 2030.
- On strategic goals, the EU is split internally: Western nations (like France and Germany) prefer more EU-led defense, while Eastern European states (like Poland and the Baltics) firmly support a sustained US military presence.
- EU-wide frameworks for resource sharing, interoperability, and combined operational capability are provided by European defense programs like PESCO and Readiness 2030.
- By investing in NATO while building autonomous capabilities at the same time, the EU has taken a practical stance that will maintain alliance advantages and provide flexibility in the event of future US departure.

### Conclusion

This study examined how a potential US withdrawal from NATO impacts the EU's security and strategic autonomy, emphasizing classical realism. Trump's "strategic shock" and transactional policies spurred EU defense initiatives like Readiness 2030, aiming for €800 billion. Despite internal divergences and structural limits, the analysis highlights both opportunities for EU integration and challenges like fragmentation, testing the EU's cohesion and strategic redefinition in a multipolar world. The European Union's defense planning and strategic thinking have been significantly impacted by the possibility of a US exit from NATO, even if it has never been completely realized. Long-held beliefs about transatlantic security were called into question by Donald Trump's transactional foreign policy, which revealed Europe's excessive reliance on American military leadership and was characterized by skepticism towards multilateral institutions and outright criticism of NATO partners. The EU was forced to face the dual imperatives of preserving alliance unity and guaranteeing its own security as a result of this strategic disturbance, which caused both fear and action. The rhetoric of the Trump administration sparked a number of institutional and policy-level changes in Europe, even as it increased the threat of desertion. PESCO, the Strategic Compass, and Readiness 2030 are examples of initiatives that show EU leaders are becoming more inclined to seek more strategic autonomy. However, institutional constraints, internal political divisions, and the lack of a common defense identity inside the bloc continue to restrict these attempts. According to this analysis, the EU has started to provide the framework for a more independent security architecture, even if complete European strategic independence is still a goal. The transatlantic alliance is being redefined rather than replaced as Europe balances its bets by continuing to work with the US while taking little moves towards independence.

The future of European security will rely on the EU's ability to resolve internal conflicts, convert political intent into operational capability, and build elite and public consensus around a shared strategic vision in the face of persistent global instability, especially Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Therefore, the EU's capacity to grasp the opportunity as a shift towards real geopolitical agency is more important in the long run than the immediate disruption caused by a potential US withdrawal from NATO.

In the end, the question is not just whether Europe can continue to exist without NATO, but also whether it can turn its reliance into resilience and go from being a minor transatlantic defense partner to a strong and capable player on the world stage.

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