

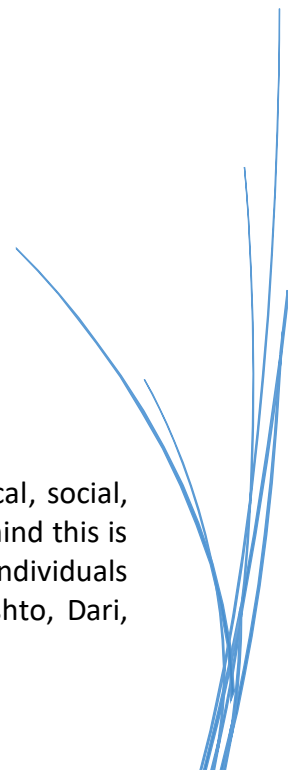
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DONALD TRUMP AND THE FUTURE OF NATO



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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



DONALD TRUMP AND THE FUTURE OF NATO

Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), established on April 4, 1949, is a military alliance created to ensure collective security among its member states, particularly during the Cold War. The organization was founded on the principle of "collective defense," meaning that an attack on one member is considered an attack on all. Initially, NATO consisted of 12 founding countries, including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and other Western European nations. Over time, NATO has expanded to include 32 member states. This alliance, throughout history and in light of global developments, has expanded its activities in the security sector and has placed combating new threats such as crisis management, peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and the fight against weapons of mass destruction on its agenda. However, the alliance has faced significant challenges, including internal disagreements, rising defense costs, and concerns over the role of the United States in key decision-making processes. NATO has also been criticized by some non-member states and even certain member countries. Despite these challenges, the organization remains one of the most important global security and defense institutions.

The relationship between the United States and NATO has been central to American foreign policy since the alliance's founding. During the Cold War and beyond, the U.S. has played a leading role as NATO's primary financial and military contributor. However, under Donald Trump's presidency—both during his first term and now—U.S. relations with NATO have significantly shifted, leading to tensions within the alliance, particularly with European nations.

This article explores the history of U.S.-NATO relations before Trump's presidency, the impact of his foreign policy on the alliance, his stance on global security threats, NATO members' reactions to his policies, and the potential consequences of a U.S. withdrawal or reduced involvement in NATO. Additionally, it examines the broader implications of these changes, including their impact on Afghanistan.

U.S.-NATO RELATIONS BEFORE TRUMP'S PRESIDENCY

Before Donald Trump took office, U.S. relations with NATO were largely based on security commitments and multilateral cooperation. As a founding member and the alliance's largest financial and



military contributor, the United States played a central role in NATO. According to recent cost-sharing estimates, the U.S. has covered approximately **15.88%** of NATO's budget.

During the Cold War, NATO served as a strategic tool for countering the Soviet Union, with the U.S. providing significant financial and military support to maintain its leadership within the alliance. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO shifted its focus toward new security threats such as terrorism and cyber warfare, with the U.S. continuing to play a dominant role. However, tensions among NATO members gradually emerged, particularly over burden-sharing and defense spending.

Under President Barack Obama and his predecessors, the U.S. pursued a diplomatic and cooperative approach toward NATO. While there were concerns over European countries not meeting the **2% GDP defense spending target**, the Obama administration prioritized strengthening alliances and multilateral engagement rather than questioning NATO's overall importance.

However, tensions escalated sharply when Donald Trump became president. Emphasizing his "America First" policy, Trump repeatedly criticized NATO members for not contributing enough to defense spending. He even threatened to reduce U.S. commitments or consider withdrawing from the alliance if members failed to increase their financial contributions. These statements created serious rifts within NATO, straining relations between the U.S. and its European allies. While some Western European countries, especially **Germany and France**, viewed Trump's stance as a threat to NATO's long-term stability, Eastern European nations facing Russian security threats welcomed the pressure he placed on the alliance.

When Joe Biden took office, he sought to rebuild NATO relations and restore trust among allies. His administration reaffirmed the importance of unity in tackling global security threats and worked to repair the damage caused by Trump's earlier policies. However, challenges such as burden-sharing disagreements and new geopolitical threats—including cyber warfare—remained.

With Trump returning to power, questions again arise about the future of NATO and the United States' commitment to the alliance.



CHANGES IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY UNDER TRUMP AND ITS IMPACT ON NATO

In Trump's current term, his foreign policy remains centered on the "**America First**" doctrine, but with notable shifts in approach and priorities. While he has sought to improve relations with NATO member states, he continues to emphasize the need for European allies to increase their financial contributions. His engagements with NATO leaders appear less confrontational than before, yet they remain characterized by persistent pressure for higher defense spending. As a result, some NATO countries have begun pursuing more independent defense policies, seeking to reduce their reliance on the United States. At the same time, Trump has attempted to rebuild trust among NATO allies through diplomatic negotiations and military cooperation. However, skepticism and criticism regarding his policies persist, with many European nations fearing that his approach could weaken the alliance's unity and cohesion.

Trump's financial pressures have had far-reaching implications for NATO's solidarity. Major contributors such as **Germany and France**, which already allocate substantial resources to NATO's defense budget, view his demands as a potential threat to long-term cooperation within the alliance. Smaller NATO members share similar concerns, fearing that Trump's policies could deepen divisions among allies. His insistence on increased financial commitments—including raising tariffs on certain NATO members—has introduced additional challenges, both domestically and internationally.

One significant consequence of these policies has been the rise of **Multipolarity** in NATO members' security strategies. While countries such as Germany and France advocate for a more autonomous European defense strategy—seeing Trump's policies as an opportunity to lessen their dependence on the U.S.—others, including **Poland and the Baltic states**, continue to push for strong American involvement in NATO. These diverging perspectives have complicated efforts to maintain strategic alignment within the alliance.

Beyond defense spending, Trump's financial pressures have also strained diplomatic relations among NATO members. European allies increasingly feel that his repeated criticisms reflect a lack of appreciation for their contributions to collective security. Additionally, his economic demands place a disproportionate burden on nations facing financial crises, leading to perceptions that NATO's cost-sharing mechanisms are unfair. These tensions have further complicated NATO negotiations and discussions, posing significant challenges for the alliance's future cohesion.



TRUMP'S STANCE ON NATO'S RESPONSE TO GLOBAL THREATS

Donald Trump's first term as president brought significant shifts in U.S. foreign policy, deeply affecting NATO and its approach to global threats. A key aspect of Trump's policy was his emphasis on emerging global threats, including Russia, China, and terrorism. These challenges necessitated new strategic responses while simultaneously creating difficulties in NATO's internal coordination and understanding among its member states. Trump specifically underscored the need to counter Russia's influence in Europe, yet his relationship with Vladimir Putin and discussions about easing sanctions on Russia raised concerns among European allies. Regarding China, Trump adopted a distinct approach, addressing both the economic and military threats posed by Beijing. His strategy included forming new alliances in the Asia-Pacific region, prompting NATO to also shift greater attention toward China's growing influence. In terms of terrorism, Trump stressed the importance of combatting groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, yet his decision to reduce U.S. military presence in the Middle East sparked concerns about NATO's ability to effectively respond to these threats.

Trump's policies forced NATO to reevaluate its strategic priorities. Russia and China emerged as long-term geopolitical challenges, prompting the alliance to strengthen its military presence and intelligence cooperation across Europe and Asia. In response to Russian aggression, NATO enhanced its defensive capabilities and increased its military deployments in Eastern Europe. At the same time, counterterrorism remained a core priority, with NATO focusing on international cooperation and capacity-building to combat terrorist threats more effectively. These changes not only pushed NATO to redefine its strategic direction but also reshaped its role within the broader global security architecture.

With the emergence of new global threats, NATO adopted diverse approaches to handling crises. The 9/11 attacks marked a turning point in NATO's history, leading the alliance to engage in military operations beyond Europe in its fight against global terrorism. Following the attacks, the United States pursued a counterterrorism doctrine, and NATO aligned its missions to support U.S. efforts. This led to NATO's military engagement in Afghanistan and later advisory missions in Iraq. However, tensions between the U.S. and European NATO members, particularly over the Iraq War and its aftermath, exposed fractures within the alliance. These divisions became even more apparent with the rise of ISIS, illustrating NATO's struggle to achieve full strategic cohesion with the United States.



NATO's approach toward Russia intensified following Moscow's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, prompting the alliance to reinforce its defensive posture. Russia's aggression directly challenged NATO, compelling the U.S. to reassert its leadership in countering Russian influence. In response, NATO and the U.S. expanded military deployments in Eastern Europe and imposed sanctions on Russia. These measures escalated further after Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with the U.S. not only tightening economic sanctions but also providing substantial military aid to Kyiv. While many European nations supported Washington's stance, divisions persisted. Trump's highly controversial meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky early in his new term shocked Ukraine and raised serious concerns about the future of NATO and transatlantic unity.

China's growing global influence emerged as another major challenge for both the U.S. and NATO. Trump consistently portrayed China as a primary threat to U.S. dominance, particularly in economic and military spheres. Throughout both his first and second terms, Trump pursued a trade war with China and imposed economic sanctions in an attempt to contain Beijing's global ambitions. This aggressive stance prompted NATO to reconsider its strategic focus on the Asia-Pacific region. However, while Washington pushed for a more confrontational approach, many European NATO members, given their extensive economic ties with China, remained reluctant to fully align with U.S. policy. Nevertheless, NATO has increasingly sought to balance its priorities by addressing the challenges posed by both Russia and China, redefining its defense strategy to maintain a more influential role in global security.

NATO MEMBER STATES' REACTIONS TO TRUMP'S POLICIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON GLOBAL SECURITY

Donald Trump's foreign policy had far-reaching implications for the United States' relations with NATO member states. One of Trump's most prominent initiatives was his repeated demands for NATO countries to increase their contributions to the alliance's defense budget. These demands, particularly among European nations, were met with widespread criticism. European leaders responded by seeking greater autonomy in their defense and security policies. For example, France and Germany, alongside other European countries, introduced initiatives such as the "European Defense Pact," aimed at reducing reliance on the United States and strengthening intra-European defense cooperation. Additionally, during his second term, Trump controversially suggested the possibility of Canada, a NATO member, joining the United



States—a proposal that was mockingly dismissed by the Canadian Prime Minister. These developments underscored a growing European inclination to reassess security strategies and move towards a more independent defense framework.

Conversely, certain Eastern European nations, such as Poland and the Baltic states, welcomed Trump's policies. Given their heightened security concerns regarding Russian aggression, these countries viewed an increased U.S. military presence in the region as a crucial security guarantee. This divergence in responses among NATO members has revealed internal fractures within the alliance, compelling European states to reconsider their defense strategies and reinforce unity within Europe.

Beyond NATO, Trump pursued policies that bolstered military, economic, and diplomatic partnerships with key allies outside the alliance, particularly Japan, South Korea, and Australia. These policies were primarily geared toward countering perceived threats from China and North Korea, significantly impacting global security dynamics. The United States, under Trump's leadership, signed defense agreements with Japan, enhancing American military presence and strengthening Japan's defensive capabilities. In South Korea, Trump emphasized the need to address threats from North Korea while fostering closer military and economic cooperation. Australia also played a pivotal role in Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy, reinforcing its strategic partnership with the United States.

These shifts in U.S. strategic priorities raised concerns among some European NATO members, who feared a diminishing American commitment to NATO. As a result, these changes necessitated a reassessment of defense policies among NATO allies and underscored the evolving role of the United States in maintaining global security while expanding its strategic focus beyond the alliance.

POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES OF U.S. WITHDRAWAL OR REDUCED ROLE IN NATO

Donald Trump's statements and policies regarding NATO's future and the United States' role in the alliance have raised serious concerns among European nations. Many European countries see NATO as the cornerstone of their collective security, and any U.S. withdrawal or reduction in its role could weaken the alliance and increase security threats in the West. One major concern is the growing influence of Russia in Europe, as well as NATO's diminishing ability to counter rising global powers like Russia and China. A



weaker NATO could contribute to a shift toward a more multipolar world, where power is distributed among multiple global actors rather than dominated by the U.S.

If the U.S. steps back from NATO, the effects on global security could be significant. In recent decades, NATO has played a key role in Western military interventions, including in Afghanistan and Iraq. Some argue that a reduced U.S. presence in NATO might lower geopolitical tensions, particularly in regions like the Middle East, where Western interventions have often fueled conflict. On the other hand, a weaker NATO could encourage multilateral diplomacy and push European countries toward greater self-reliance in defense, potentially leading to a more balanced global power structure.

Additionally, a diminished U.S. role in NATO could create opportunities for rival powers like Russia and China to expand their influence on the global stage, reshaping international power dynamics. Overall, Trump's threats to leave NATO not only pose challenges to European security but also force a reassessment of the U.S. role in global security. This could lead to structural changes within NATO or even new European-led security alliances aimed at reducing reliance on the U.S. Ultimately, Trump's stance on NATO may be a strategic pressure tactic, using the threat of withdrawal to push European nations to increase their financial contributions—aligning with the long-standing U.S. approach of ensuring NATO serves its interests.

IMPACT ON AFGHANISTAN

Given Afghanistan's strategic and geopolitical significance—and NATO's two-decade-long, largely unsuccessful military presence in the country—the weakening of NATO could bring both challenges and opportunities for Afghanistan. A reduced Western influence, particularly from the U.S., might open doors for Afghanistan to establish more balanced relationships with regional powers such as China, Russia, Iran, and Central Asian countries. These nations, driven by their own economic and security interests, could become more inclined to invest in Afghanistan's infrastructure and large-scale economic projects.

On one hand, the decline of NATO's presence could allow Afghanistan to pursue an independent foreign policy, engage in regional organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and secure a stronger role in regional affairs. However, in the short term, Afghanistan still faces serious economic challenges and a humanitarian crisis, making international assistance crucial. A reduced Western role might also create a vacuum that regional players could exploit to advance their own strategic goals in Afghanistan.



While the country's long-term stability remains uncertain, a more diversified set of international partnerships could help Afghanistan navigate its way toward a more self-reliant future.

CONCLUSION

President Trump's financial policies toward NATO, particularly his demands for European countries to contribute more to defense spending, may have strengthened NATO's financial resources. However, they have also created tensions among member states and reduced European trust in the United States. While these policies might serve as a pressure tactic to advance U.S. economic interests, they could also lead to long-term changes in America's role within NATO and reshape international relations and global security structures.

Trump's repeated threats to withdraw from NATO have pushed European countries to reconsider the future of the alliance and invest in their independent defense capabilities. As a result, NATO may be forced to reassess its priorities and strategies, facing new challenges and unanswered questions about its role. Ultimately, if the U.S. reduces its involvement or withdraws entirely, leading to NATO's weakening or dissolution, the impact could be significant, particularly for developing countries.

For decades, NATO, under U.S. leadership, has been a tool for expanding Western military influence and engaging in unilateral interventions, which have contributed to conflicts in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. A weaker NATO could reduce geopolitical tensions, create space for multilateral diplomacy, and, in the long run, promote a more balanced distribution of power in international relations.

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