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**Can NATO survive as transatlantic ties hang in the balance
and what can Europeans do about it?**

When Donald Trump called NATO an “obsolete” in 2016, many people dismissed it as political theater. But nearly a decade later, the same statement now echoes louder than ever across European countries. Since its founding in 1949, NATO has overcome crises, adapted to different threats and expanded its membership further, but it has never fundamentally been challenged from within. The transatlantic relations that were so fiercely built on mutual security and shared values is now threatened by the polarizing political interests and the U.S. defense spending disputes (Kilander, 2025). While these ties are being stained by the fast-shifting US foreign policy, a rising China and the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the alliance that once stood as the heart of Western security found itself on shaky ground.

Beneath these current crisis, a deeper concern lies: the reliability of the U.S. as NATO’s notable member. As Donald Trump’s statements regarding the alliance’s purpose and threats on withdrawal from it tensed NATO members, the question stays no longer only about the American commitment, but whether Europe is actually prepared to stand on its own. While NATO is facing its most existential moment since the Cold War, can it survive and adapt, or will it fracture? And more importantly, what must Europe do if the Atlantic turns cold?

NATO at Crossroads and in the Post-Cold War Era

By nature, NATO has always been able to shift and evolve in response to the changing security structure in Europe and beyond. As an alliance that was born in the shadow of the Second World War and strengthened by the Cold War, NATO was initially established for a collective defense mechanism. After the dynamics changed and dissolutions occurred in the late 20th century, NATO alliance managed to adapt, even extending with more memberships and continuing its unity.

After the cold war, NATO is dealing with another threat by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which has proven again the alliance’s mission of collective defense. Although this war has caused unprecedented military spendings in Europe and NATO enlargement with Finland and Sweden joining, it also exposed the long-standing divisions over “burden-sharing” issues. According to NATO report in 2023, the U.S. defense spending accounted nearly 70% of NATO’s total budget and only 11 out of 31 members met the 2% GDP defense spending benchmark in (NATO, 2024). This

imbalance has fueled the ongoing tensions within the alliance and raised questions regarding responsibility.

At the same time, NATO is facing a new generation of hybrid threats, such as the cyberattacks or energy security issues which do not fit into the Cold War security model. Considering the current circumstances and sanctions, NATO's focus on the traditional military deterrence must expand to cover energy security and technological dominance. These new areas require not only collective will but also deeper integration of civilian and private sector expertise, areas where European allies must take the lead.

Evolution of Transatlantic ties

The U.S. has historically played a vital role in the security of Europe. With its vast military capacity and intelligence power, it has proved to be a source of trust for NATO members. During the Cold War, support for a strong US leadership role in NATO was a political imperative. U.S. politicians needed to be seen as strong on defense if they were to be elected to a major office and that included showing strong support for NATO (Blessing et al., 2021). Moreover, there are still signs of support for NATO among the American public. According to Pew Research Center study, more Americans say the U.S. benefits from membership in NATO (66%) than say it does not (32%) (Chavda, 2025). This suggests that a significant majority, despite the political divisions, still see value in the alliance.

To reaffirm this, in a speech at the 2021 Munich Security Conference (House, 2021), Former President Biden assured the European audience that:

"It comes down to this: The transatlantic alliance is a strong foundation—the strong foundation—on which our collective security and our shared prosperity are built. The partnership between Europe and the United States, in my view, is and must remain the cornerstone of all that we hope to accomplish in the 21st century, just as we did in the 20th century."

Yet despite such reassurances, among the downfall of the U.S. politics and the credibility to the coalition which it helped build, the alliance now has to handle one of its biggest internal crisis. Although NATO was built on shared democratic values and mutual defense, this has eroded under political strains in the U.S.

The "America First" policy of the Trump administration, perhaps coupled with the ongoing criticism of the European defense spendings, caused Europeans to question Washington's long-term commitment. Even under the Biden administration, the U.S. decision to withdraw from

Afghanistan without consultation shook the structural balance within NATO. Adding to these doubts were the polarization of U.S. domestic politics.

The long-lasting trust in the U.S. leadership has cracked under the shifting American politics with Donald Trump threatening to abandon NATO and encouraging Russia to attack “delinquent” allies (Kilander, 2025). Unlike many of his predecessors, Donald Trump has been much more critical of NATO, its members as well as the role the United States had to play in the alliance. Hence, for the first time in the history of NATO, the unpredictability and threats are coming not just from outside of its borders, but also from within.

President Donald Trump repeatedly warned that the United States might withdraw from NATO, tying U.S. defense commitments to whether other members were meeting their spending obligations (Benitez, 2019). At one point, Trump even said he would only defend the Baltic states from a Russian attack if they had met their obligations to the U.S. (Schuette, 2021).

In fact, well before this, many NATO members, especially after Russia’s 2014 actions in Ukraine, were already on board with raising their defense budgets to address the growing security concerns in Europe. However the real risk to NATO was that Trump considered these increases inadequate and undercut the foundational principle of unconditional solidarity. Therefore, even the possibility that the U.S. would abandon that principle could undermine NATO’s cohesion and its ability to respond to threats. Eventually, the European allies raised their defense spending targets from 2% to 5%, due to the pressure from the U.S.

Internal Challenges and Strategic Autonomy of Europe

Beyond the deprioritizing rhetoric, it is known that the U.S. increasingly views China as its biggest competitor, meanwhile the European allies focus on Russia and the regional security concerns. This could be one of the aspects that pull the alliance in different directions.

Due to these problems, NATO has not been stable. The NATO 2030 agenda aim to update the alliance's strategic concept, strengthen deterrence, and increase resilience to hybrid threats such as cyberattacks and misinformation (CSIS 2020). One of the fundamental concepts is that NATO should become more political and global in nature. This means not only protecting territory but also defending democratic principles in the changing geopolitical environment.

However, adjusting to new dangers means structural adjustments and resources as well. NATO's reliance on US military capabilities, especially logistics and space-based intelligence, remains a fundamental imbalance. While European allies have boosted defense expenditure since 2014, not all allies have fulfilled the 2% GDP objective (NATO, 2025).

In addition to these, due to various views of U.S. disengagement and lack of faith in the American leadership, a drive for more "strategic autonomy" under EU leadership has gained support since

2016. However, many think that though European forces may be capable of handling limited regional crises, mainly in Africa or the Mediterranean, they lack the capacity for prolonged, space-based intelligence and high-intensity operations against a peer competitor without the U.S. support (Allison, 2025).

Additionally, continuous trade tensions during the Trump administration has weakened the transatlantic cooperation. These tensions appeared in multiple sectors including agriculture, steel and aviation, and the use of sanctions as foreign policy tools. This economic nationalism has inevitably caused frictions with the EU and restoring trade partnership remains an essential issue.

Europe's Role and Responsibilities

In the face of the unpredictability of the U.S., Europe must be able to defend itself independently; the United States' withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal, as well as conflicts over arms control, have all contributed to the deterioration in transatlantic ties.

Therefore, the future of NATO depends not only on the commitment of the U.S. but also on Europe's ability to adapt and take responsibility for its own security. As the President of France Emmanuel Macron has argued, Europe can no longer depend on U.S. for security and that Europe's military budgets should not be used to buy only American weapons but should push for more investment in home-grown defense industries (Reuters Staff, 2025).

To this end, European allies must increase defense spending and commit to the newly agreed target spending of 5%, invest in domestic defense industries and reduce reliance on American military capabilities such as troops. A good example of this effort is the permanent deployment German troops in Lithuania.

Moreover, strategic autonomy should be pursued by deepening defense integration within the E and improve its capabilities in intelligence and cyber defense. Simultaneously, Europe must also maintain strong diplomatic engagement with the U.S. to ensure continued transatlantic cooperation. Therefore, while I believe NATO's survival depends on the transatlantic partnerships, European allies must also strengthen their own defenses to ensure a more balanced burden-sharing.

The Road Ahead for Transatlantic Ties

Based on my above thoughts, there are three essential scenarios that could occur in future in regards to the transatlantic ties:

In the first possible scenario, the U.S. and Europe would deepen their connection and recommit to the transatlantic ties. Although there would likely still be internal tensions and issues within the NATO members, such challenges could be overcome through better burden-sharing,

coordination and calculating the issue of strategic autonomy, the relationship between the allies would be improved.

Another scenario I could imagine would be NATO and the U.S. operating as independent yet cooperative global powers and aligning only when their interests intersected. This scenario features looser ties, rather than formal alliances. Both powers would increasingly chart their own strategic courses, still united by same democratic values. In this specific scenario, the transatlantic relationship does not collapse, but it also stays balanced and does not grow. Disagreements and tensions over trade, arms control, disputes on defense responsibilities or target spendings would keep the topic of a formal alliance out of the table. Nonetheless, shared concerns, especially regarding Russia and China, would maintain a functional level of cooperation.

In the last scenario, transatlantic ties worsen further with slow economic growth, rising political instability, the United States' preoccupation with China and unresolved trade disputes and tensions. In this scenario, NATO would gradually lose its importance and would be replaced by the European Common Defense, led by the EU. The United States would withdraw its major combat forces from Europe. This scenario would lead to the complete dissolution of the transatlantic partnership; the U.S. would withdraw from NATO commitments and the security structure founded after the World War II would begin to collapse. Especially with the China topic, the gap would widen further.

Conclusion

NATO, as an alliance born from the ashes of war, faces a crisis not of tanks or missiles but of division. As the U.S. turns inward and the transatlantic ties hang in the balance, NATO's current fragility shows both external and internal political and security shifts. I believe along with urgent threats such as Russia, internal uncertainty surrounding U.S. and European alliance should not be disregarded.

I share the same belief as Dr. Lamers: Europeans need to do everything to keep Americans on board while building European military capacity in order to address Russian threat. (MRU, 2025). We know the real goal of Putin's Russia's aggression is not only Ukraine, but destruction of the established world order. Moving forward, the survival of NATO depend on maintaining strong transatlantic unity while also empowering Europe to take greater responsibility for its own defense.

The issues shown by the shifting U.S. politics and the new security structures cannot be ignored or disregarded; only through commitment, transparency and cooperation NATO can survive through internal crisis. Through leadership and loyalty from both sides of the Atlantic, the alliance can remain a powerful force for peace and security.

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