

# Can NATO Survive as Transatlantic Ties Hang in the Balance - And What Can Europeans Do About It?

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**DISCLAIMER- ALL VIEWS ARE MY OWN AND MINE ONLY**

**Abbreviations- NATO- NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION**

**WW (2,II,III)- WORLD WAR TWO/THREE**

**EU- EUROPEAN UNION**

**US- UNITED STATES**

**PESCO/EDF- Permanent Structured Cooperation/ European Defence Fund**

**MAGA- MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN**

## Can NATO Survive as Transatlantic Ties Hang in the Balance - And What Can Europeans Do About It?

Since the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization ( NATO ) in 1949, the alliance has served as the main pillar and the guarantor of security across the Euro-Atlantic region. With Europe facing the biggest threat to its stability and the possibility of war since World War II, the alliance finds itself in an position where its own members are questioning each others reliability and commitment, due to the unpredictable nature of the United States political leadership. However, internal conflicts also exist amongst its members, who use the 'consensus rule' as a bargaining chip, when blocking or delaying other members support for Ukraine in order to get something in return, with Turkey similarly delaying the ratification of Sweden's accession to get concessions. Its foes on the other hand, are questioning if the alliance still possesses the strength it once displayed, in an attempt to further the divide, sow fear and infiltrate the region. Russia has tested the alliance through the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and through hybrid warfare, China's rapid rise in the military and the technological sector and its strategic partnership with Russia, embodies the reemergence of the "great-power" rivalry, posing a threat to the international order.

This essay will analyse (1) The impact of illiberalism from the US political leadership, alongside several member states (2) Russian aggression and its use of both conventional and hybrid warfare (3) China's rise into a global strategic competitor (4) How Europe must respond to preserve NATO

### **2. The Foundations and the Purpose of NATO**

*" The Parties to this treaty... are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage, and civiliazation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law. They seek to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area*

<sup>1</sup>Preamble, The North Atlantic Treaty

The organization was founded on a premise that both the members and the aspiring members must comply with: to promote peace and security in the region. Created to unify countries, promoting collective action in resolving conflicts, jointly addressing the issues, as opposed to

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<sup>1</sup> The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington D.C., April 4, 1949," *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, last updated October 19, 2023, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm).

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acting alone. It aims to maintain stability, foster economic partnerships and commit to democracy to limit authoritarianism. NATO's *Strategic Concept 2022*, states that "A driving assumption is that a commitment to shared values and a common vision prevents democratic nations from going to war with one another, and provides an example for other countries to follow"<sup>2</sup>. One of NATO's core purposes was to stop further Soviet expansion into Western Europe, due to its detrimental nature to democracy, freedom and liberalism, as the Soviet regime did not reflect these principles that the members of the organization adhered to<sup>3</sup>. During Cold War, NATO grew both in military and political capacity and after the dissolution of USSR, it shifted its focus towards being an organization that specialises in crisis management and counterterrorism, participating in peacekeeping operations in places like Kosovo in 1999 and Afghanistan in 2001, with the latter being a military operation that lasted for a decade, after Article 5 was invoked following the terrorist attacks on America on the 11th of September, 2001.

### 3. Illiberalism and Leadership Instability in NATO

The rise of "illiberalism" in the alliance is undeniable. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 and his re-election in 2024<sup>4</sup> alongside the rise of nationalist parties such as Alternative für Deutschland ( AfD ), Fratelli d'Italia in Italy ( FDI ), Fidesz in Hungary, proves that a deviation from liberalism is no longer something surprising, its becoming increasingly normalized. It represents a norm that blurs the line between what is deemed to be acceptable and unacceptable<sup>5</sup>. The problem is that illiberalism subtly challenges liberalism, because it is seen as a feasible alternative. While its impact isn't always visible on the outside, internally it causes doubt and raises questions about the "pillars" of the alliance, as the revisionists in Europe see that as an opportunity to benefit. Approval from across the Atlantic, provides legitimacy to the idea, which strengthens their position and gives worldwide exposure in the "attention

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<sup>2</sup> NATO 2022 *Strategic Concept*, NATO, last updated July 18, 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_56626.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_56626.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Espinas, G.D. (2024). *Illiberalism in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)*, pp. 17–18.

<sup>4</sup> See Natalie Allison and Myah Ward, 'Donald Trump returns to the White House' <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/11/06/donald-trump-wins-presidency-00187478>

<sup>5</sup> See Claudia Chiappa, 'Orbán Blasts "Locusts" in the West During Anti-EU Tirade', Politico, 15 March 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-hungary-anti-eu-tirade-elections/>.

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economy”, on social media, a tool that is instrumental due to its crucial role in shaping public perception and legitimizing their political agendas.<sup>6</sup> It also provides a pathway to facilitate similar policies with the support of influential policy makers in Washington D.C.<sup>7</sup>. This is potentially a dangerous precedent, because it undermines the establishment from within<sup>8</sup>.

### 3.1 US Political Instability

Since the creation of NATO in 1949, America has led the way diplomatically and militarily which is why illiberalism in United States causes concern. Data from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) 2024 Democracy Index reveals that United States ranks 28th out of 167 countries<sup>9</sup>. It has maintained its place in the “flawed democracy” section for nearly eight years, a trend that occurred during Donald Trump’s first term, with Biden struggling to reverse the situation, as Republicans held a majority in Congress and had the last say when passing legislations, like the Ukraine aid<sup>10</sup>. Trump is an authoritarian populist, whose political approach is transactional and skeptical towards multilateralism<sup>11</sup>. International agreements adopt a business-like value, mutual commitments become negotiations in which America must have the upper hand in, NATO Summit 2018 in Brussels, being a prime example of this strategy, as he complained that the “US is paying more than enough<sup>12</sup>. This was followed up by threats to leave NATO, because

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<sup>66</sup> See Nicholas Vinocur and Jacopo Barigazzi, ‘Ranked: Which European Politicians Are Chummiest with Trump’, Politico, 30 January 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/chase-us-president-donald-trump-europe-politician-giorgia-meloni-viktor-orban-nigel-farage-eric-zemmour/>.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Jim Tankersley, Steven Erlanger and David E. Sanger, ‘Vance Tells Europeans to Stop Shunning Parties Deemed Extreme’, New York Times, 19 February 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/14/world/europe/vance-europe-immigration-ukraine.html>.

<sup>8</sup> See Sophia Besch and Tara Varma, ‘A New Transatlantic Alliance Threatens the EU’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 February 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/02/vance-munich-europe-security-nationalism?lang=en>.

<sup>9</sup> The full report can be found at the following website: <https://www.eiu.com/n/democracy-index-2024>

<sup>10</sup> See Jordain Carney, ‘Johnson: No Ukraine aid on year-end spending stopgap’- <https://www.politico.com/live-updates/2024/12/04/congress/johnson-on-ukraine-aid-stopgap-00192594>

<sup>11</sup> See Lesley Russell, ‘The fragility of American democracy’- <https://insidestory.org.au/the-fragility-of-american-democracy/>

<sup>12</sup> See David M. Herszenhorn, ‘Trump makes forceful NATO debut’- <https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-nato-demands-allies-make-up-for-many-years-lost-on-military-spending/>

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of the “unfair” treatment, a move which would’ve shattered the alliance, as Trump reiterated to his top National Security officials that he struggled to grasp the point of a military alliance which “drained” America financially<sup>13</sup>. Fast forward, to Trump’s second term, this rhetoric hasn’t changed, citing that “For decades, America has been exploited by the allies”<sup>14</sup>. A bipartisan rift between the Democrats and the Republicans has intensified, both in Congress and the Senate. Republicans see NATO and the war in Ukraine as a financial burden at the price of the American taxpayer, while promoting the “MAGA and America First” ideology<sup>15</sup>.

### 3.2 Illiberal Trends in Europe

Far-right parties in Europe have been gaining popularity since Trump’s first term. Both sets of revisionists, desire to have impenetrable borders. Orban, an illiberal figure in Europe, delivered a speech at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in 2022, declaring that he was the only leader in Europe who opposed migration, claiming that Hungary is “ a country that is under the siege of liberals”<sup>16</sup>, hinting to a “culture war”, a phrase commonly used by Trump and by his counterparts in Europe. Giorgia Meloni and Alice Weidel are two popular right-wing examples in Europe. Meloni appealed to her electorate through her commitment to restoring Italy’s pre-1970s linguistic and cultural homogeneity, placing emphasis on “traditional family values”, a national identity and on rejecting progressive ideologies<sup>17</sup>. However her stance against China and support for Ukraine and NATO makes her

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<sup>13</sup> See Julian E. Barnes and Helene Cooper, “Trump Discussed Pulling U.S. From NATO, Aides Say Amid New Concerns Over Russia,” *The New York Times*, January 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/us/politics/nato-president-trump.html>.

<sup>14</sup> ‘ A little tough love’ Top quotes from Trump tariff talk’ <https://f24.my/B43P>

<sup>15</sup> See Natalie Venegas, ‘Marjorie Taylor Greene Does Victory Lap as Ukraine Aid Frozen’, last updated January 26, 2025 <https://www.newsweek.com/marjorie-taylor-greene-does-victory-lap-ukraine-aid-frozen-2020892>

<sup>16</sup> “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the opening of CPAC Texas,” *Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister*, August 4, 2022, <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-opening-of-cpac-texas/>.

<sup>17</sup>See Paul Kirby, “Who is Giorgia Meloni? The Rise to Power of Italy’s New Far-Right PM,” *BBC News*, October 21, 2022.

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an unusual case. Weidel rose to power through her anti-Islam, anti-immigration and pro-Russian stance<sup>18</sup>.

Pro-Russian sentiment is no longer hidden, even within the alliance. Certain countries in the alliance, have their feet in both camps. Slovakia, Turkey and Hungary would be prime examples. As members of the alliance, they play a double-game: Turkey under Erdogan, get NATO protection, yet in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, it buys Russian air defense system and acquire Russian gas, at a knock-down rate and helping them to evade sanctions that are imposed by the EU<sup>19</sup>. The latter two, constantly repeat Russian propaganda, criticize NATO, import cheap gas, funding the Russian-war machine and hold the alliance and the EU hostage through the usage of the 'consensus rule' when it comes to Ukrainian affairs, blocking or making it difficult for Ukraine to receive funding or weapons, in order to defend itself<sup>20</sup>. On a bipartisan front in Germany, Weidel and AfD have made no secret of their ties to Russia, calling for the end of German military aid for Ukraine<sup>21</sup>.

### 4. Russian Aggression and Hybrid Warfare

Since the creation of the alliance, one notable opposing force has existed : the Soviet Union ( now Russian Federation ). Forty-two years ago, Ronald Reagan labelled the Soviet Union as an "evil empire" and the "focus of evil in the modern world"<sup>22</sup> A speech that held significance regarding the context it was said in, still holds importance to this day. Russia's historical

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<sup>18</sup> See Darko Jankovic, 'German AfD party labeled 'extremist' by intelligence agency', February 2, 2025 <https://p.dw.com/p/4tq1C>

<sup>19</sup> See Elçin Poyrazlar, 'Turkey carves its own course in NATO', Politico, July 8, 2024 <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-nato-russia-ukraine-turkish-defense-minister-yasar-guler/>

<sup>20</sup> See Isabel Van Bergen, 'Putin Allies in NATO Face Political Turmoil', Newsweek, January 16, 2025 <https://www.newsweek.com/putin-nato-allies-hungary-slovakia-2015926>

<sup>21</sup> See Hans Pfeifer, 'Russia's best friends in Germany: AfD and BSW', DW, January 9, 2024, <https://p.dw.com/p/4k16F>

<sup>22</sup> See Robert C. Rowland, 'The Power of Truth Telling in the Evil Empire Speech', Providence, March 8, 2023 <https://providencemag.com/2023/03/the-power-of-truth-telling-in-the-evil-empire-speech/>

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background is key to understanding its imperial mindset. The Kremlin views NATO as a threat for two reasons: its military power and its democratic way of life. Kremlin leadership, believes that Western values are a plague that the West tries to spread across the world, to which they hold the right to defend themselves from<sup>23</sup>. Two speeches made by Putin in 2005 and 2007 portray this rhetoric: the State of the Nation speech and annual Munich Security Conference speech<sup>24</sup>.

In 2005, Putin claimed that “The collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical tragedy of the century” and in 2007, he went on a tirade about America, claiming that they “overstepped its national borders in every way”, but he also labelled the “eastward expansion (..) as a provocation of mutual trust (..)”<sup>25</sup>. Two speeches that highlighted Putin’s view towards NATO, particularly his view towards the members of the alliance, who were ex-Soviet states. The West wrongly assumes that Russia seeks integration, despite the warning signs<sup>26</sup>.

### 4.1 Strategic Escalation

When Russia senses weakness it strikes. The aftermath of the Bucharest Summit in 2008, was a six-day war with Georgia less than six months later, the annexation of Crimea (2014) and a full invasion of Ukraine (2022). Both countries were given promises that they would be members of the alliance, but due to fears displayed by Germany and France, the alliance opted

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<sup>23</sup> Nikolai Patrushev, “Does Russia Need Universal Values?” *Military Review* (2021), <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/January-February-2021/JF21-Cover-3/>.

<sup>24</sup> See Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, ‘Russia: Excerpts From Putin's State-Of-The-Nation Speech’, April 25, 2005 <https://www.rferl.org/a/1058630.html>

<sup>25</sup> See Daniel Fried and Kurt Volker, ‘The Speech In Which Putin Told Us Who He Was’, Politico, February 18, 2022 <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/02/18/putin-speech-wake-up-call-post-cold-war-order-liberal-2007-00009918>

<sup>26</sup> Harry Edgar, “A Critical Evaluation of Poststructuralism’s Contribution to Security,” *E-International Relations*, June 13, 2018. <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/06/13/a-critical-evaluation-of-poststructuralisms-contribution-to-security/>.

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not to<sup>27</sup>. The French president at that time, Nicolas Sarkozy, also announced that it would sell a Mistral-class helicopter carrier<sup>28</sup>. Later, the Obama administration went ahead with the “Russia Reset Policy”, not punishing, but rewarding Putin instead. The alliance repeated the strategic error of appeasement once made in 1938, allowing Putin to escalate the situation at hand.<sup>29</sup> Putin sensed the Western hesitation weaponizing Russian gas into a geopolitical tool and the nuclear threats into making concessions<sup>30</sup>.

Russia is notorious for its tough stance when negotiating with the West, using a 3 point pattern, best described by a Soviet-era diplomat Andrei Gromyko. It consists of (i) demanding the impossible, (ii) issuing threats and ultimatums and (iii) refusing to budge or find common ground<sup>31</sup>. The ongoing negotiations with the Ukrainian delegation highlight this. Russia demands control over territories that were never theirs ( e.g Kherson and Zaporizhzhia)<sup>32</sup>. This is followed up by threats of escalation and ultimatums: Medinsky: “Next time we talk, we will have more”<sup>33</sup>. Their refusal to compromise leads to their opponents making concessions, prompting aggression. According to Gromyko’s negotiation rules “Do not give an inch in

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<sup>27</sup> See Walter Zaryckyj, ‘Why the Bucharest Summit Still Matters Ten Years On’, Atlantic Council, May 4, 2018 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-the-bucharest-summit-still-matters-ten-years-on/>

<sup>28</sup> See Reuters, ‘France to build two warships for Russia-Sarkozy’, July 23, 2010 <https://www.reuters.com/article/economy/france-to-build-two-warships-for-russia-sarkozy-idUSLDE66M18P/>

<sup>29</sup> See Sean Scanlon, ‘Appeasement and ‘Peace for Our Time’, The National WWII Museum, October 15, 2024 <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/appeasement-and-peace-our-time>

<sup>30</sup> See Valentina Pop, ‘EU concerned as Russia cuts off Ukraine gas’, Euobserver, January 2, 2009 <https://euobserver.com/green-economy/ar9b475359>

<sup>31</sup> See Andrew Stuttford, ‘Ukraine — and Gromyko 2.0’, National Review, January 29, 2022 <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/ukraine-and-gromyko-2-0/>

<sup>32</sup> See Olena Goncharova, ‘Putin demands full control of 4 Ukrainian regions, stalling US ceasefire push, Bloomberg reports’, The Kyiv Independent, April 29, 2025 <https://kyivindependent.com/putin-demands-full-control-of-4-ukrainian-regions-stalling-us-ceasefire-push-bloomberg-reports/>

<sup>33</sup> See Alex Stezhensky, ‘Kremlin’s top negotiator threatens Ukraine with more territorial losses if Putin’s ‘compromises’ are rejected’, The New Voice of Ukraine, June 11, 2025 <https://english.nv.ua/nation/kremlin-warns-ukraine-of-more-land-losses-if-putin-s-demands-are-rejected-50521254.html>

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negotiation, because in the end you will have one-third or half of something you didn't own before"<sup>34</sup>. This tactic wears the opponent down and allows to claim legitimacy through territorial gains. Russia negotiates to expand at the expense of the West, through violating agreements.

## 4.2 Hybrid Threats

Kremlin tests NATO across multiple domains, utilizing every weapon that it has in its arsenal. Sabotage, weaponization of migration and disinformation are examples of the Russian military doctrine<sup>35</sup>. Its aim is to push the boundaries of the alliance, without activating NATO's Article 5. From a political perspective, Russia tends to interfere into elections on a regular basis, across various governmental agencies to exert influence on domestic and foreign policies, that favor them. To achieve that, Russia uses cyberattacks and the funding of pro-Russian candidates through secret channels. The US presidential election in 2016, the Ukrainian and the Romanian presidential elections in 2004 and 2025, that led to the Orange Revolution and the initial results being overturned<sup>36</sup> For Russia to wage its disinformation campaign, it needs to have people that will promote their agenda. The fifth column is a label given to people who spread disinformation and act in Russian interests.

Under the guise of cultural diplomacy, Russia collects information, strategically placing infrastructure near critical facilities like airports<sup>37</sup>. When confronted, the Kremlin claims "discrimination", to fuel anti-Western sentiment and to reinforce the State propaganda. Russia has been instrumental in the weaponization of migration, in an attempt to destabilise

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<sup>34</sup> See Kaja Kallas, 'Estonia's prime minister: Russia has no say in NATO decisions', The Hill, March 2, 2022 <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/592516-estonias-prime-minister-russia-has-no-say-in-nato-decisions/>

<sup>35</sup> See Graeme Baker, 'Russia publishes German army meeting on Ukraine', BBC, March 2, 2024 <https://bbc.com/news/world-europe-68457087>

<sup>36</sup> See FBI (.gov), 'RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE IN 2016 U.S. ELECTIONS' <https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/cyber/russian-in>

<sup>37</sup> See Sasha Vakulina, ' (Un)orthodox intelligence operations: How Russia is using its churches abroad', Euronews, July 7, 2025 <https://www.euronews.com/2025/07/07/unorthodox-intelligence-operations-how-russia-is-using-its-churches-abroad>

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NATO and EU as institutions, while also fueling the rise of the far-right parties in Europe, as migration has become one of the main talking points.<sup>38</sup> Russian aggression, has displaced a great number of civilians, who turned to refuge in Europe, putting an unprecedented amount of stress on European nations and responsible institutions, who were not prepared for such a large influx of people. Social media platforms such as Telegram or TikTok, has made it easier to reach wider masses through algorithm manipulation<sup>39</sup>. The flaw is that in situations like these, a “grey zone”, still exists. NATO can condemn these actions, but can’t respond, because they aren’t active military measures as they fall below the threshold of what would allow for it to be activated.

## **5. China Strategic Challenge and NATO’s Global Dilemma**

While the alliance was focused on combating Soviet Union/Russia and global terrorism, China started to emerge as a strategic concern. At the Brussels NATO Summit in 2021 and in the NATO Strategic Concept in 2022, China got recognized as a systematic threat to the alliance<sup>40</sup>. According to NATO, China is not deemed as a threat that would trigger Article 5, but it is not as simple as it may seem.

### **5.1 Taiwan and Great-Power Rivalry**

NATO’s strategic interests go as far as the Indo-Pacific region. However, China has strategic interests there too, Taiwan being the most notable one. A conflict between Taiwan, who China views a breakaway province, would certainly disrupt the stability across the world, since Taiwan is not only positioned in a strategically critical area that stretches across the region, it has vital international shipping routes and is also the biggest semiconductor producer in the

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<sup>38</sup> See George Scutaru and Andrei Pavel, ‘Weaponization of Migration: A Powerful Instrument in Russia’s Hybrid Toolbox’, Hoover Institution, September 17, 2024 <https://www.hoover.org/research/weaponization-migration-powerful-instrument-russias-hybrid-toolbox>

<sup>39</sup> See Alex Loftus, ‘EU investigates TikTok over alleged Russian meddling in Romanian vote’, BBC, December 17, 2024 <https://bbc.com/news/articles/cm2v13nz2020>

<sup>40</sup> See Mercy A. Kuo, ‘NATO and the China Challenge’, The Diplomat, April 12, 2023 <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/nato-and-the-china-challenge/>

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world<sup>41</sup>. Semiconductors are vital for NATO, as they are an important component that are used across various military applications that enable the use of high-end military technology. China's invasion into Taiwan would destabilize international markets, supply chains and most importantly it would possibly signal the start of WWIII, while signaling a move away from liberal democracies towards authoritarian rule, which could lead to Russia making their move on NATO members<sup>42</sup>.

## 5.2 China-Russia Axis

The China-Russian axis symbolizes a mutual effort, to weaken the current world order that exists and replace it with their own buffer of influence. China doesn't actively endorse Russian aggression, it still issues threats and ultimatums to Taiwan, while conducting military exercises to flex its military muscle, while also providing technological assistance and buying Russian gas for a very cheap price but nevertheless keeping the Russian war-machine afloat<sup>43</sup>. To legitimize its claim to Taiwan, it attempts to play down American role as the global leader, while also repeating the narrative that is put out there by the Russians, which criticizes NATO's "expansion" eastward. China's meddling in European affairs, also serves as a topic of interest for Russia and NATO, as China has invested vast sums of money into infrastructure such ports, highways and railways in Europe, increasing its economical and logistical presence<sup>44</sup> China has also invested largely into the European digital and technological sector, through companies like Huawei and its 5G service at cheap prices. However, this potentially presents a cyber-

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<sup>41</sup> See Kerry Brown, 'How China Could Take Taiwan, Without Firing a Shot', Time Magazine, July 29, 2025 <https://time.com/7304355/china-invasion-taiwan-2027/>

<sup>42</sup> See BBC, 'China and Taiwan: A really simple guide', BBC, January 8, 2024 <https://bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-59900139>

<sup>43</sup> See Elena Giordano, 'Xi and Putin vow to deepen ties as Trump's return sparks anxiety', Politico, January 21, 2025 <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-russia-vow-to-deepen-ties-as-donald-trump-returns/>

<sup>44</sup> See Kaki Bali, 'In Greece's largest port of Piraeus, China is the boss', DW, 30 April, 2022 <https://p.dw.com/p/4ImNZ>

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safety risk, providing the Chinese with an opportunity to collect sensitive information unopposed, while also creating a strategic dependency<sup>45</sup>.

## 6. Europe's Role in Safeguarding the Alliance

### 6.1 Political Unity and Burden Sharing

While the war in Ukraine seems to have brought a sense of togetherness into the alliance, the 2025 NATO Summit still brought up the lingering fatigue that exists within the alliance and the reluctance among members to meet the 5%. Spain, whom Trump called out for "wanting a free ride" spends about 1.3% of GDP on defense, which is the lowest in the alliance. It highlights the struggle that the alliance has in convincing its members to contribute more, despite an ongoing war, reflecting complacency towards defensive commitments<sup>46</sup>. Sanchez's outburst pinpointed that even with growing economies, some countries don't feel the urge to comply, preferring to invest the money into other issues. The 5% goal seems, economically unsustainable. Countries like Belgium and Slovakia, were also vocal about their view towards the 5% goal and maintaining 'neutrality'. This shows the difference in how nations perceive the Russian threat, with the Baltic States and Poland meeting the goal and a country like Italy offering alternative models, due to the mounting debts that it has, which if the country did meet the 5% goal, it would have to pull back on essential social services<sup>47</sup>. Although, even with the signing of the pledge to meet the 5% goal, whether the countries will follow up on its promises remains a question. NATO's General Secretary's Rutte "Daddy" comments to Donald Trump, calls attention to European efforts to appease Trump, while also urging for unity. With

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<sup>45</sup> See Antoaneta Roussi, 'Spain under fire for contracting Huawei to store judicial wiretaps', Politico, July 17, 2025 <https://www.politico.eu/article/spain-huawei-contract-judicial-wiretaps/>

<sup>46</sup> See Waya Quiviger, 'NATO has deep divisions – but why is Spain its most openly critical member?', The Conversation, July 29, 2025 [https://theconversation.com/nato-has-deep-divisions-but-why-is-spain-its-most-openly-critical-member-260987?utm\\_medium=article\\_clipboard\\_share&utm\\_source=theconversation.com](https://theconversation.com/nato-has-deep-divisions-but-why-is-spain-its-most-openly-critical-member-260987?utm_medium=article_clipboard_share&utm_source=theconversation.com)

<sup>47</sup> See Laura Gozzi and Paul Kirby, 'Five takeaways from Nato's big summit on hiking defence spending', BBC, June 25, 2025 <https://bbc.com/news/articles/cvg8pd2y80go>

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the Pentagon pulling troops from Europe and relocating them to the Indo-Pacific region, shows the need for Europe to step up in its endeavors<sup>48</sup>.

## 6.2 Peripheral Destabilization and Strategic Autonomy

NATO finds its being tested on where its red lines are through unconventional warfare methods that both Russia and China are conducting covert surveillance, which demonstrates the need to keep up with the evolving unconventional warfare, where the cutting and damaging of underwater sea/data cable, power grids and energy pipelines, can cause massive damage, disrupt every-day life activities and undermine the authority of the alliance. Investment into dual-use infrastructure should be amongst the list of priorities for military mobility. For NATO to not become “braindead”<sup>49</sup>, it should also increase the production of various defense systems, missiles, shells and have large stockpile reserves, to not suffer a shortage due to the ongoing war in Ukraine. The alliance should place emphasis on the production of weapons in Europe, while also increasing its own independence from America, bringing investment and signing co-operation agreements with non-Nato members like South Korea based on an equal partnership through European-led initiatives like PESCO and EDF<sup>50</sup>.

## Conclusion

The NATO 2025 Summit served as a breakthrough, with the alliance confronting the challenges it faces: Russian aggression, evolving hybrid warfare methods and the growing influence of China, while addressing investment issues, in a bid to turn around the years of complacency prior 2022. The emerging trend of far-right figures across Europe, highlights the internal challenges that the alliance faces and must overcome. Disagreements over spending and

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<sup>48</sup> See Reuters, 'White House video embraces Trump as 'daddy' after NATO chief's remark', June 26, 2025 <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/white-house-video-embraces-trump-daddy-after-nato-chiefs-remark-2025-06-26/>

<sup>49</sup> See BBC, 'Nato alliance experiencing brain death, says Macron', BBC, November 7, 2019 <https://bbc.com/news/world-europe-50335257>

<sup>50</sup> See Federico Santopinto, 'EU Defence Industrial Policy and Strategic Autonomy: How to Square the Circle with NATO?', IRIS - Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques, December 2, 2024 <https://www.iris-france.org/en/eu-defence-industrial-policy-and-strategic-autonomy-how-to-square-the-circle-with-nato/>

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Rutte's diplomatic attempt to appeal to Trump, highlights the need for unity within the alliance. The fall of Ukraine down the agenda at the NATO Summit, shows the "Ukraine" fatigue that and the fall through the cracks that exist internally regarding this topic, with some nations starting to lose faith in a Ukrainian victory<sup>51</sup>.

Russia's continued aggression in Ukraine and hybrid warfare campaigns across the alliance, require a strict reply, while also adjusting its strategy to be able to respond to these issues more efficiently. Kremlins hybrid warfare tactics, draw attention to the need to address those gray zones. NATO must take China into account, its rise to a global power and its close ties to Russia. Preventing members from becoming reliant on China is crucial and thwarting their ambitions regarding Taiwan.

For NATO to flourish and survive, it must invest into collective defense to combat dual threats that it faces. Strategic autonomy is a necessity, through the efficient use of initiatives like PESCO or EDF. The Summit highlighted that autonomy is a priority and that it should be complementary, reinforcing unity. Reducing overreliance on the US is crucial<sup>52</sup>.

To conclude, NATO finds itself at the crossroads of democratic backsliding, hybrid threats and changing global power dynamics. The alliance must remain loyal to the foundations the alliance was created upon. Solidarity, unity, the willingness to commit and act decisively in the face of the threats that it faces. If the alliance can do that, there is no reason as to why it can't survive and function better than they did before, even with a lesser American influence on the region. However, it must muster up its courage and maintain a strict stance against aggression, in which they should preserve "peace through strength", both on the defensive and the diplomatic front. Modernization and reinvention of the European military industry and adaptation alongside investment into much needed infrastructure would strengthen the alliance tenfold.

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<sup>51</sup> See Olesya Khromeychuk, 'Ukraine fatigue': why I'm fighting to stop the world forgetting us', The Guardian, January 25, 2024 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/25/ukraine-fatigue-why-im-fighting-to-stop-the-world-forgetting-us>

<sup>52</sup> See NATO, 'Funding NATO', NATO.int, July 16, 2025 [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_67655.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_67655.htm)

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