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## **Will NATO survive as transatlantic ties weaken, and what could Europeans do in such a situation?**

Since 1949 the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has played significant role in transatlantic security, uniting the United States and Europe in a shared defense pact. Founded as a protector against Soviet aggression, NATO remains as military stronghold even seventy-six years later. Throughout the Cold War and beyond, NATO's power relied on close USA – European alignment. Over the years the alliance adapted to new threats by expanding membership and focusing on protecting each other. However, today NATO faces new problems. Global threats have evolved and political divisions among members are growing. Most concerning, the United States commitment has come into question. Under Donald Trump's "America First" approach, some European officials were shaken by talk of cutting forces in Europe or pressing allies on spending. Meanwhile, Europe is asking how to respond. This essay examines whether NATO can endure under strained transatlantic ties and what Europeans might do to keep it strong. It argues that the alliance's future depends on Europe taking on more defense responsibility, building stronger military ties and building a united strategy – even as the United States is still a necessary but more cautious partner

NATO's existence mainly relies on on the North Atlantic partnership. Basically the alliance is secured by U.S. military power and political will. The United States alone provides the vast bulk of NATO's resources. This strong dedication – from aircraft carriers, nuclear deterrents, global intelligence networks and more – supports NATO's deterrence. Without that, smaller European armies by themselves couldn't guarantee protection for each other. As one analyst notes, weakened European militaries have been tolerated in recent decades *only* because "an engaged America, with its vast military muscle, underpinned NATO" (Defense.info Media Team 2024). In other words, NATO has always worked best when the U.S. and Europe joined forces to face common dangers.

Historically this pattern holds: NATO was strongest in periods of tight U.S.–European unity, such as during the Cold War's confrontation with the USSR or in the post–9/11 era when the U.S. and allies cooperated against terrorism. Those times proved why it's worth keeping Europe and America connected. As a Council on Foreign Relations backgrounder notes, even after the Soviet threat faded, proving how important NATO's U.S. partnership remained. Likewise, NATO's current strategic concept clearly shows that stopping threats from Russia still relies on the full weight of American and allied forces working together (Masters 2024).

In sum, without reliable U.S. commitment, the alliance's protection and unity weaken. European officials have long counted on the notion that an attack on one NATO ally would

immediately trigger the full power of the United States. In the current environment, with global threats growing, that signal remains vital. As NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte emphasized at the 2025 summit, Europe must now “step up” as an alliance, while preserving “the North Atlantic” unity (Reuters 2025).

The lessons of the past are clear: when the United States and Europe share a strategy and burden, NATO delivers a high level of security. Today, even new allies like Finland and Sweden joined because they trust the US-backed NATO umbrella. In short, the alliance matters and stays strong because of its close ties between Europe and the U.S. As one commentator noted, “an alliance cannot be ironclad if in reality or perception it is seen as one-sided” (Davidson 2024). NATO can only function as intended if the United States continues to guarantee European security, and Europeans complement that guarantee with their own commitments.

In recent years, big disagreements and fading trust between Washington and its European allies have raised real concerns to NATO’s unity. Under President Trump’s 2017–2021 administration, many Europeans were unsettled by his rhetoric. Trump publicly scolded NATO allies for falling short on defense spending and wondered about pulling U.S. forces out of Europe. Although he did ultimately “stand with Article 5” in speeches, his unpredictability sowed doubt. Reuters reported that NATO leaders at The Hague summit needed to “restate their commitment to defend each other from attack” explicitly, in order to reassure allies after those doubts (Reuters 2025).

Moreover, Trump’s second term would likely amplify these challenges. Already he has been open to rethinking NATO’s purpose and America’s role, focusing instead on what he sees as bigger threats. European officials reacted to such talk with “shock and doubt about the US commitment to NATO” (Karlin 2024), prompting some countries to accelerate their own spending. But the divisions run deeper than one presidency. On core issues, Washington and Europe sometimes now disagree about strategy. While the U.S. may pivot forces towards the Indo-Pacific, Europe feels exposed on its eastern flank. These different views on threats can put pressure on the alliance’s planning and goals.

There are also differences on softer issues. Climate change and energy policy have sometimes created friction. On the Middle East, Americans and Europeans have often disagreed on approaches. The Ukraine war itself has highlighted some splits: while Europeans by and large back supplying arms and sanctions to Ukraine, the U.S. domestic debate has become more tricky, with many Americans focused on domestic issues and some questioning the amount of foreign aid.

Part of this tension is reflected in public opinion. A 2023 Pew survey found that fewer than one-third of Americans even rate international engagement as a top foreign-policy priority. A growing share believe the U.S. should “solve its own problems first” rather than engage globally (Roa 2023). This shift is supported by both sides: younger Americans, in particular, are much less eager to prioritize foreign missions. Combined with a more isolationist turn in political

discourse, this public mood raises doubts about how much the U.S. will support distant alliances.

In short, the transatlantic alliance today doesn't look as strong as it used to. The United States is pushing for one agenda, while Europeans feel compelled to spend more and fill potential gaps. Donald Trump's rhetoric and the broader shift in U.S. foreign policy focus have caused confusion between relationship. This mistrust undermines the close cooperation that NATO was built upon. Even as the alliance all agreed on supporting Article 5 at its Hague summit, those words were offered against a backdrop of anxiety about America's long-term role (Reuters 2025). The risk is that NATO's deterrent message to adversaries could be weakened if it seems U.S. resolve is wavering. All of these challenges – leadership rhetoric, policy divergence, and public skepticism – therefore pose a direct threat to NATO's unity and operational effectiveness in the short term.

Even with all the pressure, NATO still has reasons for careful hope. The alliance is actively adapting to new threats, and the basic plan still seems solid on paper. For example, the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept explicitly broadens the mission: it stresses cyber defense, countering hybrid warfare, and addressing novel security challenges alongside traditional deterrence (Masters 2024). Its members recognize that an attack by Russia or a major cyber assault could strike anywhere in the alliance, so NATO is updating plans to deter and respond to such threats. In addition, NATO's expanding membership proves it's still important. Finland and Sweden joined in 2023, and even non-Western partners like Japan and Australia were invited to the Hague summit as strategic partners (Masters 2024). This expansion shows that many democracies still see NATO as the top way to stay safe. Joining NATO provides members collective protection and a role in big defense decisions, so it keeps its value, even when global power is more divided.

Still, a few big issues are still there. One issue is that they're still not on the same page. Eastern European states view Russia as a serious threat and push for fast military backup. Western Europeans worry more about terrorism, illegal migration, and technology dependence. NATO requires unanimous agreement among its 32 members for major moves, so even one country holding back can block from moving forward. On day-to-day operations, differences in threat perception sometimes limit how quickly NATO can act. In today's crisis – Russian aggression in Ukraine – some allies push for ever-stronger measures, but some don't wanna push too hard and prefer sorting things out peacefully. Without clear consensus, NATO's response can appear uneven.

Another thing is, inside some countries we can see a bit politically split inside. As domestic politics grow polarized, there is risk that a new government might suddenly reverse or be less firm about what they agreed to. This instability can feed uncertainty in allies, capitals and in Washington alike. 2025's Hague summit already had an example: Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez just laid it out for the rest that he would not jump to a 5% spending target, earning a public rebuke from President Trump (Reuters 2025). Such episodes show how quickly alliance solidarity can be tested in public.

Also, the broader security environment is changing in ways that challenge NATO's traditional model. Climate change and energy issues create new dependencies. Cyber warfare and misinformation spreads across countries easily and can be hard to attribute. And strategic competition has expanded to the Indo-Pacific. NATO's original design did not cover these domains, so member nations must broaden cooperation into many arenas.

Considering everything, NATO will survive only if it keeps making improvements. The alliance's recent strategy documents show they're aware of evolving challenges. Yet awareness alone is not enough. Membership expansion provides extra security, but only if those members are fully integrated (Masters 2024). The big question is whether NATO can translate plans into action while making sure everyone's on the same page. So far, the Hague summit sent signals: it adopted a bolder spending goal and a bigger show of strength. Allies also discussed filling up their weapon supplies and air defense. These decisions show NATO can still move collectively when pressed. But if NATO wants to stay strong, words won't be enough. It needs meaningful reforms: getting decisions made quicker, investing in new tech, and ensuring every ally is militarily ready (Karlin 2024). In short, NATO has adapted enough to survive for now, but it must reform and prove they can get things done.

A central argument in this debate is that Europe can't just rely on others anymore. European NATO members cannot continue deferring security to the U.S. if America is pulling back, this means sustained increases in defense budgets and capabilities. The NATO guideline has long been for each member to spend at least 2% of GDP on defense. Until recently only a few Europeans met this. The collective average in Europe was under 2%. Today that is changing: the combined EU-NATO membership reached about 1.99% of GDP in 2024 (European Council 2024). But not everyone's keeping up. Even if 5% is a big ask, the message is obvious: if the U.S. wants allies to pay more, Europeans should agree and deliver. Poland moving to 4.7% next year and other front-line states are already doing so, but the rest need to catch up (European Council 2024).

It's not just about how much Europe spends, but how it spends it. Rather than each country buying incompatible systems, NATO allies could team up to build and purchase weapons. For example, group purchases could help with getting enough rifles, tanks, or jets, reducing redundancy and costs (European Council 2024). If they buy things together, European armies can buy more advanced equipment at lower price. Europeans should also expand joint training and exercises. In crises, forces that work smoothly together will scare off threats aggressors more effectively than isolated national armies (Karlin 2024).

In the meantime, Europeans should handle more of their defense themselves without the U.S. This does not mean going it alone, NATO remains the main forum. But it does mean reinforcing the European pillar within NATO. For instance, Europe could develop its own fast-reaction forces and a good stash of defense systems and ammo so that it can respond quickly. Some analysts urge creating a permanent EU-led army brigade or joint command, though such ideas risk duplicating NATO (Davidson 2024). The focus should be on filling gaps rather than creating a parallel structure. Care should be taken that EU defense projects do not lead to a separate

“European army” that competes with NATO for resources. Instead, the EU can boost things that help NATO as well.

Finally, Europeans must continue political unity. A key advantage of NATO is that it provides a forum for collective decision-making. After the Hague summit, some European leaders expressed relief that “Europe’s turn” had arrived and that Americans made it clear they’re sticking to it. Brussels and capitals must work together to maintain that trust, holding back from acting alone too fast and causing problems in the group. Europeans should live up to this commitment by ensuring that no country is vulnerable to division or strike without help close by. In practice, this could mean regular rotation of soldiers on Russia’s borders, more common defence notices. The Hague statement also called for pumping up the help for Ukraine over the long term. Showing united resolve in Ukraine’s defense signals that NATO’s guarantees aren’t just empty words (Masters 2024).

In short, Europeans must do their fair share so NATO works both ways. They need to increase spending, focus spending wisely and ensure EU defense efforts complement NATO rather than confuse it. The Economist sums up the question bluntly: “Can Europe defend itself without America?” (The Economist 2024). The answer depends on Europe clearly demonstrating that it is preparing to do so. But if European governments and publics accept that NATO’s future success lies in their hands.

NATO’s survival in the coming decades relies on Europe taking bigger defense roles, without losing sight of the transatlantic partnership. The United States remains an indispensable ally. But Washington is becoming more cautious and selective about its overseas commitments. As one analyst notes, a growing reluctance in U.S. policy means “increasing defense spending given diminishing U.S. interest in playing the security guarantor role in Europe” is the necessary response (Karlin 2024). In other words, Europeans must invest more in their own defence. That includes meeting higher spending targets, building interoperable forces, and making sure that European security initiatives reinforce NATO rather than fragment it.

European unity itself is also essential. Allies must not let policy differences derail their collective readiness. A united Europe with stronger military can keep enemies away, reassuring both Washington and European publics of NATO’s value. The June 2025 Hague summit showed that leaders still recognize this: they agreed to record-high plans for defense spending and mutual defense (Reuters 2025). One commentator observed that the European desire for transatlantic unity “has not been fully snuffed out” (Davidson 2024). The hope is that this faith is translated into action – more troops, more spending, more cooperation.

In the end, NATO’s future comes down to renewed shared investment and trust. If Europe increases its readiness and cohesiveness, and if the U.S. keeps its guarantees credible, the alliance will remain the main support of Western defense. But if either side falters the consequences would be severe. To get NATO going again, it takes leaders with guts from both Americans and Europeans. Europe’s challenge is to demonstrate it can shoulder more of the

burden, while America's challenge is to continue valuing its European partners. Only through such transatlantic solidarity can NATO survive the tests of a shifting world order.

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