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With the Alliance's US pillar in doubt, is strengthening of the European pillar possible and what Europeans must and can do about that?

Essay Paper

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In 1956, Britain and France invaded Egypt, only to succumb weeks later due to American financial and political pressure. The Suez Canal crisis showed that even the strongest powers in Europe could not pursue their strategic objectives without the United States. Seventy years later, the tables were reversed when United States asked its allies to help with the “military operation” in Iran, leading to figures questioning the long-term future of the alliance, mainly due to discontent of the US over Iran, Greenland, the pulling out of troops and capabilities and lingering question of “burden sharing” (Newsweek,2026; Siebold, Slattery and Gumrukcu, 2026).

Alexander Stubb’s *“The Triangle of Power”* provides a useful framework for interpreting this debate. Rather than viewing the current tensions from the prism of NATO’s decline, Stubb states that international politics has entered an *“interregnum”* – a transitional period in which the post-1945 order is being reshaped by renewed “great power competition, hybrid disruptions and shifting global power balances (Stubb, 2026). He argues that institutions do not necessarily collapse, instead they find ways to adapt. Through *“values-based realism”* Stubb asserts that liberal democracies must preserve co-operation, while coming to terms that responsibility will become more widely distributed.

The Ankara Summit was a prime example of this transformation in play. Although political disputes prior to the summit did fuel speculation, the alliance demonstrated its resilient strategic foundations. The Ankara Summit, reaffirmed collective defense, expanded European defense commitments and bolstered its long term for Ukraine both financially and politically, showing that NATO is stepping up as an alliance, through distribution of responsibilities rather than institutional decline (NATO,2026).

This essay argues that the narrative of “American withdrawal” misinterprets the changes taking place within the alliance. The Summit demonstrated that the transatlantic cooperation is not ending anytime soon, alongside the emergence of a more balanced NATO in which European nations assume greater conventional responsibility, while America continues to provide strategic deterrence. From the lens of Stubb’s framework of values-based realism, NATO is not unravelling but is being “renegotiated”.

Interdependence, Not Withdrawal

Prior to the Summit, the speculation surrounding NATO, was framed through a lens of decline. Donald Trump's consistent emphasis on burden sharing, disagreements over Greenland and Iran and the rumours regarding further reductions of American deployment in Europe, increased the perception that United States is gradually withdrawing from Europe (Siebold, Slattery and Gumrukcu, 2026; McLeary, Jack and Burns, 2026). Since the end of Cold War, European security was grounded in the assumption that the US would remain both NATO's primary military power and its political guarantor. Hence, any talk of reduced American commitment is interpreted as evidence of "institutional weakening". This pessimistic interpretation expressed by Robinson (2025), labels the United States as a source of instability within NATO rather than simply its guarantor. Disputes over allied territory, troop reductions and repeated doubts over Article 5 display a genuine erosion of mutual trust rather than burden-sharing negotiations.

This is a serious argument, but it conflates political bargaining with strategic withdrawal. President Trump is not the first American leader to demand its allies to assume a greater share of the burden-sharing , with Obama and George W.Bush as two notable examples (Goldberg,2016; Anderson and Steinberg,2025). His administration is renewing the "great power competition" policy again, while also shifting its long term strategic priorities more towards the Indo-Pacific (Anderson and Steinberg, 2025; Beaver and Peters, 2026). The underlying strategic principles that have sustained NATO since its creation remain intact. Rather than signalling end of American presence in Europe, recent developments point towards the renegotiation of responsibilities within an alliance whose members remain fundamentally dependent upon one another. America is a global superpower that has brandished soft and hard power over the past decade in the pursuit of its interests. It has 750 bases in 80 countries, with 30-40 major bases being in Europe, giving it major operational and political leverage over its rivals, as it was proven during Operation Epic Fury, in which the US used European bases to conduct its operations (Besch and Varma, 2026; Siebold, Slattery and Gumrukcu, 2026; Stubb, 2026).

That dependence is mutual, which is why "complete" American withdrawal remains unlikely. Europe continues to rely upon capabilities that only the United States can provide at scale,

such as nuclear deterrence, long-range strike capabilities, intelligence, satellite surveillance and command structures (Stewart, 2026). As Stubb (2026) argues, the United States remains the “*primus inter pares*” of the West, the leading military, political and technological power, while also being the main guarantor of European security. This illustrates that European strategic autonomy cannot substitute the American security umbrella.

American power projection across Europe and Middle East heavily relies upon European bases, logistics, intelligence networks and diplomatic cooperation (Besch and Varma, 2026). At a time when Washington faces simultaneous challenges from China, Russia and instability in the Middle East, Europe remains an important strategic asset and an ally. Therefore American withdrawal from NATO, would undermine its own position and the leverage it holds over its rivals in a highly contested international environment.

Burden sharing should be seen as evidence of adaptation, rather than disengagement. Greater European responsibility is necessary in the face of issues that it faces, as they have evolved both from the Cold War and the War on Terror, however it is important to preserve what United States provide. The Ankara Summit showed that NATO preserved the strategic interdependence that it has sustained for seven decades (Rubinson, 2025). This is exactly the point that Stubb makes, where institutions in order to survive political power ordeals adapt by redistributing responsibility without abandoning its fundamental purpose (Stubb, 2026).

The Ankara Summit

Prior to the Summit, a lot of speculation surrounded the prospect of transatlantic division. President Trump’s demands for greater spending, uncertainty about American commitment to Europe due to the reduction of US troops in Europe, Greenland and refusal to use certain Air Bases for Operation Epic Fury fueled predictions that the Alliance was on the cusp of decline. However, the outcome of the Summit, suggested a different reality. Behind closed doors and in public Trump reassured the allies of American commitment, while the Alliance redistributed responsibilities to strengthen it further (McLeary, Jack and Burns, 2026). The reaffirmation of Article 5 was the clearest sign of continuity (Siebold, 2026; NATO, 2026).

The Ankara Summit Declaration identified collective defense as NATO’s core purpose, confirming that an attack against one ally remains as an attack against all (NATO, 2026). At a

time when stakes are high, this declaration held significant political weight. As Reuters reported, Trump described the Summit as demonstrating “tremendous unity”, while Rutte added that the Alliance emerged stronger despite all political disagreements, (Slattery and Pamuk, 2026; NATO, 2026). The Summit therefore demonstrated that amidst all talks, NATO fundamental foundation had not been undermined.

The Summit’s most consequential outcome, however, was not the reaffirmation of the “ironclad” principles, but the institutionalisation of a more balanced model of burden sharing, alongside a clearer overview of responsibilities that each ally must fulfill (Michaels, 2026). For decades, successive American administrations have urged its European allies to assume greater responsibility for their own defence. Ankara turned it into a collective strategic objective. Members committed to substantially increasing defence expenditure, strengthening defence-industrial cooperation and accelerating its capability development to meet requirements set by Washington, while taking on a larger share of conventional defense responsibilities (NATO, 2026; Siebold, Slattery and Gumrukcu, 2026). This should not be interpreted as Europe giving in to American pressure, but as a shared understanding that European strategic objectives have changed due to full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. As Stubb (2026) observes, systemic transitions require allies to adapt institutions to new geopolitical realities, while preserving the partnerships upon which they depend. Also, Stubb (2026) argues through the lens of *values-based realism* that “middle powers” will play a crucial role in the stability of the institutions. For middle powers in the alliance, this creates an opportunity to gain greater strategic agency, exert more individual influence over global affairs, while strengthening the European pillar.

Support for Ukraine further reinforced this emerging strategic alignment. Allied leaders pledged to provide 70 billion in military assistance over the next two years reaffirming the importance of Ukrainian security (NATO, 2026). United States will continue to provide strategic capabilities, while also authorizing the licensed production of Patriot systems in Ukraine (Michaels, 2026; Siebold, Slattery and Gumrukcu, 2026). The combination of European financial and conventional alongside American strategic enablers portrays how the alliance is evolving. Europe is assuming greater responsibility for its own conventional defense capabilities and financial support for Ukraine.

The Ankara Summit also placed emphasis on strengthening the Alliance's defense-industrial base. Members committed themselves to increasing defense production, improving procurement cooperation and strengthening partnerships between both governmental agencies and industry (NATO, 2026). By placing industrial resilience as one of the strategic priorities, the alliance signaled a major shift toward expanding domestic manufacturing capacities. This ensures that European defense factories can rapidly produce munitions and heavy equipment, reducing reliance on external supply chains, thus enabling allied nations to sustain long-term military support without depleting their own strategic reserves. The summit therefore established the political framework for a stronger European pillar.

Building the European Pillar

The Ankara Summit shifted the European pillar's political will into motion. European allies, alongside Canada had increased the annual defense investment by more than 139 billion since The Hague Summit, but Ankara placed particular emphasis on the outcomes of this investment. Allies announced new multinational acquisitions in aerial refueling, air transport, maritime surveillance and airborne early warning radars, while launching NATO Front Door for Industry, NATO Engine and a new strategy for the cooperation between NATO and the defense industry. Ankara's central outcome, hence, wasn't another spending "promise", but a real-time strategy turning financial inputs to military outputs (NATO, 2026). The objective of these initiatives is to directly connect NATO's capability requirements with procurement, innovation and manufacturing capacity (NATO,2026).

However, the purpose of this capability development should remain clear. Europe shouldn't attempt to duplicate or replace the United States within NATO. The Belfer Center proposed "transatlantic bargain" involves Europe taking primary responsibility for the conventional defense, while preserving American involvement, alongside its nuclear deterrence. It calls on European allies to provide most of NATO's required forces and enablers, rather than supporting components of an American-led force (Daalder, Grand and Schwarzer, 2025). The Heritage Centre proposes a similar solution, stronger European conventional forces would allow Washington to devote more attention to the Indo-Pacific while retaining a strategic role in Europe (Beaver and Peters, 2026). This reflects Stubb's proposed values-based realism,

where NATO's institutional and democratic foundations are preserved, but the distribution of responsibilities is adjusted to tackle the evolving political realities (Stubb,2026).

Europe's first capability priority should be closing strategic-enabler gap. European states possess a substantial number of tanks, combat aircraft and naval platforms, but their efficiency still depends upon American aerial refueling, strategic transport, intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance, airborne warning radars alongside various other assets and systems. The Belfer report identifies these enablers as the area in which the capability gap is the greatest, as their absence would constrain European forces without extensive US assistance (Daalder, Grand and Schwarzer, 2025). Grand (2024) argues that Europe must have a "package" that combines combat formations with supporting capabilities required to deploy and operate them. Ankara's procurement of additional refueling and transport aircraft, Triton surveillance systems and GlobalEye airborne early-warning aircraft, addresses this issue, proving that NATO is prioritizing systems that connect armies into an effective fighting unit (NATO,2026).

Three existing gaps require consistent investment. Europe needs an interoperable system of layered air and missile defense capable of protecting civilians, the forces, reinforcement hubs and critical infrastructure. Second, Europe requires European-owned ISTAR capacity so that its forces can identify threats, select targets and share battlefield information, without relying on America. Third, it must acquire deep precision-strike that can penetrate Russian command posts, ammunition depots and reinforcement routes behind the frontline. Raik and Terlikowski (2025), identify air defense, ISTAR and deep strike as main priorities for a stronger European pillar. Heritage Foundation adds that European strike systems should be available in substantial quantities and supported by European supply chains, in case of a crisis in the Indo-Pacific (Beaver and Peters,2026). The aim should be to ensure that a temporary loss of American capabilities cannot paralyze European defense.

Europe must also place emphasis on readiness and manpower. The existence of military units on paper means little if they cannot deploy quickly, replace losses or remain operational during a prolonged conflict. Belfer report argues that Europeans should provide between 70-80 % of the forces and enablers required by NATO's force model. To achieve this, larger active and reserve forces are necessary alongside regular large-scale exercises, reinforced inventory of ammunition, fuel and spare parts for sustained operations (Daalder, Grand and Schwarzer,

2025). Inventory must be combined with advanced missiles with systems that can be manufactured rapidly, with artillery ammunition, drones and counter-drone technologies. Readiness should be assessed by whether units are staffed, trained and equipped, not only by the amount of manpower (Daalder, Grand and Schwarzer, 2025).

Allied Forces must be capable of reaching areas that they are defending. Beaver and Peters (2026), place emphasis on the logistical network connecting Netherlands and Germany through Poland to Lithuania and other Baltic nations. It recommends major investment into transit networks capable of facilitating a quick transportation of military equipment eastward. The Belfer Report emphasizes military mobility as a core capability (Daalder, Grand and Schwarzer, 2025). EU and NATO could work together to remove regulatory obstacles.

Capability development will remain unsustainable unless Europe reforms how it procures and manufactures equipment (Scazzieri, 2025). The existing defense market is divided among national requirements and small production scale. Belfer recommends pooling demand, reducing the number of overlapping platforms and adopting standardized NATO equipment and ammunition (Daalder, Grand and Schwarzer, 2025). Bergmann and Svendsen (2025) similarly argue that Europe should shift towards a more unified force posture capable of collective defense. Common procurement would improve interoperability and reduce regulatory hassle (Bergmann and Svendsen, 2025; Fuhrhop and Overhaus, 2026; Iso-Markku and Helwig, 2025).

While Europe must expand its own defense production, it should also seek to manufacture American-designed systems when there isn't an optimal alternative (Kroenig and Taussig, 2026). This would accelerate the output and delivery, while increasing stockpiles. The Ankara initiatives support this, as NATO Engine's objective is to mobilize civilian and defense production across member states, complemented by the Front Door initiative. The strategy focuses on increasing production, strengthening interoperability and improving co-operation with suppliers (NATO, 2026).

Ukrainian integration into capability development is a must for the alliance. Its armed forces and defense firms have valuable experience in drones, interceptors and electronic warfare through the experience on the battlefield. Raik and Terlikowski (2025) argue that learning from

Ukraine is fundamental to modernizing the European pillar, particularly because NATO has the capacity to develop its own drone capabilities. Co-operation with Ukraine should therefore include joint development, production and training. This would allow Europe to combine what it already has, with something that had been tested in the modern-day drone warfare.

Conclusion

Stubb's concept of an international "interregnum" best reflects NATO's transformation. The Ankara Summit showed that the Alliance is not declining but adapting instead. The Article 5 was reaffirmed, bolstering its support for Ukraine and institutionalizing European commitments through concrete procurement and manufacturing strategy (NATO,2026; Stubb,2026).

Ankara was successful because it preserved transatlantic unity while establishing concrete operational responsibilities amongst the members. Europe will assume a greater role in conventional defense, especially in air and missile defense, ISTAR deep strike capabilities, readiness and military production, while the United States remains the principal guarantor of safety (Daalder, Grand and Schwarzer,2025; Beaver and Peters,2026 ; Stubb,2026).

The outcome of the Summit best reflects Stubb's values-based realism, as NATO has responded pragmatically to changing power realities without abandoning its core principles or the institutions. Instead of weakening the Alliance, the Summit provided a stable framework, making it more balanced and resilient.

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