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The Future of NATO and Transatlantic Relations

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The Future of NATO and Transatlantic Relations

Recent developments in United States foreign policy rhetoric have reignited debates surrounding the future of NATO and the durability of transatlantic relations. Statements by U.S. leadership questioning allied commitments, particularly regarding access to military bases, have contributed to perceptions of growing tension within the Alliance. At the same time, European actors, most notably France, are pursuing increased strategic autonomy, while economic interdependence between the United States and the European Union remains deeply entrenched. This research memo examines the evolving dynamics within NATO, evaluates the continued strategic value of the Alliance for the United States, and assesses the implications of emerging European defense initiatives. It argues that despite rising tensions, the transatlantic partnership is more likely to undergo recalibration rather than fragmentation.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has long served as the cornerstone of transatlantic security and cooperation. However, recent political discourse in the United States has raised questions regarding the long-term sustainability of this alliance. Statements by President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Marco Rubio emphasizing dissatisfaction with European allies, particularly their reluctance to grant access to military bases during operations involving Iran, have intensified concerns about the cohesion of NATO.

According to Politico, during hours-long, closed-door, intense conversation with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte on April 8, President Donald Trump expressed dissatisfaction in harsh terms over European allies' refusal to allow the U.S. access to military bases for the Iran war. However, President Trump made no specific demands, nor did he indicate the U.S. would reduce its commitments to the alliance due to base decisions, according to three people familiar with the meeting. "We're not asking them to conduct airstrikes," Secretary of State Marco Rubio said later on Fox News. "When we need them to allow us to use their military bases, their answer is no? Then why are we in NATO?" NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte acknowledged that "some allies failed the test."

These developments are not occurring in isolation. They reflect broader structural shifts in the international system, including changing threat perceptions, evolving geopolitical priorities, and increasing calls within Europe for strategic autonomy.

Tensions within NATO have become increasingly visible in recent years, driven by both political and strategic disagreements. The United States has repeatedly called for greater burden-sharing among European allies, including demands for higher defense spending – five percent of the GDP. While such debates are not new, they have gained renewed intensity in the current political climate.

As mentioned above, a particularly contentious issue has been the refusal of certain European allies, namely Spain and France, to allow the United States to utilize military bases for operations related to Iran. This has been interpreted by U.S. leadership as a breach of alliance solidarity, contributing to a sense of strategic frustration.

At the same time, disagreements over issues such as Greenland and broader geopolitical priorities have further strained relations. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these tensions coexist with ongoing cooperation, suggesting that **the Alliance is experiencing stress rather than imminent breakdown.**

Despite political disagreements, NATO continues to provide substantial strategic benefits to the United States. One of its most significant advantages lies in the extensive network of over 50 military bases across Europe. These bases, hosting tens of thousands of U.S. personnel, enable rapid deployment and serve as critical hubs for operations in the Middle East, Africa, and beyond.

Geography further enhances NATO's value. The positioning of European allies allows the United States to project power efficiently across multiple regions, reducing the logistical constraints associated with operating from the American mainland. In this sense, NATO functions not merely as a defensive alliance, but as a platform for global strategic outreach.

In addition, NATO facilitates unparalleled intelligence cooperation. Collaborative frameworks, including the Five Eyes partnership, significantly expand the United States' surveillance and analytical capabilities. The Alliance also strengthens nuclear deterrence through alignment with the independent arsenals of the United Kingdom and France.

Economic considerations are equally important. European NATO members represent a major market for U.S. defense exports, supporting domestic industries and reinforcing technological leadership. Moreover, NATO underpins a broader security architecture that contributes to the global dominance of the U.S. dollar. Finally, the principle of collective defense, enshrined in Article 5, provides the United States with a unique form of strategic insurance, as demonstrated following the September 11,

2001 attacks. Over 1,100 soldiers from NATO countries died in Afghanistan answering that call.

Parallel to these developments, Europe has begun to articulate a more independent strategic vision. France, in particular, has taken a leading role in advancing the concept of strategic autonomy. Recent initiatives include increased defense spending, modernization of nuclear capabilities, and the development of advanced military technologies.

It is worth to mention several initiatives: UK-France 2025 nuclear pact (Northwood Declaration); Franco-British-German ELSA initiative concerning long-range conventional strike missile program; European nuclear umbrella “forward deterrence” doctrine with 8 partners (Germany, UK, Poland, Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Sweden, Denmark); JEWEL program - sovereign European space-based missile early warning system; next-generation SSBN “L’Invincible” nuclear ballistic missile submarine; SAMP/T NG air defense and others.

France’s efforts extend beyond national defense. Paris has embarked on some financial measures to reduce dependence on the US. Thus, between July 2025 and January 2026, the Banque de France moved its final 129 tonnes of gold reserves from the Federal Reserve in New York to Paris. This completed a, £12.8 billion (\$15 billion) profit-generating operation to modernize its 2,437-tonne stockpile. The bank sold older US-held gold and bought new bars in Europe.

These initiatives reflect a broader shift within Europe toward greater self-reliance. However, they do not necessarily imply a complete departure from NATO. Rather, they suggest an attempt to rebalance the transatlantic relationship by reducing asymmetries in capability and responsibility.

While political and military tensions have attracted significant attention, the economic dimension of transatlantic relations remains a powerful stabilizing force. Trade in goods and services between the United States and the European Union exceeds €1.68 trillion in 2024, supported by deep investment ties (over €5.3 trillion in mutual investments) and highly integrated supply chains. The US-EU trade volume exceeds agreements combined like the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement, EU-Mercosur and the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA).

This level of interdependence creates strong incentives for both sides to maintain cooperative relations. Even in the absence of a comprehensive free trade agreement,

the transatlantic economy operates as a highly interconnected system, particularly in sectors such as finance, technology, and manufacturing.

The evidence suggests that NATO is undergoing a process of adaptation rather than decline. Although political rhetoric has raised concerns about alliance cohesion, institutional resilience remains strong. American experts argue that the United States' system of checks and balances acts as a moderating force, limiting the likelihood of abrupt policy shifts.

Similarly, European policymakers appear cautious in pursuing full strategic independence. While initiatives aimed at strengthening European defense capabilities are advancing, they are generally framed as complementary to, rather than replacements for, NATO.

This evolving dynamic can be understood as a search for a new *modus operandi* in a changing global order. Both sides are adjusting their expectations and roles within the Alliance, reflecting broader transformations in international politics.

Conclusion

NATO continues to play a central role in maintaining transatlantic security and global stability. Despite emerging tensions and calls for reform, the Alliance remains deeply embedded in the strategic, political, and economic structures of its member states.

The future of NATO is therefore unlikely to be defined by dissolution, but rather by transformation. As the United States and Europe navigate shifting geopolitical realities, the transatlantic partnership will likely evolve into a more balanced and flexible arrangement. Such a recalibration may ultimately strengthen, rather than weaken, the foundations of the Alliance.

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