

# Trump and NATO: Will NATO Survive Under a Second Trump Administration?

Rebecca Myshrall\*

## ABSTRACT

*When President Trump entered office in 2017, he had a critical stance toward the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that was perhaps unprecedented among American presidents since NATO's formation in 1949. His complaints centered around the concern that the U.S.'s European allies within NATO were not financially contributing their fair share to the organization. However, given how increasingly uncertain the global environment is, NATO remains relevant. With that said, a second Trump administration creates questions about the political consequences it will have on the Alliance. Given this uncertainty, this paper summarizes the historical context of NATO's formation and the evolution of U.S. perspectives on it. It then documents President Trump's historical animosity towards NATO, particularly his complaint about the lacking financial contributions of European allies, and how that animosity remains in his rhetoric today. Ultimately, in analyzing the first Trump Administration's relationship with NATO and his continuing NATO critiques made on the 2024 campaign trail, this paper concludes that another Trump Administration is not an existential threat to NATO. Rather, the critical rhetoric will likely push NATO countries to increase their defense spending and burden-sharing. In order to bolster the future of transatlantic relations, this paper concludes by recommending how European allies can address Trump-like concerns by increasing their financial and defense contributions and recommending policy advisors Trump's second Administration should consider who would be qualified and committed to maintaining a robust transatlantic Alliance. However, the harsh rhetoric may decrease European allies' trust in the United States, creating cracks in NATO's foundation that could spread in due course.*

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between President Donald J. Trump and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (“NATO,” “the Alliance,” or “the Treaty”) represents a pivotal development in transatlantic relations, marked by a departure from traditional U.S. foreign policy norms. President Trump's critical stance toward NATO

---

\* Rebecca Myshrall is a third-year evening student at Georgetown University Law Center and a full-time consultant working in national security. Rebecca graduated with a Master of Arts in Government from the Johns Hopkins University and with a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Southern Adventist University and is originally from Maine. © 2025, Rebecca Myshrall. I would like to thank Professor David Koplow for his expert advice that helped shape this article.

and his demands for increased defense spending from European allies created significant tension within the Alliance. This paper examines the historical context of NATO's formation, the evolution of U.S. and European perspectives on defense contributions, and President Trump's distinct approach to NATO during his presidency. It also analyzes the potential consequences of a second Trump term, particularly how his policies could further alter the dynamics within NATO. Finally, the paper offers strategic recommendations for European leaders to reduce dependency on U.S. military power and enhance their defense capabilities. In doing so, this paper considers how President Trump and his advisors should navigate future NATO relations to maintain the Alliance's stability and relevance in an increasingly uncertain global environment.

### NATO: THE RELEVANT HISTORY

The United States and eleven other Western nations founded NATO in 1949 as an attempt to restrain the rise of communism.<sup>1</sup> However, this attempt is only part of the NATO origin story. The Treaty's creation was part of a broader endeavor to encourage European political integration, block the revival of nationalist militarism in Europe through a strong North American presence on the continent, and dissuade Soviet expansion.<sup>2</sup> The Treaty was the first peacetime military alliance the United States entered outside the Western Hemisphere.<sup>3</sup>

European nations struggled to preserve security and rebuild their economies after the destruction of the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> These vulnerabilities required support against incursions from the Soviet Union or a resurgent Germany and an enormous amount of aid to re-establish industries and produce food for the war-torn countries.<sup>5</sup> The United States recognized a safe, economically strong, and integrated Europe as necessary to prevent the spread of communism across the continent.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Secretary of State George Marshall recommended providing large-scale economic aid to Europe.<sup>7</sup> This proposal led to the European Recovery Program, or the Marshall Plan.<sup>8</sup> This plan aided European monetary integration and bolstered shared cooperation and interests between the United States and Europe.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, between 1947 and 1948, several events led Western European nations to fear for their political and physical security and the United States to become more closely entrenched in European affairs.<sup>10</sup> Due to tensions in Turkey

---

1. Medea Benjamin, *Trump Was Right: NATO Should be Obsolete*, NEWSTEXT (Dec. 2, 2019), <https://perma.cc/UND2-BQCU>.

2. *A Short History of NATO*, N. ATL. TREATY ORG. (June 3, 2022), <https://perma.cc/4VA6-QULL>.

3. *North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)*, U.S. DEP'T OF STATE: OFF. OF THE HISTORIAN (1949), <https://perma.cc/4XF4-8R5C>.

4. *Id.*

5. *Id.*

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.*

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.*

and the ongoing civil war in Greece, President Harry S. Truman asserted that the United States would provide military and economic aid to both nations and any other countries struggling against an attempt at subjugation.<sup>11</sup>

During this time, the Communist Party had made significant inroads among Italian voters during their elections.<sup>12</sup> As a result of a Soviet-sponsored coup in Czechoslovakia, a communist government came to power on the borders of Germany.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, in mid-1948, Joseph Stalin implemented a blockade against West Berlin, which was then under joint British, U.S., and French control but surrounded by Soviet-controlled East Germany.<sup>14</sup> Although a large airlift to resupply the city for the duration of the blockade prevented an outright confrontation, the Berlin affair resulted in tension between the Soviet Union and the United States.<sup>15</sup> Due to these events, U.S. officials became increasingly concerned that Western European countries might negotiate with the Soviets to handle their security concerns.<sup>16</sup> To evade this possibility, the Truman administration considered forming a European-American alliance that would commit the United States to support the security of Western Europe.<sup>17</sup>

In response to increasing security distress, representatives of Western European countries gathered to create a military alliance. Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Great Britain, and the Netherlands signed the Brussels Treaty in March 1948.<sup>18</sup> The Treaty established collective defense, and if any nation within the group faced an attack, the other members were obligated to assist in its defense.<sup>19</sup> Concurrently, the Truman administration initiated a peacetime draft, increased military spending, and asked the historically isolationist Republican Congress to consider a military alliance with Europe.<sup>20</sup> In May of 1948, Republican Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg proposed a resolution recommending that President Truman pursue a security treaty with Western Europe that would adhere to the United Nations Charter but exist outside the Security Council, where the Soviet Union had veto power.<sup>21</sup> The Vandenberg Resolution passed, which began negotiations for the North Atlantic Treaty.<sup>22</sup>

It took several months to work out the exact terms of the treaty.<sup>23</sup> Western European nations wanted guarantees that the United States would intervene immediately in the event of an attack; however, under the U.S. Constitution,

---

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.*

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

Congress has the power to declare war.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, Europe's participation in collective security required large-scale military contributions from the United States to help rebuild Western Europe's defense capabilities.<sup>25</sup> The United States strove to make any aid dependent on regional coordination despite European countries pushing for individual assistance and grants.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the countries that signed onto the Brussels Treaty wanted to keep the new Alliance restricted to the members of that Treaty, plus the United States.<sup>27</sup> However, the United States fought to enlarge the Treaty to include Canada, Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Ireland, and Portugal, arguing that these countries' territories formed a bridge between the opposite shores of the Atlantic Ocean, which would facilitate military action if necessary.<sup>28</sup> These negotiations resulted in the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949.<sup>29</sup> Later, in 1949, the U.S. Congress passed the Mutual Defense Assistance Program, which appropriated approximately 1.4 billion USD to build Western European defenses.<sup>30</sup>

Soon after the United States and European countries began implementing NATO, the Korean War pushed the member countries to swiftly integrate and coordinate their defense forces through a centralized headquarters.<sup>31</sup> The United States bolstered its troop commitments to Europe in response to the North Korean attack on South Korea, which many viewed at the time as communist aggression. Furthermore, in 1952, NATO admitted Greece, Turkey, and West Germany.<sup>32</sup>

The entry of West Germany led the Soviet Union to form its own alliance: the Warsaw Pact.<sup>33</sup> Through these two multilateral institutions, the Cold War encompassed the globe. In 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, the Warsaw Pact dissolved, and NATO expanded.<sup>34</sup> NATO grew from its original twelve members to thirty-two member countries today.<sup>35</sup> At its origin, NATO was effective. It championed stopping the expansion of the Soviet Union, enabled economic and political integration of Western Europe, and promoted peace overall.<sup>36</sup>

Deterrence theorists claim that it is the possession of nuclear weapons that has kept peaceful relations. Deterrence theory posits that the destructive capability of

---

24. *Id.*

25. *Id.*

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.*

29. *Id.*

30. *Id.*

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.*

34. Medea Benjamin, Trump Was Right: NATO Should be Obsolete, NEWSTEXT (Dec. 2, 2019), <https://perma.cc/UND2-BQCU>.

35. *NATO member countries*, N. ATL. TREATY ORG. (last updated Mar. 11, 2024), <https://perma.cc/9KL7-W8B9>.

36. Michael Kimmage, *Time for NATO to Close Its Door*, FOREIGN AFFS, (Jan. 17, 2022).

nuclear weapons triggers fear, which in turn makes leaders cautious.<sup>37</sup> However, recent scholarship demonstrates that this relationship is not automatic.<sup>38</sup> Nuclear deterrence has been integral to NATO's collective defense.<sup>39</sup> NATO has the capabilities and resolve to defend itself with the use of nuclear weapons.<sup>40</sup> Three NATO countries — France, the United Kingdom, and the United States — have nuclear weapons.<sup>41</sup> The strategic forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States, are the ultimate assurance of NATO's overall security.<sup>42</sup>

Additionally, NATO's nuclear deterrence relies on U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in Europe, as well as supporting infrastructure and capabilities provided by allies.<sup>43</sup> Several European NATO countries possess dual-use aircraft dedicated to the delivery of U.S. nuclear weapons.<sup>44</sup> However, the United States always retains complete control of these nuclear weapons.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, these nuclear-sharing agreements predate and are consistent with the Non-Proliferation Treaty.<sup>46</sup>

The United States assisted European nations through financial aid, military supplies, and the provision of nuclear capabilities. This support allowed Europeans to divert money from their defense industry towards domestic welfare programs, a social safety net, and economic development.<sup>47</sup> This shift was a practical choice for Europeans. Why spend billions of dollars on your defense capabilities when another nation will protect you and your allies?

Europe's stark economic circumstances in the 1940s and 1950s, with a war-torn continent dependent on U.S. economic power and the Marshall Plan, led to European dependency on the United States.<sup>48</sup> This dependency resulted in a significant financial disparity between the United States and the rest of the NATO member countries. The United States contributed more of its GDP towards defense spending than European members did to their defense budgets. One of the earliest attempts to establish a fiscal guideline dates back to the late 1970s when, at its Defense Ministerial, NATO committed to a three percent GDP goal for defense spending.<sup>49</sup> The steps towards formalizing the current two-percent guideline came to fruition during the 2000s.<sup>50</sup> Allies pledged to achieve the two-

---

37. Benoît Pelopidas, *Have nuclear weapons helped to maintain global peace?*, HIST. EXTRA (Aug. 2, 2019).

38. *Id.*

39. *NATO Nuclear Deterrence*, N. ATL. TREATY ORG. (Nov. 30, 2023), <https://perma.cc/T6T7-44D8>.

40. *Id.*

41. *Id.*

42. *Id.*

43. *Id.*

44. *Id.*

45. *Id.*

46. *Id.*

47. Daniel DePetris, *Donald Trump is half right about NATO*, CHI. TRIB. (Feb. 13, 2024).

48. *NATO Nuclear Deterrence*, *Supra* note 39.

49. Wayne Schroeder, *The pathway to NATO's '2/20' goal is through real growth of defense spending*, ATL. COUNCIL (Sept. 15, 2023), <https://perma.cc/6Q6Y-SP3Y>.

50. John Dowdy, *More tooth, less tail: Getting beyond NATO's 2 percent rule*, MCKINSEY & CO. (Nov. 29, 2017), <https://perma.cc/E8LB-RNAB>.

percent guideline at the 2002 Summit in the Czech Republic.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, they repeated the two-percent goal at the 2006 Summit in Latvia.<sup>52</sup> However, the NATO members did not establish a specific timeframe for achieving the two-percent benchmark.

The 2008-2010 financial crisis hampered the implementation of the two-percent guideline.<sup>53</sup> In the pre-crisis period (2004-2007), eight countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Turkey, Greece, Poland, Bulgaria, and Estonia, met the two-percent goal.<sup>54</sup> Later, in 2010, only five countries satisfied the benchmark (Bulgaria, Estonia, and Poland no longer met the goal).<sup>55</sup> In 2014, only France, the United States, and Greece met the two-percent guideline.<sup>56</sup>

It was only after the annexation of Crimea by Russia that NATO formalized the two-percent goal during the 2014 Wales Summit.<sup>57</sup> The Wales Summit established the Defense Investment Pledge, which encouraged allies whose military expenditure was at least two percent of GDP in 2014 to continue their military growth.<sup>58</sup> Allies not meeting the two-percent mark were encouraged to increase their military expenditure as GDP grows and meet the two-percent guideline by 2024.<sup>59</sup> After the 2014 Summit, the situation improved modestly, with Estonia and Poland meeting the goal for a total of five countries reaching the two-percent benchmark.<sup>60</sup>

---

51. *Id.*

52. Press Briefing, James Appathurai, NATO Spokesman, Press Briefing after the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the Level of Defence Ministers (June 8, 2006), <https://perma.cc/H56H-TR6D>.

53. Jaroslaw Wolkonowski, *NATO defense expenditures in 1949-2017*, SHS WEB OF CONFERENCES 57 at 9 (2018).

54. *Id.*

55. *Id.*

56. *Id.*

57. North Atlantic Treaty Org., *Wales Summit Declaration*, para. 14 (Sept. 5, 2014), <https://perma.cc/62Z5-J6MC>.

58. *See id.*

59. *See id.*

60. Wolkonowski, *supra* note 53.

**Table 1: Defense expenditure as a share of GDP and annual real change (2014–2023)<sup>61</sup>**

Share of Real GDP (%)	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022e	2023e
Albania	1.35	1.16	1.1	1.11	1.16	1.28	1.30	1.24	1.21	1.76
Belgium	0.97	0.91	0.89	0.88	0.89	0.89	1.01	1.05	1.19	1.13
Bulgaria	1.31	1.25	1.24	1.22	1.45	3.13	1.59	1.52	1.62	1.84
Canada	1.01	1.2	1.16	1.44	1.30	1.29	1.42	1.27	1.22	1.38
Croatia	1.82	1.76	1.60	1.64	1.55	1.61	1.71	1.98	1.82	1.79
Czechia	0.94	1.02	0.95	1.03	1.10	1.18	1.30	1.39	1.34	1.50
Denmark	1.15	1.11	1.15	1.14	1.28	1.30	1.38	1.32	1.38	1.65
Estonia	1.93	2.03	2.07	2.01	2.01	2.05	2.30	2.02	2.16	2.73
Finland	1.45	1.45	1.42	1.38	1.39	1.45	1.53	1.40	1.68	2.45
France	1.82	1.78	1.79	1.78	1.81	1.81	2.00	1.91	1.88	1.90
Germany	1.19	1.19	1.20	1.23	1.25	1.35	1.51	1.46	1.49	1.57
Greece	2.22	2.31	2.40	2.38	2.54	2.45	2.91	3.70	3.86	3.01
Hungary	0.86	0.90	1.00	1.19	1.01	1.34	1.76	1.68	1.82	2.43
Italy	1.14	1.07	1.18	1.20	1.23	1.17	1.59	1.57	1.51	1.46
Latvia*	0.94	1.03	1.44	1.59	2.06	2.02	2.15	2.07	2.08	2.27
Lithuania*	0.88	1.14	1.48	1.71	1.97	2.00	2.07	1.97	2.47	2.54
Luexmbourg	0.37	0.42	0.38	0.50	0.50	0.55	0.58	0.47	0.62	0.72
Montenegro	1.50	1.40	1.42	1.34	1.37	1.33	1.73	1.55	1.41	1.87
Netherlands	1.15	1.13	1.16	1.15	1.22	1.32	1.41	1.38	1.63	1.70
North Macedonia	1.09	1.05	0.97	0.89	0.94	1.16	1.24	1.47	1.62	1.87
Norway	1.54	1.56	1.73	1.71	1.72	1.84	1.97	1.72	1.51	1.67
Poland*	1.88	2.23	2.00	1.89	2.02	1.99	2.23	2.22	2.40	3.90
Portugal	1.31	1.33	1.27	1.24	1.34	1.37	1.43	1.53	1.42	1.48
Romania*	1.35	1.45	1.43	1.73	1.79	1.84	2.01	1.86	1.72	2.44
Slovak Republic	0.98	1.11	1.12	1.10	1.22	1.70	1.92	1.74	1.81	2.03
Slovenia	0.97	0.93	1.00	0.98	1.01	1.05	1.06	1.24	1.25	1.35
Spain	0.92	0.93	0.81	0.91	0.93	0.91	1.01	1.04	1.07	1.26
Turkiye	1.45	1.38	1.45	1.51	1.82	1.86	1.86	1.61	1.36	1.31
United Kingdom	2.14	2.03	2.08	2.07	2.1	2.08	2.35	2.30	2.16	2.07
United States	3.72	3.52	3.52	3.31	3.29	3.51	3.64	3.48	3.45	3.49
<b>NATO</b>										
Europe and Canada	1.43	1.42	1.44	1.48	1.51	1.54	1.72	1.67	1.65	1.74
<b>NATO Total</b>	<b>2.58</b>	<b>2.48</b>	<b>2.49</b>	<b>2.40</b>	<b>2.41</b>	<b>2.54</b>	<b>2.71</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>2.57</b>	<b>2.64</b>

The table above demonstrates how each member's percentage of GDP towards defense spending has fluctuated since the 2014 Summit. While the numbers vary between spending year over year for all the NATO countries, notably, combined NATO defense spending increased about eleven and a half percent between the year before President Trump took office (2016) and 2020, President Trump's last year in office.<sup>62</sup> The amount paid by NATO countries other than the United States increased by about twenty percent over the same period. However, the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022 pushed European countries to bolster their defense spending and to rely less on the United States.<sup>63</sup> In 2023, Finland, Hungary, Romania, and the Slovak Republic joined several other countries in meeting the

61. PRESS RELEASE, DEFENCE EXPENDITURE OF NATO COUNTRIES (2014-2023), NATO: PUBLIC DIPLOMACY DIVISION AT 8 (July 7, 2023).

62. Robert Farley & Eugene Kiely, *Trump's Distorted NATO 'Delinquent' Comments*, FACTCHECK.ORG (Feb. 12, 2024).

63. Raf Casert, *EU plans to boost defense industry and move away from US dependency in the face of Russian threats*, AP NEWS (Mar. 5, 2024).

two-percent benchmark, totaling eleven countries surpassing the goal.<sup>64</sup> However, as of February 2024, twenty of NATO's thirty-one member countries still have not fulfilled the Alliance's guideline of spending at least two percent of their GDP on defense.<sup>65</sup>

#### AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN SENTIMENTS & ACTIONS ON DEFENSE SPENDING

European members' failure to meet the two-percent goal has led to declining U.S. attitudes toward NATO allies.<sup>66</sup> While most Americans (58%) still have a favorable opinion of NATO, according to a Pew Research Center poll, the share of Americans who believe the Alliance's influence is growing stronger dropped eleven percentage points since 2022.<sup>67</sup> The graph below breaks down American viewpoints by education level and political leanings.<sup>68</sup> Notably, Republicans have become less favorable toward NATO over the past year, while Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents remain positive about NATO.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, Americans who say security and defense ties are vital for a strong E.U. and U.S. relationship are almost twice as likely to have a favorable view compared to those who do not consider security ties important (60% vs. 33%). Lastly, those with more knowledge of the Alliance are more positive about NATO.<sup>70</sup>

---

64. PRESS RELEASE, *supra* note 61.

65. DePetris, *supra* note 47.

66. Richard Wike, Moira Fagan, Sneha Gubbala, & Sarah Austin, *Americans' opinions of NATO*, PEW RSCH. CENTER (May 8, 2024), <https://perma.cc/XFL9-CG2P>.

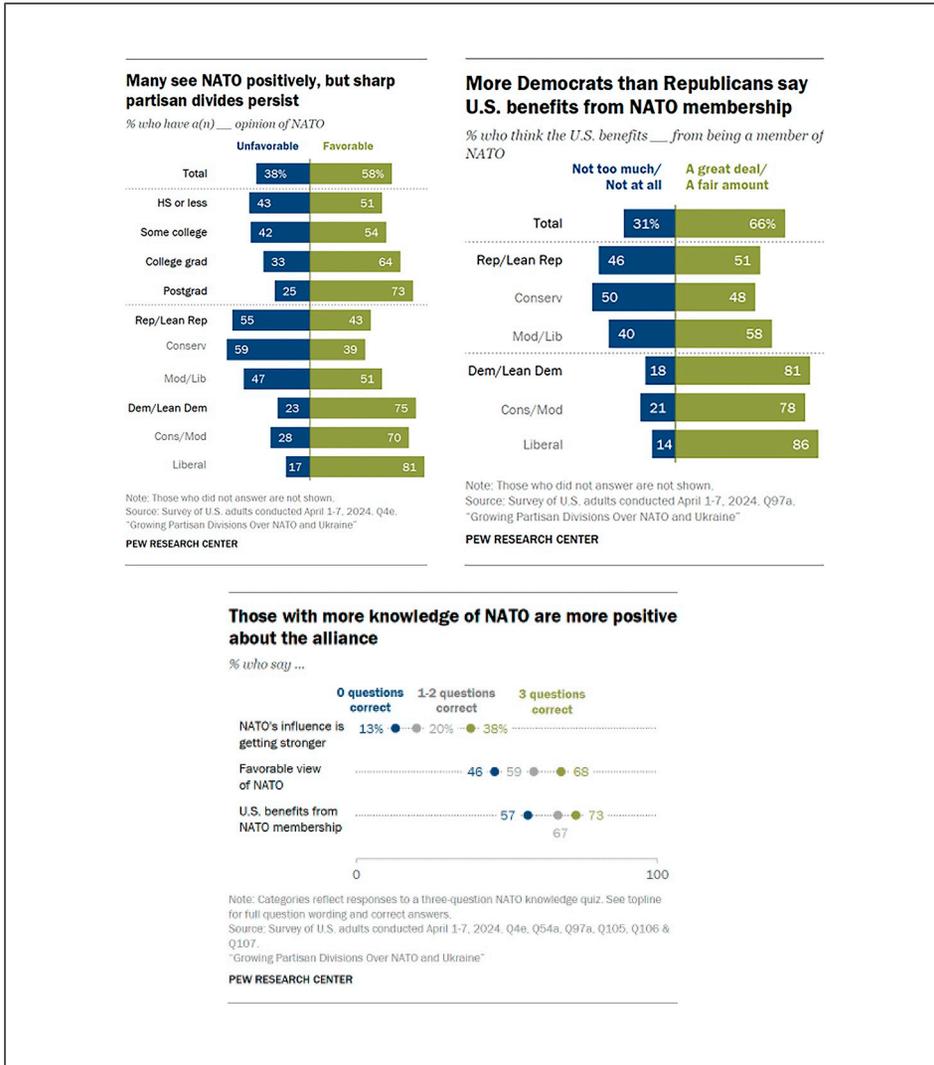
67. *Id.*

68. *Id.*

69. *See id.*

70. *See id.*

**Table 2–4: Americans’ Viewpoints on NATO<sup>71,72</sup>**



Citizens of the European member states support increased defense spending.<sup>73</sup> In an E.U.-wide survey conducted in June 2023, Europeans expressed support for increased E.U. defense spending.<sup>74</sup> Seventy-seven percent of Europeans believe member states should improve their coordinated purchase of military equipment.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, two-thirds of European citizens agree that European leaders should

71. *Id.*

72. *Id.*

73. *Eurobarometer shows public support to defence policy and industry*, DEF. INDUS. & SPACE, EUR. COMM’N (July 14, 2023), <https://perma.cc/V69M-G3UJ>.

74. *Id.*

75. *Id.*

appropriate more monetary funds for European defense.<sup>76</sup> Additionally, more than two-thirds agree that the European Union needs to reinforce its capacity to produce military equipment.<sup>77</sup>

Financially, European countries have contributed more than \$100 billion in aid to Ukraine.<sup>78</sup> This aid encompasses financial, humanitarian, and military support, including advanced weaponry and defense systems.<sup>79</sup> For example, the Baltic republics have each contributed approximately one and a half percent of their GDP to Ukraine.<sup>80</sup> In 2024, NATO facilitated the bulk purchase of 220,000 rounds of 155mm artillery ammunition, critical for Ukraine's defense efforts.<sup>81</sup> While much of this spending is significant and counts towards European nations' two-percent goal, it does not ultimately increase the sustained military capacity of European NATO countries.<sup>82</sup>

Beyond these financial contributions, NATO partners mobilized support towards the United States after the 9/11 attacks, invoking the Alliance's Article 5 (an attack on one member is an attack on all members) for the first and only time.<sup>83</sup> European citizens fought and died alongside American troops in Afghanistan.<sup>84</sup>

European countries rely on the United States for the presence of troops on the European continent, protection under its nuclear umbrella, jet fighters, bullets, and more.<sup>85</sup> Even Poland, which spends a relatively high percentage of GDP on defense compared with other European NATO countries, is buying jet fighters, rocket artillery systems, and tanks from the United States.<sup>86</sup> Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said, "The alliance with the United States is the absolute foundation of our security."<sup>87</sup> Overall, European nations recognize the importance of the United States as a NATO member.

#### ASSESSMENT OF THE TWO-PERCENT GUIDELINE

Many experts assert that the United States accounts for a disproportionate share of NATO's military expenditure.<sup>88</sup> In 2023, sixty-eight percent of NATO's

---

76. *Id.*

77. *Id.*

78. Robert Benson, *In Defense of NATO: Why the Trans-Atlantic Alliance Matters*, CAP 20 (Mar. 26, 2024).

79. *Id.*

80. *Id.*

81. *Id.*

82. *Id.*

83. *Id.*

84. *Id.*

85. Matthew Karnitschnig, *America's European burden: How the Continent still leans on the US for security*, POLITICO (June 14, 2023), <https://perma.cc/VCC7-JG88>.

86. *Id.*

87. *Id.*

88. Rex W. Tillerson, U.S. Sec'y of State, Remarks on Ministerial Intervention, Address before NATO Foreign Ministers (Mar. 31, 2017), in U.S. Dep't. of State Archives 2017-2021, <https://perma.cc/3M7Q-BN4G>.

total military expenditure came from the United States.<sup>89</sup> However, comparing U.S. military spending, in absolute terms, with the aggregated military expenditure of the rest of the NATO countries is misleading. NATO indicates that the United States' contribution to NATO's common budget in 2024 was approximately sixteen percent, equal to Germany's contribution.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, the United Kingdom contributed approximately eleven percent, France contributed ten percent, and Italy followed with approximately eight and a half percent.<sup>91</sup> In this regard, the numbers do not suggest that European nations are freeloading off the United States.

A further critique of the two-percent guideline is that it heavily emphasizes input with less focus on output.<sup>92</sup> For example, the two-percent benchmark does not consider military capabilities and the quality of the military forces.<sup>93</sup> In absolute terms, military expenditures of two percent of GDP also depend on the size of the economy and the business cycle.<sup>94</sup> Periods of contraction imply that the two-percent metric results in lower levels of absolute military expenditure.<sup>95</sup>

Furthermore, neglecting to consider output implies that the two-percent goal fails to assess how allies contribute to NATO's activities. For example, Denmark contributed more soldiers than Greece to NATO's presence in Afghanistan between 2010 and 2012.<sup>96</sup> Also, during the 2011 NATO-led military operation in Libya, Denmark contributed slightly more military planes than Greece.<sup>97</sup> However, Denmark has roughly half the population of Greece, which indicates Denmark contributed more than its GDP defense spending figure would reflect.<sup>98</sup>

Additionally, the share of GDP committed to military expenditures fails to reflect the member countries' willingness to participate in operations or undertake risky missions. For example, Denmark and Canada exemplified greater readiness to undertake more dangerous operations in Afghanistan.<sup>99</sup> In particular, Canada lost 158 soldiers during its engagement in Afghanistan, which was more than any NATO country besides the United Kingdom and the United States.<sup>100</sup> However, since 2014, Greece has consistently exceeded the two-percent guideline.<sup>101</sup> In

---

89. Marcus Lu, *Breaking Down \$1.3T in NATO Defense Spending*, VISUAL CAPITALIST (Feb. 23, 2024).

90. NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORG., FUNDING NATO (last updated April 5, 2024).

91. *Id.*

92. Ojars E. Kalnins, *Burden Sharing Revisited*, NATO PARL. ASSEMBLY POL COMM. At 7 (2017), <https://perma.cc/PK8X-GU4K>.

93. Jan Techau, *The Politics of 2 Percent: NATO and the Security Vacuum in Europe*, CARNEGIE EUR. (Sept. 2, 2015), <https://perma.cc/AKE5-C9BR>.

94. Simon Lunn and Nicholas Williams, *NATO Defence Spending: The Irrationality of 2%*, EUR. LEADERSHIP NETWORK at 3 (June 2017), <https://perma.cc/J5NU-S4MG>.

95. *Id.*

96. John R. Deni, *Burden Sharing and NATO's 2 Percent Goal*, CARNEGIE EUR. (April 14, 2015), <https://perma.cc/2MYH-YYRC>.

97. *Id.*

98. *Id.*

99. See Kalnins, *supra* note 92.

100. *Id.*

101. Farley & Kiely, *supra* note 62.

contrast, Canada and Denmark have been some of the lowest GDP contributors of the member states, hovering around one to one and a half percent of GDP.<sup>102</sup>

Furthermore, the two-percent goal does not necessarily consider efficiency, specifically how member countries spend their military expenditure, toward whether they achieve the two-percent goal. For example, personnel expenses contribute to many European members' military spending, often leaving fewer funds for other significant investments, such as equipment.<sup>103</sup> For example, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain spend over fifty percent of their military defense on personnel, compared to the United States, which spends just under thirty percent of its military budget on personnel.<sup>104</sup> However, this also suggests that many European nations have had the opportunity to invest in their people fiscally through pay and benefits, whereas the United States spent more of its defense budget on operations and maintenance, which was thirty-nine percent for the 2023 fiscal year.<sup>105</sup> However, the operations and maintenance appropriation does include some benefits for military personnel such as healthcare, therefore, the disparity between the United States and European member countries' fiscal support of their personnel may be closer than meets the eye.

Lastly, another critique of the two-percent guideline is the unclear methodology the Alliance relied on when NATO originated. NATO did not rely on any known financial analysis to conclude the optimal percentage of GDP that member countries would need to commit to military expenditure for it to achieve its strategic goals.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, an analysis of the wording used to describe the Defense Investment Pledge, such as GDP "growth" and "aim," fails to assert that the two-percent guideline is binding.<sup>107</sup> Despite American pressure, this assertion could explain why some member countries have approached the two-percent benchmark as a goal that is not necessary to meet.

#### PREVIOUS ADMINISTRATIONS' AND CONGRESSES' TRANSATLANTIC POLICIES AND RELATIONS

While presidents have varied in their relations with NATO member countries over transatlantic issues, apart from President Trump, every president following the Second World War has defended NATO's vital role in U.S. national security. At the start of the Alliance, President Truman noted, "The unity of the nations of Western Europe and of the North Atlantic area is vital to their security and to ours."<sup>108</sup> Presidents of both parties have continued to praise NATO's vital role in the

102. *Id.*

103. Philip Shelter-Jones, *Does Europe Contribute Enough to NATO? The Truth about Defence Spending*, WORLD ECON. FORUM (Mar. 16, 2017), <https://perma.cc/X8KC-2L2F>.

104. Farley & Kiely, *supra* note 62.

105. *Budget Basics: National Defense*, PETER G. PETERSON FOUNDATION (May 2, 2024), <https://perma.cc/U9VV-M9LG>.

106. Techau, *supra* note 93.

107. Juuko Aloziou, *NATO's Two Percent Guideline, A Demand for Military Expenditure Perspective*, 33 DEF. & PEACE EECON., 475, 478 (2021).

108. President Harry S. Truman, Statement by the President Following a Report by Secretary Acheson on His Meeting with the Ministers of the North Atlantic Treaty Nations (Dec. 21, 1950).

United States and abroad. For example, President Reagan declared that NATO was “the core of America’s foreign policy and of America’s own security.”<sup>109</sup>

For decades, Americans have demonstrated bipartisan support for NATO as a counter to Russia. However, in the early 1950s, the “Great Debate” dispute set President Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson against congressional NATO skeptics.<sup>110</sup> A year after NATO’s establishment, the Truman administration pushed for a dramatic increase in U.S. troop levels in Western Europe.<sup>111</sup> President Truman sought to increase the U.S. commitment to Europe’s badly depleted state.<sup>112</sup> Some prominent Republican legislators objected, concerned that the United States would finance too much of the cost of member countries’ defense.<sup>113</sup> Led by Senator Robert A. Taft, these skeptics included legislators who wanted to preserve American freedom of action abroad, others who clung to prewar isolationist tendencies, and still others who wanted to push for more extensive defense commitments from European allies.<sup>114</sup>

Congress has never acted to invalidate the fundamental U.S. allegiance to NATO. While past Congresses have supported the United States’ commitment to NATO, there has also been a congressional push to readjust defense burdens between the United States and other member countries.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, executive-congressional relations in the burden-sharing debate have mixed confrontation and cooperation.<sup>116</sup> Some of this is due to partisan political behavior, but more often it is influenced by differing institutional perspectives and responsibilities.<sup>117</sup> While it is debatable if this is true in 2024, Congress has historically primarily focused on its constitutional duty to raise and allocate funds to support governmental programs.<sup>118</sup> Historically, the executive branch is driven by the president’s responsibilities as commander-in-chief and protecting the nation’s security.<sup>119</sup> Given the traditionally different priorities of the executive and legislative branches, it is understandable that conflicting positions on NATO support have existed since the Treaty’s inception.<sup>120</sup>

Despite Congress’s attitudes towards NATO in the past, there has been relative bipartisan support for the Alliance in the last several years. In 2019, the Democratically controlled House passed H.R. 676, the NATO Support Act,

---

109. President Ronald Reagan, Address to the Citizens of Western Europe (Feb. 23, 1988).

110. Matthew Waxman, *NATO and War Powers: Remembering the ‘Great Debate’ of the 1950s*, LAWFARE (July 11, 2018, 6:30 AM), <https://perma.cc/QK6U-FUTC>.

111. *Id.*

112. *Id.*

113. *Id.*

114. *Id.*

115. Stanley R. Sloan, *Managing the NATO Alliance: Congress and Burdensharing*, 4 J. OF POL’Y ANALYSIS & MGMT. 396, 397 (1985).

116. *See id.*

117. *Id.*

118. *Id.*

119. *Id.*

120. *Id.*

which served as a reaffirmed commitment to Congress's support of NATO.<sup>121</sup> The bill reads that the president "shall not withdraw the United States from NATO" and that the United States will "remain a member of good standing" in NATO.<sup>122</sup> The bill further stipulated that "no funds are authorized to be appropriated, obligated, or expended to take any action to withdraw the United States from the North Atlantic Treaty."<sup>123</sup>

Furthermore, in 2023, a Republican-controlled Congress enacted a statutory provision located at Section 1250A of the most recent National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that expressly prohibits the President of the United States from withdrawing from NATO or using any appropriated funds for that purpose without permission from Congress.<sup>124</sup> However, the legal protections provided by Section 1250A are incomplete.<sup>125</sup> Legislators dropped a critical provision that would have preauthorized litigation to challenge any presidential effort to exit NATO contrary to this legislation.<sup>126</sup> Without such authorization, it is unclear who may have the standing to challenge the legality of an attempted unilateral exit from NATO in federal court.<sup>127</sup>

President Trump's frustration with Europe "not paying their fair share" dates back to the first decade of NATO. In 1959, President Eisenhower stated that the U.S. allies were close to "making a sucker of Uncle Sam."<sup>128</sup> In more recent administrations, the sentiment has stayed the same. Due to Europe's economic depletion and harm caused by Soviet military actions, the United States became a powerful ally of Europe. However, many U.S. presidents have argued that European allies must put more funds towards their defense, and the United States has unfairly had to fill in the defense gaps.

President George W. Bush declared at the Bucharest Summit in 2008, "I will encourage our European partners to increase their defense investments."<sup>129</sup> President Obama continued this rhetoric, "[E]very NATO member should be contributing its full share . . . I'll be honest, sometimes Europe has been complacent about its own defense."<sup>130</sup> President Obama further disclosed his annoyance with allies failing to "pay [their] fair share."<sup>131</sup> He further expressed, "Free riders aggravate me."<sup>132</sup>

---

121. See NATO Support Act, H.R. 676, 116th Cong. (2019).

122. *Id.*

123. *Id.*

124. Scott R. Anderson, *What Congress Has Done – and What It Still Needs to Do– to protect NATO*, LAWFARE (Mar. 22, 2024, 9:40 AM), <https://perma.cc/ZXG5-5NPX>.

125. *Id.*

126. *Id.*

127. *Id.*

128. Memorandum from Brigadier General Andrew Goodpaster on Conference with President Eisenhower (Nov. 4, 1959).

129. President George W. Bush, President Bush Visits Bucharest, Romania, Discusses NATO (Apr. 2, 2008).

130. President Barack Obama, Remarks by President Obama in Address to the People of Europe (Apr. 25, 2016).

131. Jeffrey Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*, THE ATLANTIC (April 2016).

132. *Id.*

However, European member countries needed more than encouragement; they needed a push to increase their defense spending. When President Obama left office in 2017, only four NATO countries apart from the United States met the two-percent guideline.<sup>133</sup>

These few examples demonstrate that President Trump's attitude towards NATO is not necessarily different from past administrations. American presidents and members of Congress have historically been impatient with European allies failing to fulfill their defense commitments. However, like almost all matters concerning President Trump, he expresses himself in a more bombastic, bold tone that is off-putting to many.

#### PRESIDENT TRUMP DEPARTS FROM PRECEDENTED U.S. SUPPORT FOR NATO

President Trump is not the first U.S. president to complain about other NATO members not contributing an equitable share of defense spending. However, he is the first president to publicly doubt the vitality of NATO to U.S. national security. Furthermore, he is the first president to publicly question the viability of U.S. defense commitments to NATO member countries. These two changes in presidential rhetoric towards NATO have almost certainly contributed to a recent increase in negative U.S. sentiments towards the Alliance (Tables 2 and 3 on page 111).

Previous administrations unsuccessfully pushed allies to invest more money into their defense capabilities. President Trump described his opinion on the previous administrations' relationship with NATO allies at the 2018 NATO Summit:

Now, what has happened is, presidents over many years, from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama, they came in, they said, "Okay, hey, do the best you can," and they left. Nobody did anything about it. And it got to a point where the United States was paying for 90 percent of NATO. And that's not fair. So it's changed.<sup>134</sup>

However, President Trump's analysis is not entirely accurate, as indicated by the statistics in Table 1 on page 109. Despite President Trump's claim that the United States was paying for ninety percent of NATO, since 2014, U.S. defense spending has stayed relatively consistent, making up approximately two-thirds of the total NATO defense expenditures and representing approximately three and a half percent of U.S. GDP.<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, President Trump moved from stating that the allies are failing to meet the two-percent guideline to emphasizing that the United States is paying more and saying the other member countries owe the

---

133. Farley & Kiely, *supra* note 62.

134. President Donald Trump, Remarks by President Trump at Press Conference After NATO Summit (July 12, 2018).

135. Farley & Kiely, *supra* note 62; PRESS RELEASE, *supra* note 61.

United States money.<sup>136</sup> This analysis is false. While most NATO countries fail to meet the two-percent goal, the guideline does not create bills, debts, or legal obligations if not met.<sup>137</sup> President Trump may intend to relay that Europe should pay the United States back for burdening a large share of defense spending; however, the guideline does not require payments to NATO or the United States.<sup>138</sup>

#### TRUMP: THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

In March 2016, then-candidate Trump described NATO as a remnant from a more affluent American period:

NATO was set up at a different time. NATO was set up when we were a richer country. We're not a rich country anymore. We're borrowing, we're borrowing all of this money. . . NATO is costing us a fortune and yes, we're protecting Europe with NATO but we're spending a lot of money. Number one, I think the distribution of costs has to be changed. I think NATO as a concept is good, but it is not as good as it was when it first evolved.<sup>139</sup>

Candidate Trump likely meant “fortune” in reference to the United States, whose defense budget represents approximately two-thirds of the combined defense budgets of NATO members.<sup>140</sup> His stance on NATO can be summarized as follows: NATO is obsolete; NATO allies are not paying their fair share; and the United States should not defend nations that have not met their budgetary defense commitments.

Even as far back as the 1980s, Mr. Trump has consistently supported the idea that other countries are exploiting the United States.<sup>141</sup> For example, in 1987, then a famous real estate developer, Mr. Trump appeared on CNN's *Larry King Live* and answered a question from a caller inquiring why West Germany was not paying for the U.S. military presence there. Mr. Trump responded, “I agree with you on NATO. If you look at the payments that we are making to NATO, they are totally disproportionate with everybody else's. And it's ridiculous.”<sup>142</sup> However, the United States only contributes to NATO's common funds to keep the organization running.<sup>143</sup> The United States contributes roughly twenty-two percent of NATO's Common Funded budget (approximately \$685 million out of

136. Daniel Dale, *Fact check: Debunking five false Trump claims about NATO*, CNN (Feb. 13, 2024, 1:38 PM), <https://perma.cc/ZZ5X-5UYH>.

137. *Id.*

138. *Id.*

139. Shayna Freisleben, *A guide to Trump's past comments about NATO*, CBS NEWS (Apr. 12, 2017, 4:06 PM), <https://perma.cc/8E6V-5J8V>.

140. Farley & Kiely, *supra* note 62.

141. Don Gonyea & Domenico Montanaro, *Donald Trump's Been Saying the Same Things for 30 Years*, NPR (Jan. 20, 2017, 5:00 AM), <https://perma.cc/2BP2-V4ME>.

142. Philip Bump, *The dishonest spending rhetoric that masks Trump's Russia sympathies*, WASH. POST (Feb. 12, 2024).

143. U.S. Embassy Kyiv, *Fact Sheet: U.S. Contributions to NATO Capabilities*, U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, (Jul. 8, 2016), <https://perma.cc/83GJ-7RN9>.

NATO's \$2.8 billion per year).<sup>144</sup> This is separate from the military budgets of the respective countries.

Furthermore, in his book, *The America We Deserve*, published in 2000, Mr. Trump wrote, "The Soviet Union is no longer a threat to our Western European allies. America has no vital interest in choosing between warring factions whose animosities go back centuries in Europe."<sup>145</sup> In fact, during this time, there was discussion referencing the possibility of Russia joining NATO. Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that he asked President Clinton during a visit to Moscow if President Clinton thought Russia had a chance of joining NATO after tensions settled at the end of the Yugoslav war.<sup>146</sup> The real estate tycoon continued, writing, "Their conflicts are not worth American lives. Pulling back from Europe would save this country millions of dollars annually. The cost of stationing NATO troops in Europe is enormous, and these are clearly funds that can be put to better use."<sup>147</sup> Therefore, when Mr. Trump announced in his 2016 campaign that "NATO is obsolete," it was not out of character.<sup>148</sup>

Mr. Trump's assertion that NATO was obsolete was unprecedented for presidential hopefuls. Mr. Trump described, "When NATO was formed many decades ago, we were a different country. There was a different threat."<sup>149</sup> The presidential candidate further tied NATO to Russia by explaining how nations' leaders formed NATO to combat the Soviet Union, which is no longer in existence.<sup>150</sup> In 2000, Mr. Trump emphasized that NATO was obsolete, and NATO members encountered a vastly different set of circumstances than in President Truman's day when the Alliance served as a necessary agreement in the 1950s.

#### TRUMP: THE PRESIDENT

During his first presidential term, President Trump aggressively approached NATO member countries. He often criticized member states for inadequate defense spending and questioned the Alliance's relevance. His cynicism towards multilateralism and partiality for transactional diplomacy raised concerns at home and abroad about the durability of the United States' commitment to NATO under the Trump administration.

*Quid pro quo* logic forms the foundation of transactional diplomacy: "I do not do anything for you if I do not get something in return."<sup>151</sup> Furthermore, proponents of transactional diplomacy perceive a zero-sum world.<sup>152</sup> Essentially, what

144. *Id.*

145. DONALD TRUMP & DAVE SHIFLETT, *THE AMERICA WE DESERVE* 118 (2000).

146. Patrick Reilly, *Putin says Bill Clinton told him Russia could join NATO before pulling back hours later: 'You tricked us'*, N.Y. POST (Feb. 8, 2024, 8:00 PM), <https://perma.cc/6KUM-4DBJ>.

147. TRUMP & SHIFLETT, *supra* note 145, at 118.

148. Freisleben, *Supra* note 139.

149. Donald Trump, *Transcript: Donald Trump Expounds on His Foreign Policy Views*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 26, 2016).

150. *Id.*

151. Marina Henke, *Trump's Transactional Diplomacy: A Primer*, POLITICAL VIOLENCE AT A GLANCE (Feb. 8, 2017), <https://perma.cc/FVL5-T45W>.

152. *Id.*

benefits one person does not benefit the other.<sup>153</sup> Therefore, under transactional diplomacy, if one person helps another, the one receiving help must pay the giver back.<sup>154</sup> Practicing transactional diplomacy in full force means every cooperative move becomes a fungible and potentially tradable asset, whether in the security, institutional, or economic space.<sup>155</sup> However, this *quid pro quo* logic is not unique to President Trump.<sup>156</sup>

These *quid pro quo* exchanges are often called “issue linkages” or “side payments.”<sup>157</sup> For example, the United States and others frequently use them to win votes in the U.N. Security Council or U.N. General Assembly.<sup>158</sup> Furthermore, side payments and issue linkages have also been critical factors in successful international negotiations on human rights, international trade, economic sanctions, and environmental agreements.<sup>159</sup> Pursuing a foreign policy that prioritizes interests like domestic prosperity, big-power relations, and national security over American values such as democratic governance and human rights is not a new approach.<sup>160</sup> For example, under former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the United States agreed to reduce its ties with Taiwan in exchange for formal relations with China, the larger and more dominant global power.<sup>161</sup> More recently, President Obama traded sanctions relief for Iran’s entry into a nuclear deal that relinquished the threat of an Iranian breakout as a nuclear-armed country.<sup>162</sup> Some experts also note that President Obama ignored grassroots anti-regime demonstrations in Iran to reach a nuclear deal.<sup>163</sup>

However, deal makers often constructed these agreements in language that concealed the transactional nature of the deal.<sup>164</sup> Frequently, both sides strove to keep the image that any cooperative agreement was intrinsically motivated by both parties.<sup>165</sup> Typically, both sides cared about the outcome of the cooperation, so providing an external reward was unnecessary.<sup>166</sup> Furthermore, parties often did not ask for anything specific in return at the time of a policy move (e.g., accepting refugees from another country).<sup>167</sup> Conversely, they banked “goodwill”

---

153. *Id.*

154. *Id.*

155. *Id.*

156. *Id.*

157. *Id.*

158. *Id.*

159. *Id.*

160. Howard LaFranchi, *Diplomacy is in part transaction. How is Trump’s different?*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR (Oct. 3, 2019), <https://perma.cc/BGH5-NAF2>.

161. *Id.*

162. *Id.*

163. *Id.*

164. Henke, *supra* note 151.

165. *Id.*

166. *Id.*

167. *Id.*

in other countries, which the party could retrieve later.<sup>168</sup> Ideally, if one helps his/her ally at a certain point in time, s/he will help you at a later point.<sup>169</sup>

What is different under President Trump is his tone when negotiating such deals. He has publicly spoken numerous times about the United States needing better trade deals and getting more return on America's defense abroad.<sup>170</sup> The problem with President Trump's foreign policy approach is not necessarily that he wants the United States to make diplomatic deals that benefit its people. On occasion, what Trump wants in return has to do with him personally.<sup>171</sup>

For example, President Trump's phone call with Ukrainian President Zelensky prompted his first impeachment.<sup>172</sup> When President Zelensky mentioned U.S. military assistance to Ukraine and told President Trump he was interested in buying additional anti-tank missiles, President Trump told President Zelensky, "I would like you to do us a favor though."<sup>173</sup> President Trump asked Ukraine to investigate conspiracy theories about the 2016 presidential election.<sup>174</sup>

Furthermore, President Trump requested that President Zelensky work with his personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani, to investigate allegations of corruption by Joe Biden, a 2020 presidential challenger to President Trump.<sup>175</sup> However, President Trump did not commit to the anti-tank missiles President Zelensky requested during the call.<sup>176</sup> President Zelensky agreed to investigate the two matters Mr. Trump requested.<sup>177</sup> Another example of President Trump's foreign policy occurred in the fall of 2019 when the President pressed Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison for information that could assist Attorney General William Barr in his probe aimed at discrediting the Mueller investigation into Russia's involvement in the 2016 presidential election.<sup>178</sup>

When a president uses the Oval Office for his objectives, this behavior encourages other nations' leaders to operate with the United States on the assumption that the only person who matters is the president himself.<sup>179</sup> Why would another country take up important issues with a U.S. ambassador or the chief of mission, who are likely devoted experts in their fields, when the U.S. president makes up his foreign policy, potentially based on his self-interests?<sup>180</sup> While President Trump's foreign policy push to get fair deals for the United States seemed successful at specific points, such as through more NATO countries increasing their

---

168. *Id.*

169. *Id.*

170. LaFranchi, *supra* note 160.

171. *Id.*

172. Marshall Cohen, *Impeachment inquiry uncovers three clear examples of the Trump-Ukraine quid pro quo*, CNN (Nov. 6, 2019), <https://perma.cc/AKN9-Z4SP>.

173. *Id.*

174. *Id.*

175. *Id.*

176. *Id.*

177. *Id.*

178. LaFranchi, *supra* note 160.

179. *Id.*

180. *See id.*

defense spending, it has apparent drawbacks when the president works to achieve his self-interests through diplomatic measures.<sup>181</sup>

President Trump's public-facing opinion on NATO has wavered over the years. Shortly after becoming president in 2017, President Trump commented positively on NATO: "America stands with those who stand in defense of freedom. We have your back every hour, every day, now and always."<sup>182</sup> However, he also noted, "That also means getting our allies to pay their fair share."<sup>183</sup> Lastly, President Trump said, "We strongly support NATO. We only ask that all of the NATO members make their full and proper financial contributions to the NATO Alliance."<sup>184</sup>

Furthermore, President Trump surrounded himself with leaders who deeply understood NATO. For example, Trump appointed Gen. James Mattis, retired, Secretary of Defense, and LTG H.R. McMaster, retired, National Security Advisor. Both appointments guided President Trump to see the importance of the Alliance. For example, President Trump conveyed strong U.S. support for the Alliance, stating, "We stand firmly behind Article 5, the mutual defense commitment."<sup>185</sup>

Conversely, he expressed comments indicating his support for a change to the multinational agreement, such as, "Europe must do more."<sup>186</sup> However, these two sentiments are not opposed. U.S. presidents have conveyed these two messages: they support NATO and want Europeans to spend more on defense.

According to Mark Short, Vice President Mike Pence's former chief of staff, President Trump's rhetoric was a negotiation tactic. Short said the complaints were President Trump's strategy to find leverage against European leaders, whom he seemed to distrust instinctively.<sup>187</sup> "He was more consistent in saying NATO should pay their fair share," Short said.<sup>188</sup> Short added, "That's way different than saying, 'Let's pull out and let Russians go in.' That's totally different."

It is unclear exactly why President Trump distrusted European leaders. A large part of this distrust is likely due to many of these nations' failure to meet the two-percent guideline. However, it also appears that President Trump was more partial to "new Europe" countries, such as Hungary and Poland, than "old Europe" nations, such as France and Germany. For example, experts have argued that President Trump was more critical of Germany than any other European

---

181. Press Release, Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2023), NATO: Public Diplomacy Division (July 7, 2023).

182. President Trump, Remarks to Coalition Representatives and Senior U.S. Commanders at MacDill Air Force Base (Feb. 6, 2017).

183. *Id.*

184. *Id.*

185. President Trump, Remarks to the People of Poland Representatives and Senior U.S. Commanders at Krasiński Square in Warsaw, Poland (Jul. 6, 2017).

186. *Id.*

187. Isaac Arnsdorf, Josh Dawsey & Michael Birnbaum, *Trump didn't quit NATO, but a potential second term alarms allies*, WASH. POST (Feb. 19, 2024).

188. *Id.*

nation.<sup>189</sup> As to why, theories range from the idea that President Trump believes Germany has grown wealthy by taking advantage of the United States to the notion that he disdains former German Chancellor Angela Merkel.<sup>190</sup>

Furthermore, President Trump's stance on Germany might stem from his admiration for President Putin.<sup>191</sup> In December 2015, Mr. Trump stated, "It is always such a great honor to be so nicely complimented by a man so highly respected within his own country and beyond."<sup>192</sup> A few days later, Mr. Trump remarked that President Putin is "running his country and at least he's a leader, unlike what we have in this country."<sup>193</sup> President Trump's perception of President Putin as a strongman may be part of why he disdained countries that have had conflicts with Putin.<sup>194</sup> An example of this disdain is President Trump's swipes at Germany.<sup>195</sup>

President Trump favors the countries that more recently joined the European Union post-Communism, as they adhere to an isolationist ideology.<sup>196</sup> In 2018, President Trump delivered a U.N. speech in which he said that the United States "will not be held hostage to an old, discredited ideology and experts that have been proven wrong over the years."<sup>197</sup> The ideology he referenced is "globalism," which President Trump rejects.<sup>198</sup> In its place, he favors the "ideology of patriotism."<sup>199</sup> In 2018, Hungary and Poland were populist-nationalist nations.<sup>200</sup> In the same speech, President Trump stated, "In Poland, a great people are standing up for their independence, their security, their sovereignty."<sup>201</sup>

Trump administration officials consistently believed that treaties and allies were negotiable transactional relationships. He argued that his primary goal was to prevent the United States from being exploited. One former senior administration official stated, "He views America's forces abroad, and America's protection, as a service to be paid for."<sup>202</sup>

---

189. Nahal Toosi, 'Why Germany?' *Trump's strange fixation vexes experts*, POLITICO (Jul. 12, 2018), <https://perma.cc/R5SU-7FCB>.

190. *Id.*

191. See Jeremy Diamond, *Timeline: Donald Trump' Praise for Vladimir Putin*, CNN (Jul. 29, 2016), <https://perma.cc/2RAG-QLVW>.

192. *Id.*

193. *Id.*

194. Toosi, *Supra* note 189.

195. *Id.*

196. Ronald Radosh, *Trump's U.N. Speech Was a Green Light for Poland, Hungary and Other Anti-Democratic Regimes*, DAILY BEAST (Sep. 26, 2018).

197. *Id.*

198. *Id.*

199. *Id.*

200. *Id.*

201. *Id.*

202. Arnsdorf, Dawsey & Birnbaum, *supra* note 187.

DID PRESIDENT TRUMP PUSH OTHER MEMBER COUNTRIES TO MEET THE  
  TWO-PERCENT GUIDELINE?

As a spokesperson for Mr. Trump's 2024 campaign, Jason Miller stated, "President Trump got our allies to increase their NATO spending by demanding they pay up, but Joe Biden went back to letting them take advantage of the American taxpayer. When you don't pay your defense spending, you can't be surprised that you get more war."<sup>203</sup> However, Russia did not invade a NATO ally in 2022. Regardless, NATO members have still substantially subsidized Ukraine in its fight against President Putin.<sup>204</sup>

According to multiple policymakers, at a NATO Summit in 2018, when the meeting turned to Georgia and Ukraine, President Trump steered the conversation and demanded that leaders commit to doubling their defense spending goals on the spot, or the president stated that he would do his "own thing."<sup>205</sup> Furthermore, President Trump called out countries' leaders individually and declared that, despite being kind to him, their defense spending sent a divergent message. After the Summit, some senior diplomats stated the urgency of increasing defense spending.<sup>206</sup> Additionally, some NATO countries that border Russia and are under increased threat from the Kremlin appreciated some of President Trump's tough strategies to push other European members to increase their defense spending.<sup>207</sup> Latvian President Edgars Rinkevics stated, "We actually were supportive of his push to spend more. There was an understanding that the U.S. will not accept a free ride."<sup>208</sup>

When President Trump took office in 2017, European defense spending had already been on the rise due to fears of Russia's aggression following its occupation of Crimea.<sup>209</sup> However, this rise is potentially partially due to President Trump's rhetoric on the 2016 presidential campaign trail. The increase in European defense budgets surprised many people inside NATO.<sup>210</sup> Furthermore, President Trump's 2016 comments that, under his presidency, the United States might not defend other NATO members who failed to meet the two-percent guideline deeply unsettled European officials.<sup>211</sup> For example, Secretary General of NATO Jens Stoltenberg was alarmed by Mr. Trump's NATO remarks.<sup>212</sup> Moreover, President Trump's rhetoric prompted further attention to and debate over

---

203. *Id.*

204. See Christopher Wolf & Elliott Davis Jr., *Countries That Have Committed the Most Aid to Ukraine*, U.S. NEWS (Feb. 23, 2024, 4:31 PM), <https://perma.cc/X9QV-WFEB>.

205. Arnsdorf, Dawsey & Birnbaum, *supra* note 187.

206. *See id.*

207. *See id.*

208. *Id.*

209. *See id.*

210. Sam Jones, *Defense spending by NATO's Europe states up as uncertainty rises*, FIN. TIMES (May 30, 2016).

211. See Sewell Chan, *Donald Trump's Remarks Rattle NATO Allies and Stoke Debate on Cost Sharing*, N.Y. TIMES (July 21, 2016).

212. *See id.*

European defense spending.<sup>213</sup> Therefore, while Trump was the underdog in the 2016 presidential election, European nations were likely preparing for increased military defense in case of a Trump win.<sup>214</sup>

Only four NATO countries, apart from the United States, met the two-percent target in 2017.<sup>215</sup> That number doubled by the time President Trump left office. European policymakers expressed that, apart from Russia's growing threat, President Trump's rhetoric and pressure made a difference.<sup>216</sup> For example, in July 2018, Jens Stoltenberg credited President Trump for pushing a "clear message" that allies must invest more in their defense.<sup>217</sup> Mr. Stoltenberg further argued that the actual increases in defense spending directly resulted from President Trump's push.<sup>218</sup>

Furthermore, European leaders spent much of the 2018 Brussels NATO summit telling Trump he was the reason they would be increasing their defense spending.<sup>219</sup> In 2024, according to Jens Stoltenberg, eighteen NATO countries are expected to meet the two-percent guideline.<sup>220</sup> Additionally, President Trump's rhetoric impacted European leaders and likely the European domestic population. For example, a 2023 poll of the European public found that increasingly more Europeans support increased defense spending.<sup>221</sup> This rise in European defense funding and a concurrent increase in domestic support for defense funding by the European public is likely due to a combination of President Trump's lasting impression from his 2017 administration, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and preparation for President Trump's potential (at the time) return to the White House in 2025.

#### A SECOND TRUMP PRESIDENTIAL TERM

President Trump's 2024 win likely means a fundamental change for NATO. President Trump's disdain for the lack of certain NATO nations failing to meet the two-percent benchmark remains undiminished and will continue in a second Trump term.<sup>222</sup> Furthermore, the 2023 congressional edict, which requires the approval of two-thirds of the Senate to end U.S. participation in NATO, is unlikely to stop a determined President Trump.<sup>223</sup> Not even Congress can force an

---

213. *See id.*

214. *See id.*

215. Arnsdorf, Dawsey & Birnbaum, *supra* note 187.

216. *See id.*

217. David Wemer, *NATO's Stoltenberg Credits Trump as Allies Increase Defense Spending*, ATL. COUNCIL (July 11, 2018), <https://perma.cc/CTJ9-33M9>.

218. *Id.*

219. *See, e.g.*, Henry Foy, Amy Kazmin, & Marton Dunai, *NATO defence spending to hit record as alliance braces for potential Trump win*, FIN. TIMES (Feb. 14, 2024).

220. *See* Dans Sabbagh, *NATO chief rebukes Donald Trump and announces record defence spending*, GUARDIAN (Feb. 14, 2024, 1:34 PM), <https://perma.cc/MB76-6SPT>.

221. *Eurobarometer shows public support to defence policy and industry*, DEF. INDUS. & SPACE, EUR. COMM'N (July 14, 2023), <https://perma.cc/V69M-G3UJ>.

222. *See* Dale, *supra* note 136.

223. *See* Arnsdorf, Dawsey & Birnbaum, *supra* note 187.

American president to defend another country with the full backing of the U.S. military.<sup>224</sup>

Any NATO member is legally obliged to take “such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area” under Article 5.<sup>225</sup> Essentially, each member country is permitted to decide whether to protect another member country and, if so, the means it will use to defend against an armed attack on an ally.

However, the 2023 legislation will likely deter President Trump from fully withdrawing from NATO. Rather than withdrawing from the Treaty, President Trump could allow his allies to decrease U.S. involvement in NATO.<sup>226</sup> This shift would include a significant burden shifting to Europe with a pledge to no further territorial expansion.<sup>227</sup> Additionally, this new policy approach would involve changing European manpower to become the primary defense of Europe’s frontiers, with the United States serving as a last resort instead of a continued American forward presence.<sup>228</sup>

While the legal alliance of NATO is crucial, the trust each country must have in each other serves as the basis of the pact. A member state must be able to trust that a member country will come to its defense in the case of an armed attack. It is this trust that sustains the legally binding commitment. Therefore, the concern is not whether President Trump will withdraw from NATO; the threat is if his reelection will signal to other NATO allies that the United States will no longer be a trusted friend in the case of an armed attack for the four years President Trump is in office.<sup>229</sup>

President Trump’s 2024 campaign called for a second term that fundamentally reevaluates NATO’s purpose and mission.<sup>230</sup> President Trump stated, “I said ‘you didn’t pay? You’re delinquent?’ . . . ‘No, I would not protect you, in fact I would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want. You gotta pay.’”<sup>231</sup> Trump uttered that line at a campaign rally in February 2024, in response to a foreign leader’s inquiry about whether President Trump would continue to protect a country that did not meet the two-percent goal. Like his first presidential run, Trump uses this rhetoric to encourage even more NATO countries to meet the two-percent guideline rather than signaling that a second Trump term would lead to the United States leaving the Alliance.

---

224. See, e.g., Ivo Daalder, *What Another Trump Presidency Would Mean for NATO*, POLITICO (Jan. 25, 2024, 4:00 AM), <https://perma.cc/S92T-LEAV>.

225. *Collective defence and Article 5*, N. ATL. TREATY ORG. (Last updated July 4, 2023, 11:47 AM), <https://perma.cc/28RA-4XZ3>.

226. Sumantra Maitra, *Policy Brief: Pivoting the US Away from Europe to a Dormant NATO*, CTR. FOR RENEWING AM. (Feb. 16, 2023), <https://perma.cc/28PG-WGWF>.

227. See *id.*

228. See *id.*

229. See The North Atlantic Treaty, art. 3, Apr. 4, 1949, 63 Stat. 2241, 34 UNTS 243.

230. See Arnsdorf, Dawsey & Birnbaum, *supra* note 187.

231. James FitzGerald, *Trump Says He Would ‘Encourage’ Russia to Attack NATO Allies Who Do Not Pay Their Bills*, BBC (Feb. 11, 2024), <https://perma.cc/5KE5-PXEM>.

A second Trump presidency will change the United States' relationship with NATO allies. This divergence already started in his 2024 campaign. President Trump's campaign rhetoric resonated with the Republican Party and became a popular position among conservative policy experts.<sup>232</sup> Some right-of-center former officials and foreign policy experts stress that the expansive presence of the United States in Europe is no longer necessary and that Europe is wealthy and capable enough to defend itself against Russia.

Justin Logan, the director of defense and foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, questioned:

Does Trump sound like a mafia don running a protection racket? He sure does. But is there something more to this debate? I think so. The polite establishmentarian wing of the policy community has made these complaints too. The rude, boorish mafia Don Trump version of this, sad to say, may be required to get the Europeans' attention. Trump has gotten the Europeans attention.<sup>233</sup>

This Republican shift towards alignment with President Trump's NATO sentiments varies from that of prominent Republicans in 2018. For example, Senator Bob Corker, then chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, broke with President Trump and expressed significant unease regarding President Trump's NATO approach. Mr. Corker said that he was worried that President Trump aimed to "tear apart" NATO. He further described his disdain for President Trump's diplomacy with NATO allies, sharing, "I think there are ways of communicating with your friends and sometimes it feels like we punch our friends in the nose."<sup>234</sup>

With another Trump presidency looming, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are discussing how to strengthen their collective defense capabilities against a Russian attack.<sup>235</sup> Under another Trump term, these countries must take action to ensure their security. Furthermore, in January 2024, German Finance Minister Christian Lindner called for a discussion concerning collective EU nuclear weapon capabilities, which have long been considered a German political taboo.<sup>236</sup>

Even over three years after President Trump left office in 2021, Mr. Stoltenberg still clarifies Trump's rhetoric. During a press conference in February 2024, Stoltenberg stated, "The criticism that you hear is not primarily about NATO, it's about NATO allies not spending enough on NATO. And that's a valid point."<sup>237</sup>

232. Arnsdorf, Dawsey & Birnbaum, *supra* note 184.

233. *Id.*

234. Manu Raju & Elizabeth Landers, *Corker: Trump Rhetoric 'Diminishing' American Leadership Around the World*, CNN (Jul. 11, 2018, 4:59 PM), <https://perma.cc/PZ9Y-6ARC>.

235. See Arnsdorf, Dawsey & Birnbaum, *supra* note 187.

236. See Wintour, *UK could contribute to nuclear shield if Trump wins, suggests German minister*, GUARDIAN (Feb. 15, 2024, 12:00 AM), <https://perma.cc/7QR8-EPNP>.

237. Ruxandra Iordache, *NATO Chief Concedes 'Valid Point' of Spending Criticism as Allies up Defense Budgets*, CNBC (Feb. 14, 2024, 12:09 PM), <https://perma.cc/6K3G-6YVV>.

The future of transatlantic relations under another Trump administration remains unknown. While NATO is a critical pillar of U.S.-European security cooperation, tensions over trade, defense spending, and other issues could strain the Alliance. Efforts to rebuild trust and reaffirm shared values under a second Trump term would be vital to enduring NATO's relevance and success.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

These listed assumptions serve as the basis for the recommendations below:

- President Trump's NATO-related rhetoric continues;
- President Trump's rhetoric in his 2016 presidential race and his first term led to specific member states increasing their percentage of GDP spent on defense;
- and the two-percent guideline is a reasonable and meaningful benchmark by which NATO member countries should be measured.

For European NATO Members:

- European NATO members should commit to meeting the two-percent goal. This target equates to substantial financial commitments. For example, Germany surpassed the two-percent guideline at 2.01 percent of Germany's GDP in 2024 for the first time since the early 1990s.<sup>238</sup> In 2023, Germany spent 1.57 percent of its GDP on defense.<sup>239</sup> Other European countries should aim to mirror Germany's commitment to increasing defense spending.
- European NATO members should aim to invest at least twenty percent of their defense budgets in acquiring new equipment, technology, and capabilities over the next five years. This investment is necessary to support Ukraine in its fight against Russia. This proposal reflects the twenty percent target established in the Defense Investment Pledge endorsed in 2014.<sup>240</sup>
- To progress towards industrial readiness, European NATO members should aim to acquire at least forty percent of their defense equipment through joint military procurement programs by 2030 to initiate at least ten collaborative projects for acquiring defense technology and equipment.<sup>241</sup>

---

238. *Germany to Hit NATO Budget Goal for 1st Time Since Cold War*, DW (Feb. 14, 2024), <https://perma.cc/XEA9-3ASB>.

239. *Id.*

240. NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORG., *FUNDING NATO* (last updated April 5, 2024).

241. Andrew Gray & Bart H. Meijer, *EU Commission proposes 1.5 billion euro common defence industry package*, REUTERS (Mar. 5, 2024), <https://perma.cc/68S3-GSER>.

- European NATO countries should aim to maintain a combined contribution of at least 300,000 troops to NATO's Rapid Response Force (NRF), targeting a deployment readiness level of eighty percent for all participating units and the capability to deploy within thirty days.<sup>242</sup>

By setting and achieving these specific numerical targets and action-oriented plans, European NATO members can significantly enhance their defense capabilities, strengthen NATO's collective defense posture, and demonstrate a renewed commitment to the Alliance's shared security objective. These plans would help bolster European NATO countries as the second Trump term is in full swing.

For President Trump and his policy advisors:

In a second Trump administration, President Trump should choose policy advisors who deeply understand transatlantic diplomacy and support pushing Europe to increase its defense spending. These advisors should always approach NATO-related conversations with President Trump with points on how particular actions will help the United States and, more importantly, how the specific actions will make President Trump look good. Below is a list of potential advisors Trump should consider:

- Ambassador Kay Bailey Hutchinson: Hutchinson served as the U.S. Permanent Representative to NATO for Trump's presidential term from 2017-2021.<sup>243</sup> European allies increased their defense spending by 140 billion dollars during her tenure.<sup>244</sup> She aligned with President Trump's push for increasing European defense spending, but she also prioritized informing the president on the importance of NATO.<sup>245</sup> In a second term, Trump needs Hutchinson or someone similar to her, who will prioritize increased pressure on European countries to increase defense spending while also protecting the core of the Alliance.
- Ambassador Richard Grenell: Grenell served as the U.S. Ambassador to Germany and Acting Director of National Intelligence under the Trump administration.<sup>246</sup> In 2019, the deputy speaker of Germany's Bundestag called to send Grenell home after he criticized the budget of Germany's finance minister and said it is unacceptable that Germany is still on track to miss the two-percent guideline.<sup>247</sup> Grenell's experience in diplomatic relations with European countries and his strong support

---

242. *NATO to Boost Troops on High Alert to over 300,000 – Stoltenberg*, REUTERS (June 27, 2022, 12:11 PM), <https://perma.cc/AU8R-6ZE6>.

243. See CBS Texas, 'We've Made NATO Stronger' Says Former US Ambassador and Native Texan Kay Bailey Hutchinson, CBS NEWS (Jan. 26, 2021, 7:59 PM), <https://perma.cc/8F3A-Y9DJ>.

244. *See id.*

245. *Id.*

246. *Richard Grenell*, BALLOTPEDIA, <https://perma.cc/GUC7-DYEE>.

247. Laurenz Gehreke, *Call for US Envoy to Germany to Be Sent Home over NATO Spending Row*, POLITICO (Mar. 19, 2019, 12:45 PM), <https://perma.cc/HT8M-EX7U>.

for increased European defense spending make him a potential advisor President Trump should choose.

- Senator Lindsey Graham: As a Republican senator, Graham has been actively engaged in foreign policy debates and has been a strong supporter of NATO.<sup>248</sup> In 2017, the Senate adopted his resolution affirming the U.S. Senate's commitment to NATO by a 100-0 vote.<sup>249</sup> However, he has also echoed Trump's rhetoric in favor of European member countries increasing their defense spending.<sup>250</sup> Graham's legislative experience and foreign policy expertise would inform his advice to President Trump on NATO-related matters and would serve as a counterbalance. He is a strong supporter of NATO but also deeply committed to increased European defense spending.

While continuing his strong and pointed language encouraging NATO members to increase spending, President Trump should not seek to withdraw the United States from NATO or fail to support European nations under attack (even if said country is under the two-percent guideline). Likely, President Trump's NATO-related language is merely a rhetorical approach to negotiation. President Trump wants to be an ally but wants countries to invest more in their defense. While provocative, his threats in the past have seemingly worked to increase European defense spending. President Trump should continue down this path while assuring NATO members that the United States will remain a dependable ally if the European nations, who have not yet met the two-percent benchmark, either continue or start to work towards the two-percent goal.

#### CONCLUSION

Trump's second presidential term likely does not mean the end of NATO. However, the United States is the true backbone of the Alliance. The U.S. military has positioned itself as an expansive part of NATO's defense capability. While the recommendations focused on Europeans increasing defense spending, trust is essential for a treaty to be successful. While President Trump's rhetoric may have contributed to increased European defense spending, it decreased U.S. allies' trust in the United States.

Trump's second administration poses opportunities and challenges for the trans-Atlantic Alliance. While continued Trump pressure on defense spending and burden-sharing could push more NATO countries towards meeting the two-percent guideline, distress about U.S. commitment and Alliance trust will likely continue, thereby threatening the Treaty itself. If President Trump wants to maintain the Alliance while nudging other members to or closer to the two-percent guideline, he must continue his strong language towards other nations while displaying proactive leadership, diplomatic engagement, and a shared commitment to NATO's common values and collective defense.

---

248. See Press Release, Lindsey Graham, U.S. Sen., Historic Moment for U.S.-NATO Relationship (Jun. 15, 2017), <https://perma.cc/BNT2-Q66R>.

249. *Id.*

250. See Lauren Sforza, *Graham Responds to Trump NATO Comments: 'If You don't Pay You Get Kicked Out.'* HILL (Feb. 18, 2024, 11:36 AM), <https://perma.cc/CV6M-2QGT>.