

Donald Trump's reelection signals the dawn of a Trump 2.0 era, with far-reaching consequences for global geopolitics. At the forefront of these challenges, NATO faces a pivotal moment, navigating the strategic pressures of China's ascent and the uncertain course of the Russia-Ukraine war. A second Trump administration is likely to be instrumental in shaping the alliance's trajectory during this critical period. Here are three insightful assessments about the future of NATO under the new Trump administration.

Question 1

Donald Trump's re-election as President of the United States ushers in the "Trump 2.0" era, sparking discussions about its potential ripple effects across global politics. In your view, what would be the implications of this new era for NATO, particularly in addressing emerging challenges such as the rise of China?

The return of Donald Trump to the White House promises to be as disruptive to the world order as his first term. The muscular isolationism of his first mandate will likely persist but the new US President has also to deal with new challenges, many of them stemming from his unconventional and transactional approach to foreign policy. The results could be unpredictable, forcing rivals and allies to change their calculations, according to the inclinations and preferences of the new administration. NATO is likely to come again under increasing political pressure, from both inside and outside the organisation, testing its resilience and resolve. On the other hand, the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East are also having important reverberations in the Indo-Pacific, a region that is very likely to be high on the agenda of the next Trump presidency. This will provide an important opportunity for the Atlantic Alliance to demonstrate its usefulness, according to an evolution already reflected in the latest Strategic Concept that identifies the Indo-Pacific as an area of interest for the organisation.

Umberto Profazio, Associate Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies

Question 2

2. How might NATO's credibility be impacted if a resolution to the Russia-Ukraine War were to involve Russia retaining territorial gains and Ukraine relinquishing its aspirations for NATO membership, as some have interpreted from Trump's pledge to end the conflict?

If the country in question were a NATO member state and NATO had failed to act under the current circumstances—under Article 5 of collective defence, if it had not defended that country—then there could have been a situation where NATO's credibility was undermined. Or, if Russia had attacked one of the new members, such as Sweden, or Finland, and NATO had not responded, we could have faced a perception that NATO's credibility was lost. Here, the situation is a bit different. Trump represents U.S. policy. From the beginning, NATO has provided non-lethal aid and coordinated the delivery of aid. In general, NATO's actions are defensive and do not want to escalate the war. However, there is a significant difference between the policies implemented during the Biden administration and those during the Trump administration, leading to questions of reliability. Second, the presence of disputed territories, as seen in Ukraine and Georgia, prevents Ukraine's NATO membership due to Article 10 of the treaty. If Russia holds onto the territories it has seized and Ukraine does not join NATO, what guarantees will be given that Russia will not attack other parts of Ukraine? We do not yet know what kind of security guarantees will be obtained, but Rasmussen's 2014 proposal of bringing Ukraine into NATO based on the territories outside Crimea after the Russian annexation, and Zelenskyy's position likely being close to this, is for Ukraine to join NATO based on its sovereign territories. However, there is also the requirement that all NATO member states must unanimously approve any membership. Overall, it is not NATO but the U.S. that faces credibility issues because of the lack of continuity in policies. The U.S. administration needs an honourable peace and security guarantee for Ukraine not to lose its credibility.

Professor Aylin Ünver Noi, International Relations Expert

Question 3

3. Do you think Donald Trump's vocal reiteration of his call for NATO members to allocate 2% of their GDP to defence spending will yield tangible results? In this context, do you think the increased rhetoric around the U.S. withdrawal from the alliance is a tactical narrative employed to achieve this goal?

Trump's emphasis on increased defence spending by NATO members should be understood in the context of a process that has been underway since 2006 when NATO defence ministers agreed to spend 2% of their GDP on defence. The 2% commitment was later reaffirmed by the Allies at the 2014 Wales Summit, where a defence investment guideline was adopted in light of Russia's annexation of Crimea. By 2024, 23 of the Alliance's 32 members appear to have met the 2% target. While acting as an incentive mechanism in the short term, Trump's tactical disengagement rhetoric poses certain risks to NATO's deterrence capability, as well as to the unity, cohesion and stability within the Alliance in the long term. The possibility of a US withdrawal has the potential to undermine the Allies' confidence in US leadership and commitment to collective security, as well as its operational capacity to counterbalance adversaries.

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