

Trump 2.0: Redefining U.S. Multilateralism and NATO's Future

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The reelection of Donald Trump signals the start of a Trump 2.0 era, with significant implications for global geopolitics. Key among these is the administration's approach to multilateralism and its impact on the NATO alliance. During his previous term (2017–2021), Trump's transactional stance and scepticism toward international commitments were evident. Now, NATO faces a critical moment, shaped by China's rise and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. A second Trump presidency will be pivotal in defining the alliance's trajectory. This policy outlook offers an in-depth analysis of NATO's future under Trump 2.0, drawing on expert insights.

Introduction

With Donald Trump's re-election as President of the United States, the dawn of a "Trump 2.0" era in American foreign policy appears imminent. Throughout his initial term (2017-2021) and during his election campaign, Trump was characterised by a pronounced antipathy toward multilateral agreements and international institutions. Analysts predict that this stance will persist in a second term, which is evident in both his rhetoric and decisions and the hawkish composition of his administration.

Trump's first term provided ample examples of this outlook, including his imposition of tariffs as part of protectionist trade policies, withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, and confrontational rhetoric toward NATO. These actions suggest that a second Trump administration would reinforce a principled and institutional opposition to multilateralism. This anticipated trajectory aligns with the "America First" doctrine, which resonates with the Jacksonian tradition of prioritising national sovereignty and self-reliance.

This upcoming period will be pivotal in defining the United States' role in global geopolitics. This Policy Outlook examines the potential trajectory of U.S. relations with NATO over the next four years.

Trump 1.0: Scepticism, Transactionalism, and Withdrawal

During Donald Trump's first term, his administration's approach to global governance and multilateralism was mainly defined by three core pillars: deep scepticism, a transactional mindset, and strategic withdrawal due to the first two tenets. Let us first elaborate on each of these dimensions:

1. Scepticism

Trump's view of international bodies and global governance is dominated by a deep scepticism, which was also evident in the dominant rhetoric of his presidency. He has criticised multilateral treaties and organisations, particularly the UN and its affiliated bodies, for being bureaucratically inefficient and mismanaged. For instance, he stated, "The United Nations has such great potential but it is just a club for people to get together, talk and have a good time. So sad!", The main criticism here was to emphasise that the UN has evolved from a problem-solving structure to a symbolic one with no tangible solution for any global problem. In addition, the Trump administration prioritised the 'America First' policy as the dominant element

by putting international institutions in second place in its global governance approach. At the 74th General Assembly of the UN, Trump said, "The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots," and favoured an inward-oriented approach dominated by national focus instead of global governance. For Trump, international bodies are led by unelected officials who pursue a globalist agenda at the expense of U.S. national interests. Therefore, his consistent framing of "global bureaucrats" portrayed them as out-of-touch elites who pursued policies benefiting a globalist agenda while ignoring the interests of ordinary American citizens and pursuing entrenched political bias against the U.S.

2. Transactionalism

The Trump administration's transactional mindset was a defining feature of its foreign policy, emphasising immediate, tangible benefits—often economic—over long-term strategic partnerships or shared values. This approach treated international relations as zero-sum deals, where gains for the U.S. were framed as losses for others and vice versa. Trump's focus on burden-sharing within NATO exemplified this mentality; he criticised allies for "free-riding" on U.S. military expenditures and pushed member states to increase their defence spending, often leveraging the threat of reducing American support to force compliance. Similarly, his approach to trade agreements reflected a transactional logic. Trump withdrew the U.S. from multilateral frameworks like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and renegotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) into the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), claiming the latter was more favourable to American workers and industries. The administration's tariff wars with China further underscored its emphasis on short-term economic leverage; by imposing heavy tariffs (75% to 25%) on Chinese goods, Trump aimed to pressure Beijing into addressing trade imbalances and intellectual property theft, albeit at the cost of escalating tensions and disrupting global supply chains. By prioritising immediate U.S. gains over enduring diplomatic ties, Trump reshaped the perception of the U.S. as a partner, with allies wary of unpredictable demands and adversaries emboldened by the erosion of multilateral unity. This line of approach in Trump's foreign policy orientation is particularly evident in his disdain for NATO. The issue of burden-sharing, as all members are expected to allocate 2% of their GDP to defence spending, is the central pillar of Trump's sceptical and often transactional approach to the alliance. He has frequently framed this issue as a matter of payment in exchange for security or European allies paying for the U.S. for their security guarantee against threats posed by Russia.

3. Withdrawal

The Trump administration's strategic withdrawal from multilateral agreements and institutions was a natural

outcome of its scepticism of global governance and its transactional approach to foreign policy. Emboldened by deep scepticism toward global governance and international relations, withdrawal has mostly been the observed American foreign policy action if Trump does not foresee any tangible results favourable to the U.S. within his transactional approach. This strategy was framed as a defence of U.S. sovereignty and an effort to extricate the country from what Trump characterised as unfair or burdensome arrangements. A prime example was the [withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement](#) in 2017, which Trump justified by arguing that the accord disadvantaged American businesses and workers while allowing other countries, particularly China and India, to benefit disproportionately. Similarly, in 2018, the decision to [withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action \(JCPOA\)](#), also known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, reflected a belief that the agreement was inadequate in addressing Iran's ballistic missile program and regional activities, despite criticism that the U.S. withdrawal further destabilised the Middle East and alienated key allies in the face of growing Iranian threat. The U.S. also withdrew from the **World Health Organization (WHO)** during the COVID-19 pandemic, with Trump [accusing](#) the organisation of being unduly influenced by China and failing in its core responsibilities, a move that many viewed as weakening global health coordination at a critical moment and deepening distrust that might spill over other members to withdraw.

Another notable example was the withdrawal from **UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)** in 2017, citing alleged anti-Israel bias within the organisation. The U.S., a founding member, had previously suspended funding to UNESCO in 2011 after Palestine was admitted as a member, but the Trump administration took the further step of exiting entirely, signalling a broader disapproval of multilateral cultural and educational diplomacy. Similarly, the administration [ended](#) U.S. funding to **UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East)** in 2018, arguing that the agency perpetuated the refugee issue rather than resolving it. Critics viewed this move as part of a broader effort to pressure Palestinian leadership and reshape the normalisation process initiated by the Abraham Accords, though it drew widespread condemnation for its humanitarian implications.

Likewise, Trump's rejection of the **International Criminal Court (ICC)** illustrates strategic withdrawal. The administration imposed sanctions on ICC officials investigating U.S. war crimes in Afghanistan and warned against prosecutions of Israel. Trump framed the ICC as an unaccountable, overreaching institution infringing on U.S. sovereignty, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [labelling](#) it a "kangaroo court." The Trump administration's withdrawal from the **UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC)** in 2018 was another stark example of its strategic disengagement from multilateral institutions it perceived as ineffective

or biased. The administration criticised the council as a platform that shielded authoritarian regimes while disproportionately targeting Israel for condemnation. Then-U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, [called](#) the UNHRC a "cesspool of political bias," highlighting its inclusion of countries with poor human rights records, such as Venezuela and China, as evidence of its flawed structure.

These withdrawals were often accompanied by rhetoric asserting that the U.S. was being exploited by multilateral treaties, global institutions or foreign actors, a key theme of Trump's scepticism. While these actions appealed to Trump's domestic base and framed him as a patriotic who defended the rights of the citizens and U.S. sovereignty at the expense of unelected global bureaucrats, such moves were also criticised because of causing a vacuum in global leadership that competitors like China sought to fill. The strategic withdrawal policy thus recalibrated Washington's role in the international order, signalling a pivot toward unilateralism and a diminished commitment to the global norms and structures it had helped build.

U.S. Foreign Policy Orientation toward NATO in the Trump 2.0 Era

It is essential to note that the prospect of the United States withdrawing from NATO in the next four years is highly improbable and the bulk of the claims surrounding U.S. withdrawal is media smokescreen. The alliance's strategic importance to the U.S. is deeply rooted in historical imperatives extending beyond any single administration's tenure. During the Cold War, the bipolar international system necessitated NATO's role as a safeguard for continental Europe against the Soviet threat. This mission was operationalised through military support to European allies, nuclear deterrence, joint exercises, and the collective defence framework enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

In the post-Cold War era, NATO faced frequent scrutiny regarding its relevance within the evolving international power structure. Scholars and policymakers alike [argued](#) that the alliance, as a product of a bipolar order, would need to adapt to the emerging multipolar realities to sustain its strategic purpose. A critical, unforeseen factor that has since reshaped NATO's role is [the rise of China](#), which now constitutes a central dynamic in global power competition vis-à-vis the U.S. Recent NATO summit communiqués have, for example, explicitly identified China as a strategic challenge and rival, providing the alliance with a renewed sense of purpose.

In this context, the shifting U.S. perspective on China has indirectly reinforced NATO's relevance. President Trump,

through both his selection of a China-hawk cabinet and his adversarial rhetoric on trade and tariffs, has signalled an intent [to intensify competition with Beijing](#). This raises a pivotal question: could NATO play a role in advancing the administration's pivot to Asia? Should NATO adapt to bolster the military capacities of key U.S. partners in the Indo-Pacific—such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines—through joint exercises, training programs, cyber warfare, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms, its strategic significance to a Trump administration would likely grow. Such a transformation would position NATO as an indispensable tool in managing the multidimensional challenge posed by China.

However, addressing President Trump's longstanding grievances regarding NATO's [burden-sharing framework](#) is equally important as it constitutes the very essence of his disdain. A central point of contention has been the failure of many member states to meet the agreed-upon defence spending target of 2% of GDP, established at the 2006 Riga Summit. Although not legally binding, this benchmark gained de facto significance acting as an indicator of political will to stick to the alliance following key geopolitical events, such as Russia's annexation of Crimea. As of late 2023, however, only 11 of NATO's 31 members achieved this target. This imbalance has prompted Trump to criticise European allies for engaging in what he perceives as "free-riding," whereby they disproportionately benefit from U.S. contributions without bearing a commensurate share of the costs.

Throughout his first term, Trump demonstrated his dissatisfaction through some symbolic measures, such as [cutting the U.S. share of funding](#) for NATO's administrative and operational budgets in 2019, which was only \$2.5 billion at the time. More provocatively, he declared during his re-election campaign that he would [encourage](#) Russia to act freely if allies failed to meet their defence spending obligations. This rhetoric exemplifies the transactionalism and withdrawal tendencies that have characterised his approach to NATO, leveraging radical policy declarations as a mechanism to exert pressure and achieve desired outcomes.

The improbability and complexity of a U.S. withdrawal from NATO have been further underscored by the [passage of legislation](#) during the Biden administration, spearheaded by Senators Tim Kaine (D-VA) and Marco Rubio (R-Fla). This law effectively prevents any American president from unilaterally withdrawing from NATO without either a two-thirds Senate supermajority or an act of Congress. Notably, Marco Rubio, a co-author of this legislation, is set to take on the influential role of Secretary of State in the incoming Trump administration. While scepticism toward NATO exists within the administration, it is largely centred on issues of burden-sharing rather than outright opposition to the alliance, as Mike Waltz, the next administration's National Security Advisor, [wrote about](#) the issue of defence budgets.

Although concerns over burden-sharing are unlikely to translate into a formal withdrawal, a second Trump administration could employ [various mechanisms](#) to exert pressure on allies. Potential measures include withholding the appointment of a U.S. ambassador to NATO, reducing participation in joint military exercises, or promoting rhetoric that questions the constitutional interpretation of Article 5, portraying the collective defence commitment as non-guaranteed and subject to legal and political debate. Such approaches aim to challenge European allies' reliance on NATO's deterrence framework while addressing perceptions of disproportionate U.S. contributions.

This debate is not confined to the executive branch. Within the Republican Party, figures such as Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) [penned](#) a controversial Op-ed against interpreting Article 5 as a binding clause obligating the United States to engage in military conflict without Congressional authorisation. This underscores a broader alignment with Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy, emphasising burden-sharing as a central issue and leverage against members which lagged in the 2% target.

Should Trump return to office, NATO members would likely face increased pressure to meet defence spending commitments, particularly the longstanding 2% GDP benchmark. Recent trends suggest that allies are already recalibrating their policies in anticipation of such a sce-



nario. For instance, while Germany [hesitated to](#) codify the 2% target into law in August 2023, instead opting for a phased five-year plan, the possibility of a second Trump administration has shifted political rhetoric significantly. German leaders, including Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, have recently signalled stronger commitments to defence spending. After exceeding the 2% threshold for the first time since the early 1990s, Baerbock notably [declared](#) that surpassing the 2% target is insufficient, urging greater investment and cooperation among allies.

This evolving commitment is evident in NATO's overall progress. In 2023, only 11 members of the alliance exceeded the 2% defence spending threshold; this year, that number has risen to 23 out of 32 members. Such progress reflects a growing recognition within NATO of the need to prepare for a potential second Trump presidency and its associated demands for greater burden-sharing.

In this context, the first 18–24 months of a second Trump administration—likely focused on domestic political priorities—may provide NATO allies with an opportunity to address these concerns proactively. By increasing defence expenditures and diversifying military capabilities, member states can strengthen the alliance's cohesion

and reduce vulnerabilities to critiques of inequitable burden-sharing. These efforts underscore the alliance's adaptability and its members' resolve to sustain NATO's strategic relevance in an increasingly complex global security environment.

In sum, the prospects of the Trump 2.0 Era for NATO would include the following developments:

- Implementing a robust strategy to compel allies to increase their defence spending based on the 2% target.
- Leveraging withdrawal rhetoric more frequently as a strategic tool to influence European allies.
- Advocating for an open-door policy that is firmly tied to the equitable and consistent implementation of the burden-sharing principle.
- Excluding Ukraine's membership issue from the Alliance's agenda as the settlement between Russia and Ukraine nears.
- Redirecting the Alliance's focus towards addressing the strategic challenge posed by China's rise and fostering unified action on this front.

Expert Views

Let's take a look at some insightful assessments by experts on how the future of NATO as a security alliance will be shaped in the era of the new Trump administration.

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.

Professor Selver B. Şahin, *Political Science and International Relations, Boğaziçi University*

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 to 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*

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 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 a honourable peace and security guarantee for Ukraine not to lose its credibility.

Professor Aylin Ünver Noi, *International Relations Expert*

What outcomes could arise from Trump's 'America First' approach in NATO's collective defence and the assurance of mutual trust among European allies and the external credibility of the alliance?

I think Trump will put more pressure on European allies to spend more money on defence. Trump will also signal that American protection should not be taken for granted. This might trigger renewed discussions about European strategic autonomy yet I think Europe is quite late to invest in strategic autonomy. Europe is also not ready to pay the political economic and diplomatic cost of strategic autonomy.

Associate Professor Enes Bayraklı, *Head of the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the Turkish German University and Vice President of Türkiye Research Foundation.*

Conclusion

A second Trump administration is likely to introduce both opportunities and challenges across the global political landscape, with the future of NATO emerging as a pivotal issue. In its pursuit of sustained relevance, NATO could face a defining moment under renewed U.S. leadership. Central to the Alliance's agenda in the coming four years will likely be heightened pressure on member states to meet or exceed the 2% GDP benchmark for defence spending, alongside advancing consensus on addressing China's rise as a strategic threat.

Trump's approach to multilateralism, characterised by scepticism, transactionalism, and the strategic use of withdrawal rhetoric, is expected to influence his stance and negotiations regarding NATO. While the prospect of a complete U.S. withdrawal from NATO remains improbable, such rhetoric may serve as a tactical tool to reinforce his administration's emphasis on burden-sharing. Should member states fail to meet these expectations, the administration will likely question NATO's relevance and operational effectiveness to achieve its strategic objectives. This period would, therefore, mark a significant test for the Alliance's unity and capacity to adapt.



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