

Analysis

12 / 2024

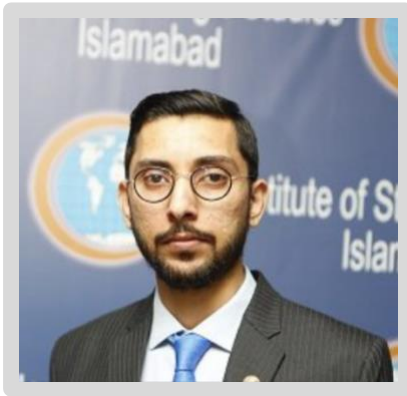
www.csm.org.pl

European Security at a Crossroad:
**CHALLENGES FROM THE NEW
U.S. ADMINISTRATION**

CENTRUM
STOSUNKÓW
MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH



CENTRE
FOR INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS



Muhammad Taimur Fahad Khan

Research Associate (Europe & Russia),
Centre for Strategic Perspectives (CSP),
Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI).

As the U.S. reflects on the results of its recent presidential election, Donald Trump’s confirmed return to the White House raises substantial concerns for European security. His presidency from 2017 to 2021 was marked by a transactional approach to foreign policy, creating deep rifts within NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation), questioning the U.S. commitment to collective defence, and softening America's stance toward adversaries like Russia. With his re-election, his policies could weaken the foundations of Europe's security architecture at a time of growing geopolitical tensions with Russia and China. This brief examines the key risks and implications for European security, particularly as these risks transition from hypothetical to actionable realities amid the challenges posed by shifts in U.S. foreign policy.



NATO's Future: A Fragile Alliance?

Trump's previous term sowed doubt about the U.S. commitment to NATO, the bedrock of European security since World War II. His [demands](#) for NATO allies to contribute more to defence spending—though based on real imbalances—came with threats that directly undermined alliance solidarity. In 2018, Trump openly [questioned](#) why the U.S. should defend European countries that do not meet the 2% GDP spending target. His infamous [suggestion](#) that the U.S. could withdraw from NATO heightened concerns among European leaders and emboldened adversaries.

According to NATO's 2023 [report](#), the number of member states meeting the 2% GDP target has risen slightly but remains below optimal levels. Germany, Europe's largest economy, still lags with 1.58% of GDP, while Italy's defence expenditure stands at approximately 1.63%, falling short of the benchmark. These imbalances highlight persistent challenges within the alliance.

A renewed Trump administration could exacerbate these divisions. If the U.S. retreats from its security obligations or reduces its military presence in Europe—as seen in 2020 with the withdrawal of 12,000 troops from Germany—countries on NATO's eastern flank, particularly Poland and the Baltic states, could find themselves exposed to heightened Russian aggression.

The Russian Gambit: Emboldening an Adversary

Trump's presidency saw a peculiar [softening](#) toward Russia, despite Moscow's actions in Ukraine and its alleged interference in Western democratic processes, which Russia denies. His [reluctance to impose](#) harsh sanctions on Russia and ambiguous stance on Crimea sent conflicting signals about America's resolve to counter Moscow's actions.



Notably, Trump suggested [inviting Russia](#) back into the G7—a move that could have legitimized Russia’s annexation of Crimea and further undermined European security.

In 2024, Trump outlined a [plan](#) to end Russia's war on Ukraine within 24 hours, leveraging personal negotiations with Putin and Zelenskyy. While aiming for swift resolution, this approach raises concerns about undermining NATO’s unified stance and emboldening Russia further, threatening European security cohesion.

Europe’s strategies to counter Russian aggression must include strengthening deterrence through diversified energy supplies, enhanced cyber defences, and coordinated sanctions. A Trump administration's potential appeasement could disrupt these efforts, leaving Eastern Europe vulnerable to destabilization, which would have ripple effects across the continent.

Article 5 in Question: A Weakening of Collective Defence

At the heart of NATO lies [Article 5](#), the collective defence clause that guarantees that an attack on one member is considered an attack on all. Trump’s [refusal](#) to unequivocally endorse Article 5 during his first NATO summit in 2017 raised profound doubts about whether the U.S. would honor its defence commitments in a crisis. Although he later clarified his commitment, the damage to NATO’s credibility had already been done.

European leaders responded with calls for greater self-reliance. German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s [statement](#) urging Europe to "take its fate into its own hands" and French President Emmanuel Macron’s [advocacy](#) for a "true European army" exemplify this shift. Similarly, European Council President Donald Tusk’s [remark](#), "With friends like that, who needs enemies?" underscored the growing uncertainty surrounding U.S. commitments.



If European allies perceive that the U.S. may abandon Article 5 under Trump, it could unravel the fabric of the alliance. Vulnerable countries like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania rely heavily on NATO's deterrence. The uncertainty surrounding U.S. commitments could force European nations to rearm rapidly, risking a new arms race in the region.

Strategic Autonomy: Europe's Path toward Self-Reliance

The uncertainty of U.S. leadership during Trump's first term accelerated discussions within Europe about strategic autonomy. The [European Defence Fund](#), launched in 2021, and initiatives like [PESCO](#) (Permanent Structured Cooperation) were direct responses to the growing realization that Europe could no longer rely solely on the U.S. for its security. French President Emmanuel Macron has been the loudest proponent of this strategy, advocating for a more [independent](#) European defence posture.

While these initiatives mark progress, they remain in their nascent stages. A renewed Trump presidency could accelerate these efforts but might also lead to disjointed actions, competing priorities, and coordination challenges. Enhanced collaboration between NATO and EU frameworks is essential to ensure interoperability and avoid gaps in collective defence capabilities.

A Geopolitical Vacuum: Filling the Gaps Left by the U.S.

Trump's transactional approach to alliances left European leaders questioning whether the U.S. under his leadership remains committed to the liberal international order it helped create. His withdrawal from multilateral agreements—the [Paris Climate Accord](#), the Iran



nuclear deal ([JCPOA](#)), and the Trans-Pacific Partnership ([TPP](#))—sent shockwaves through Europe and signaled an unpredictable foreign policy trajectory.

European powers may seek to fill the vacuum left by a retreating U.S., but this could lead to a more fragmented global order. Countries like China and Russia have already exploited divisions in Europe through initiatives like the Belt and Road and energy diplomacy. The EU's ability to counter these influences hinges on building political and military cohesion, which remains a significant challenge.

Conclusion: The Stakes for European Security

A second Trump presidency presents a clear challenge to the post-World War II security architecture that has kept Europe safe for over 70 years. While European nations have started pursuing strategic autonomy, they are not yet positioned to replace U.S. military leadership. The weakening of NATO and a potential softening of U.S. policy toward Russia could embolden adversaries, destabilizing Europe's eastern borders. European leaders must prepare for a future where U.S. security commitments are no longer guaranteed, with a focus on resilience and self-reliance.

Recommendations:

1. **Bolster NATO Unity:** Europe must reinforce its commitment to NATO and encourage all members to meet the 2% defence spending target to present a unified front against potential threats.



2. **Develop Strategic Autonomy:** The EU should accelerate defence cooperation projects under PESCO and the European Defence Fund, while ensuring interoperability with NATO.
3. **Enhance Transatlantic Dialogue:** European leaders must maintain strong diplomatic ties with the U.S., regardless of the election outcome, to ensure continued cooperation on security issues.
4. **Strengthen Eastern Defences:** The EU must enhance deterrence capabilities on its eastern borders through joint military exercises and intelligence-sharing with NATO partners.
5. **Adopt a Balanced China Policy:** The EU should pursue a balanced, independent policy toward China to maintain vital trade relationships while mitigating the risk of deepening Sino-Russian ties.

By anticipating the challenges posed by potential shifts in U.S. foreign policy, Europe can strengthen its security framework and reduce the risks of a more unpredictable global order.

Muhammad Taimur Fahad Khan

CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



Centre for International Relations (CIR) is an independent, non-government analytical centre established in 1996 which deals with Polish foreign policy and the most important issues of international politics. CIR is active in research, education and publishing, organises conferences and meetings, and participates in international projects in collaboration with similar institutions in many countries. CIR creates a forum for debate and exchange of ideas in matters of international politics, relations between states and challenges in the global world. CIR's activities are addressed above all to local-government officials and to entrepreneurs, as well as to officials of the central administration, politicians, diplomats, political scientists and the media. In 2014, CIR was again recognised as one of the best think-tanks in East-Central Europe in the study "The Leading Public Policy Research Organisations in the World" conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

Centre for International Relations | ul. Ogrody 24, 03-994 Warszawa | +48 608 593 632



www.twitter.com/CIR_CSM



www.facebook.com/CIR.CSM