NATO WATCH

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Contact:
Dr. Ian Davis
Email: idavis@natowatch.org
www.natowatch.org

Trump 2.0 and NATO:
Implications for Ukraine, European security and military spending

Trump's return to the White House—convincingly explained as due largely to post pandemic economic factors and an anti-incumbency bias that has culled several ruling parties around the world—is going to take time to digest. Much will depend on his picks for key posts in the new administration. However, it seems relatively clear there are going to be far-reaching implications for US foreign policy. And given that the world is now a much more dangerous and unpredictable place, these implications are potentially far more perilous than what flowed from his 2016 victory. A more erratic and transactional Washington is likely to strain longstanding US alliances and undercut Western support for Ukraine's resistance to Russia's invasion.

The election outcome also raises a fundamental question about US foreign policy: is it largely driven by who is in the White House or the country's hegemonic position in the international order? This question goes to the heart of academic debates and competing theories about international relations. As Paul Poast argues, "If Trump chooses to take US foreign policy in a completely different direction, then the answer is the former. But if we look back four years from now and see more continuity than change, it suggests that the answer is the latter". One area of likely continuity is the "unwarranted influence" exercised by the military-industrial complex. In the six decades siince US President Dwight D. Eisenhower gave this warning in his farewell address in 1961, the military-industrial complex appears to have even greater power and influence.

NATO

According to the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, withdrawal from NATO is possible after giving one year's notice. No NATO member state has ever done so, and instead the alliance has expanded from the original 12 countries to 32 member states. In 2023, Senators Tim Kaine (D-Va.) and Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) introduced legislation requiring that any US presidential decision to exit NATO must have either two-thirds Senate approval or be authorized through an act of Congress. The measure was passed as part of the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act. Although the strength of that legal guardrail has been questioned—Trump could simply chose to ignore it (as he ignored the domestic legal notification requirements before leaving the Open Skies Treaty in 2020).

On balance, however, it seems unlikely that Trump will opt for withdrawal. Instead, he will almost certainly use the threat of withdrawal to seek to bend the alliance to his will and make new demands on European members (and Canada) for bigger financial contributions and investment in additional military resources. In turn, this will result in further large European orders for weapons from US defence companies. There may also be some drawdown in the 100,000 US troops in Europe—a number that has grown by one-fifth since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022—but not a complete withdrawal as bases in Europe support US operations and deployments in the Middle East and Asia. The US also has bilateral commitments with most key European countries that would take time to entangle.

Concerns over Ukraine

More pressing will be Trump's impact on the Biden administration and NATO's current policy of supporting Ukraine with weapons and aid for "as long as it takes" to defeat Russia. NATO is on track to oversee €40 billion in assistance this year, with a commitment to maintain that level of funding in 2025. Trump's promise to end the conflict (without any explanation as to how this will be achieved) has caused alarm. Earlier this year, NATO allies attempted to Trump proof assistance to Ukraine by taking on a bigger role in coordinating the supply of weapons to Ukraine, but without US support the value of arms supplied would fall from a projected €59 billion to €34 billion .

Admiral Rob Bauer, the Dutch chairman of NATO's Military Committee, on 9 November warned against any peace deal that was too favourable to Russia, saying: "If you allow a nation like Russia to win, to come out of this as the victor, then what does it mean for other autocratic states in the world where the US has also interests?". Ultimately, however, the war in Ukraine will be determined by the balance of power on the ground, which has been shifting in Russia's favour but with no clear route to military victory. Ukraine has little prospect of winning back its eastern territory in what has become a costly and damaging war, and a move towards diplomacy under the Trump administration seems inevitable. Advisers to the president-elect have signalled that a future deal may concede parts of Russian-controlled Ukraine to Moscow and delay Kyiv's membership to NATO for at least two decades in exchange for continuing American military support. The conflict would also become frozen, with a 1,300-km-long demilitarized zone winding through the country, likely policed by European forces.

In addition to eroding the important international norm that territory cannot be acquired through the use of force, many analysts argue that such an outcome would allow Russia to reconstitute its forces, and in time threaten not only Ukraine's sovereignty, but also the security of NATO's eastern flank. Given Putin's history of miscalculations and overinflated ambition the risks of such a confrontation cannot be ignored.

However, Moscow has neither the capability (being at a decisive conventional military disadvantage against NATO) nor the intent to launch a war of aggression against NATO member states. Moreover, at successive summits since 2014 NATO leaders have agreed a range of measures to enhance their deterrence and defence posture on the eastern flank. And a peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine, however flawed, would allow Europe time (with or without US support) to reinforce those defences, as well as support political change in Russia.

The response from NATO allies

As during the previous Trump administration, US allies are likely to opt for a combination of pragmatism (engagement and flattery), mitigation (Trump proofing) and institutional idling (effectively generating enough commitment to run essential components in NATO and other multilateral bodies and preventing bad trends from becoming worse until the next presidential election in 2028).

Pragmatism will be key to dealing with Trump. Several European heads of state were quick to congratulate Trump and express a willingness to work with him, but stressed that they would protect Europe's interests. Not all political leaders in NATO will need to walk this diplomatic tightrope, however. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and perhaps Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico and Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni are kindred spirits. Türkiye also seems less concerned about a second Trump presidency than many other NATO allies.

Having previously handled Trump well when he was Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte was partly appointed as the new NATO Secretary-General with this 'Trump whisperer' status in mind. He sought to set off on the right foot with the President-elect in a post on the social platform X on 6 November: "I just congratulated @realDonaldTrump on his election as President of the United States. His leadership will again be key to keeping our Alliance strong. I look forward to working with him again to advance peace through strength through #NATO". And in a formal NATO statement the same day, Rutte added that Trump would be welcomed by a "stronger, larger and more united alliance".

The NATO statement also emphasised the increase in military spending and production among its members, and on arrival at the European Political Community summit in Budapest on 7 November, Rutte went further praising Trump's attempts to get NATO countries to spend more on defence and agreeing that spending would need to go beyond the current 2 percent of GDP target.

Military spending and European security

During his first presidential term, Trump criticised European countries for not spending enough on their own defence, and said in 2018 the target should be doubled to 4 percent. And during his election campaign, he said the US would only defend NATO members from a future attack by Russia if they met their spending obligations. Most have now done so. Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, all NATO member states have significantly raised their military spending, although nine of the 32 member states remain below the 2 percent threshold. Others, such as Poland, Estonia and Latvia, are heading upwards of 4 percent given fears about Russia. During his confirmation hearing in the European Parliament on 6 November, the EU's soon-to-be Defence and Space Commissioner Andrius Kubilius also said it was time for NATO to discuss raising its spending target.

However, NATO and its member states are not short of money for weapons. European NATO states and Canada are collectively forecast to spend \$506.7 billion in 2024 and the United States \$967.7 billion. Hence, total NATO military spending is expected to reach \$1.47 trillion, up 14 per cent from \$1.29 trillion in 2023. Independent estimates suggest that in 2023 NATO accounted for 55 per cent of the global total in military spending. This raises questions as to how much military spending is enough to provide security for NATO member states.

One possible win-win would be for European NATO member states to take on a bigger role in the alliance, perhaps matching US spending in a European pillar. This could appease Washington by demonstrating greater commitment and efficiency from European members and bolster the continent's ability to defend itself in case the US did decide to shake up or ultimately quit the alliance. I have argued elsewhere, that an ideal scenario would see military spending being reduced as part of a redirection of global wealth into social infrastructure, climate action and human security. For example, the United States could reduce military spending by about 30 per cent over the next four years and European member states could collectively increase it by 30 per cent over the same time frame, so that both the US and European pillars end up committing around $660 billion each, with the net spend reducing to about $1.32 trillion (hardly chump change).

Achieving such a rebalancing in the military burden is likely to prove extremely difficult, however. First, Trump is committed to increasing rather than reducing US military spending, especially if he adopts the Project 2025 template, a Heritage Foundation-led plan to accelerate all US nuclear and missile defence programmes. But with the US facing a debt crisis it is unclear how the government will maintain or increase military spending with interest on federal debt at a record high and Trump's spending and tax plans only likely to see this growing burden worsen. It might be that Trump could be convinced cut military spending, especially if European allies were seen to be picking up the slack.

A second problem, however, is that the goal of greater European strategic autonomy remains largely aspirational. Restructuring European security around Europe and not the US-NATO axis is not easy and will take time. However, as Oliver Meir argues European opposition to the George W. Bush administration's neoconservative agenda and invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to the EU adopting the first European Security Strategy, which outlined an alternative vision of "effective multilateralism" and paved the way for a more coherent EU foreign and security policy. The strategy was replaced in 2016 by the European Union Global Strategy, which set out a more modest and concrete approach compared to earlier aspirations. Whether a fragmented Europe can come together around a new European security identity remains an open question.