

1. Introduction: The End of Ambiguity

The global strategic landscape in 2026 confirms what many analysts feared at the beginning of the decade: the “peace dividend” has not only disappeared, but appears to have been replaced by a kind of security tax. The global stage has left the post-Cold War era behind, entering what could be called a pre-conflict environment, where the boundaries between peace, crisis, and war are blurred across a spectrum of hybrid and conventional threats.

For the past few decades, NATO has operated under the relatively comfortable umbrella of crisis management and operations beyond its borders. From the Balkans to Afghanistan, the Alliance's primary function was to project stability beyond its borders, with limited success and even outright fiascos, as in Afghanistan. However, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent consolidation of a strategic alliance between Moscow and Beijing have forced a sharp return to the Alliance's original *raison d'être*: collective defense. This return is not a simple regression to the 1980s, as it is characterized by a triple pressure that tests the very foundations of the North Atlantic Council:

- The kinetic reality, characterized by high-intensity warfare on European soil, has depleted Western arms and equipment reserves, highlighting the vulnerabilities of the European and American defense industrial base.
- The geopolitical shift marked by the surprising (though perhaps expected) emergence of a fiercely transactional Washington, which, under the second Trump administration, replaced security guarantees—previously considered an ideological commitment—with what is clearly economic extortion.
- The global overextension of the United States, which forces it to prioritize the Indo-Pacific theater of operations, is clearly creating a capabilities gap in Europe that its European allies are still striving to fill and will only be able to do so in the medium term.

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In this context, studies such as Rynning's¹ historical deconstruction and Spatafora's² urgent call for reform point to a single conclusion: NATO's survival depends on its capacity to reform its decision-making processes and its military structure. It is no longer enough to spend more; the challenge now is to spend better and be able to act together without US involvement.

As we will examine, the transition from the 2022 Strategic Concept to the 2026 reality requires more than tactical adjustments; it requires recognizing and acknowledging the end of strategic ambiguity. Western Europe (NATO and the European Union) must decide whether it will remain a consumer of security or finally evolve into a provider, capable of maintaining a credible deterrent on its own flanks—the eastern and northern, of course, but without neglecting the southern.

2. Historical Continuity and the Catalyst of Ukraine: From the Cold War to the Reality of 2026

To understand NATO's current position, it is necessary to recognize that the Alliance is not merely reacting to a contemporary crisis, but is undergoing its third major historical transformation. The organization has spent the last three decades trying to define itself by what it does (crisis management, counterterrorism) rather than by what it is (a collective defense alliance)³.

Thus, the period between 1989 and 2014 was marked by a strategic “distraction.” The Alliance's focus on operations outside the area (specifically, the prolonged commitment in Afghanistan) created a military culture optimized for expeditionary warfare, but increasingly detached from the demands of high-intensity conflict between equal powers. This “strategic pause” led to the atrophy of European military capabilities, resulting in a dangerous dependence on US facilitators in areas such as strategic airlift and satellite intelligence.

¹ RYNNING, Sten. *NATO from Cold War to Ukraine*, New Haven: Yale University Press, May 2025. The author argues that the transition to collective defense is not a return to the past, but a necessary adaptation to an era of permanent confrontation, offering the necessary historical context to understand why we are at the current turning point.

² STAPHORA, Giuseppe. “Fit for purpose? Reforming NATO in the age of Trump 2.0.” EUISS Brief, no. 12 (June 2025). The author analyzes the concept of *burden-shifting* as opposed to traditional *burden-sharing*.

³ RYNNING, Sten. *NATO from Cold War to Ukraine*.

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The 2022 invasion of Ukraine not only shattered peace in Europe but also destroyed the myth of a possible strategic partnership with Russia, demonstrating that the 1997⁴ Founding Act was, in retrospect, a document based on false hope rather than what experience has allowed. The catalyst of the war in Ukraine is forcing a redefinition of the boundary between the Alliance and the Russian sphere of influence, which is once again a hard, militarized line reminiscent of the Cold War, but with a significantly more complex technological and hybrid dimension.

The conflict in Ukraine has acted as a brutal laboratory for the Alliance. The Ukrainian catalyst has generated three fundamental changes that now define NATO's agenda⁵:

- The resurgence of mass. After decades of focusing on small, highly mobile, professional units, the conflict has reminded us that quantity has its own inherent value. The consumption of artillery ammunition, the enormous number of casualties, and the rates of loss of heavy equipment and gear have highlighted the small size of armies without reserves, as well as the fragility of Western logistics and its industrial capacity for replenishment.
- The end of sequential confrontation. NATO can no longer afford to focus on only one threat at a time. The synergy between Russian kinetic aggression and Chinese economic and technological pressure (which we could call the Eurasian challenge) means that the Ukrainian support model must be sustainable in the long term, without compromising readiness to act in other theaters of operations with different characteristics and intensities.
- The credibility of deterrence. Deterrence is a psychological construct backed by a physical reality: the ability to carry out the threat. The transition from deterrence by punishment (a concept that assumes a reactive stance, waiting to be attacked before relinquishing occupied territory) to deterrence by denial (a clearly proactive concept that seeks to prevent the seizure of any inch of NATO territory) is perhaps the most significant strategic shift since the 1960s⁶.

⁴ Regarding the evolution of the Russian position, see: Rynning, *NATO from Cold War to Ukraine*, cap. 4, which analyzes the failure of the Founding Act of 1997.

⁵ RYNNING, Sten. *NATO from Cold War to Ukraine*.

⁶ PEROT, Elie. *The return to collective defence: The New Force Model and the credibility of Article 5*, *International Affairs* (Oxford Academic), vol. 101, no. 6 (November 2025), where the concept of deterrence by denial versus deterrence by punishment is extensively developed. Available in: <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article->

The historical continuity described by Rynning suggests that NATO's strength lies in its capacity to adapt without losing its essential identity. However, the 2026 horizon presents a paradox: while the Alliance is returning to its Cold War territorial defense roots, it must do so in the Trump 2.0 era, where American commitment is no longer a theological certainty but a political variable.

Thus, while the Ukrainian catalyst has provided the necessary impact on the system to demonstrate the need for reform, history teaches us that this impetus could be fleeting. Therefore, the challenge for the North Atlantic Council would be to institutionalize these lessons before strategic fatigue sets in, because, as the Alliance moves forward in analyzing the capabilities needed for the new collective defense (see NATO Defence Planning Process below), influenced by the shadow of the Cold War, it is becoming clear that the tools needed to secure the future are radically different from this.

3. The Return to Collective Defense: Capabilities and Credibility

The 2022 Madrid Summit and the subsequent 2023 Vilnius Agreements marked a radical shift in the Alliance's military planning. However, a persistent gap exists between the Alliance's political and strategic ambitions and its operational and tactical reality⁷. The transition from a crisis management mindset to a genuine collective defense posture requires more than simply updating documents; it demands a radical transformation of the New Force Model (NFM).

In the previous decade, NATO's presence on the so-called Eastern Flank was based on a discrete force designed to trigger a broader response. Today, the Alliance's ambition is to be able to defend every inch of its territory from the outset of any conflict. This shift has profound implications for the deployment of the Allied Rapid Reaction Force, as credibility (deterrence) is no longer measured by the size of the total force inventory, but rather by the availability and responsiveness of high-level capabilities. The goal of having more than 300,000 troops on high readiness remains a monumental challenge for European

[abstract/101/6/2129/8281860](https://www.iiiee.es/abstract/101/6/2129/8281860), consulted 13/3/ 2026.

⁷ Ibidem.

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capitals, which face significant obstacles in recruitment, retention, and the acquisition of advanced multi-domain systems⁸.

One of the most critical points raised by recent literature is the risk of a fragmented defense. While the Baltic States and Poland have accelerated their acquisition cycles, NATO's hinterland (Western and Southern Europe) remains slower to adapt. A two-speed NATO, in terms of capabilities, could encourage Moscow to test the Alliance's cohesion through "salami slice" tactics: limited incursions or hybrid attacks that seek to exploit political fissures, but without triggering Article 5. Furthermore, the return to collective defense has highlighted the logic of attrition. As we observe in the current scenario, the capacity to sustain a high-intensity conflict depends on:

- Replenishment stockpiles, which require a shift from reactive logistics based on need to proactive logistics based on contingency, utilizing pre-existing equipment.
- Standardization, to resolve the persistent lack of interoperability among European weapons systems, a recurring theme in many analyses.
- Infrastructure resilience, guaranteeing the capacity of European rail and road networks to facilitate rapid reinforcement from the Atlantic to the Vistula.

A crucial element for Spanish interests is the balance between the eastern and southern flanks, suggesting that, while collective defense is currently synonymous with the Russian threat, it must not be geographically blind and neglect the Southern Flank⁹. A credible NATO in 2026 must be capable of managing high-intensity conflict in the East, while simultaneously securing the so-called Global Commons (sea routes, submarine cables, etc.¹⁰) and responding to instability in the Sahel and North Africa. The return to collective defense is therefore a test of the Alliance's capacity to remain a global security actor, while simultaneously focusing on its entire regional, eastern, and southern security—that

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ FERNANDEZ SOLA, Natividad. *OTAN: España y el Frente Sur. Análisis geopolítico tras cuarenta años de experiencia compartida*, Revista de Estudios en Seguridad Internacional, Vol. 8, No. 1, (2022), pp. 71-85. The need to address the Southern Flank is a recurring theme among Spanish analysts and academics, among whom I would highlight the work of Dr. Natividad Fernández, who carried out what I consider to be the most complete analysis of its antecedents and problems. Available in: <http://www.seguridadinternacional.es/resi/index.php/revista>. Consulted 19/3/2026.

¹⁰ Regarding the vulnerability of critical underwater infrastructure and the need for new naval capabilities, see: PEROT, Elie. *The return to collective defence: The New Force Model and the credibility of Article 5*.

is, on the 360 degrees of its strategic environment, as advocated by its 2022 Strategic Concept¹¹.

For the European allies, this means that the so-called European Pillar should be able to assume primary responsibility for conventional territorial defense, allowing the United States to act as the ultimate guarantor and strategic reserve, especially now that Washington's priority remains, and will continue to remain, the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East.

4. The “Trump 2.0” Factor and Institutional Reform

If the war in Ukraine represented an external shock to NATO's military structures, Donald Trump's return to the White House in 2025 has represented an internal shock to its political, psychological, and institutional foundations. The Alliance can no longer rely on “strategic inertia”¹². The era of automatic American primacy has been replaced by what we might call “transactional Atlanticism,” which demands a radical restructuring of the alliance agreement.

The rhetoric of the second Trump administration has gone beyond the requirement of the 2% of GDP benchmark, now considered an obsolete minimum in Washington, increasing the demand toward a 5% of GDP target if European members want the full security of the American security umbrella. However, the real challenge is not just the amount of money to be spent (a demanding sum in itself, and it remains to be seen whether all partners will be able to reach it, despite their initial acquiescence), but the nature of the contribution—that is, what capabilities will be acquired. Even then, the thorny issue of how the collective defense effort will be divided would remain.

Thus, NATO must move from a “burden-sharing” model (whereby Washington demanded that Europeans contribute more to US-led missions) to a “burden shift” model (whereby Europeans assume primary responsibility for conventional deterrence in Europe). This implies that NATO's European Pillar should be capable of deploying most of the

¹¹ NATO 2022 Strategic Concept. Available in: <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/strategic-concepts/nato-2022-strategic-concept>, consulted 13/3/2026.

¹² SPATAFORA, Giuseppe. *Fit for purpose? Reforming NATO in the age of Trump 2.0*, EUISS Brief, no. 12 (June 2025). Available in: <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/fit-purpose-reforming-nato-age-trump-20>. Consulted 13/3/2026.

conventional forces necessary to deter Russia and other potential adversaries (including the Sahel), while the United States would focus its main resources on the Indo-Pacific theater of operations (or other theaters the White House might decide, much to the surprise of Europeans), maintaining only the strategic capabilities that its continental partners lack in the Euro-Atlantic area: nuclear deterrence, high-level intelligence, long-range missiles, and command and control, among the most notable.

In any case, a key proposal is the modernization of NATO's decision-making process, according to which the Alliance might need:

- Reform NATO's Defense Planning Process (NDPP), shifting from purely national objectives to collective and multinational capability goals. This would compel allies to synchronize their industrial bases, rather than acquiring weapons and equipment in a fragmented manner, thus resolving the underlying tension between cooperation and/or rivalry in defense industry initiatives within NATO and the EU.
- A "European SACEUR"? While historically the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) has always been a US general, the current geopolitical shift has opened a debate on rebalancing military leadership, which would reflect greater European participation in conventional warfare responsibility¹³.
- Applying the principle of consensus minus one, while potentially mitigating the risk of a single member state vetoing an allocated capability package and ensuring that the Alliance's collective needs prevail over national concerns during the planning phase, could, on the other hand, weaken cohesion if unwanted objectives are ultimately imposed on members.

But perhaps the most difficult aspect of the situation created by Trump 2.0 is undoubtedly what some analysts call radical uncertainty. Strategic planning requires predictability, but the current US administration seems to be using unpredictability as a bargaining chip. This clearly undermines mutual trust and could lead to a bilateralization of European security, where Washington deals individually with capitals (Warsaw, Berlin, London, etc.) instead of with the North Atlantic Council as a whole, thus more easily imposing its interests against those of the Alliance as a whole.

¹³ McALISTER, Vivian. *Is It Time for a European SACEUR in NATO?*. Geopolitical Monitor (March 2025). Available in: <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/is-it-time-for-a-european-saceur-in-nato/>, consulted 13/3/2026.

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To avoid this and remain fit for purpose (a phrase frequently used in Alliance documents), NATO should institutionalize its defense plans in a way that makes them resistant to Trump or any new White House occupant who attempts to implement a purely transactional security policy. This would entail moving long-term planning coordination away from purely US-led initiatives (such as the Ramstein format¹⁴) and redefining NATO's permanent command structure.

In short, a second Trump term could pose an existential threat to NATO, not so much because of Washington's potential withdrawal (an attempt which the US leader would likely encounter considerable resistance from the US Congress and Senate), but because it could risk becoming an inoperative treaty. To avoid this, Europeans should rethink their traditional understanding of NATO. Thus, the new Alliance would need to be more European in its implementation and more transactional in its approach.

But the Trump 2.0 challenge is not only policy-driven; it is also decidedly personal and symbolic. In this respect, the behavior of current Secretary General Mark Rutte toward President Trump has provoked unprecedented unease in European strategic circles and media outlets on both sides of the Atlantic¹⁵. While diplomatic pragmatism is never out of the question, Rutte's approach seems to have crossed the line into a style that some veteran analysts do not hesitate to describe as fatuous and alarmingly servile. The public release of private messages—in which Rutte assured President Trump that "Europe is going to pay big" and referred to the US president in almost familiar terms, calling him "Dad"—has caused considerable consternation. This ring-kissing diplomacy reached its lowest point during the recent debates over the 5% of GDP target for defense spending, presenting these forced budget increases as a personal victory for Trump, rather than as a strategic necessity, endorsing and thus de facto validating a purely transactional view of mutual defense commitment.

¹⁴ The Ramstein Format (or Ukraine Defense Contact Group) is a military coordination mechanism, established in April 2022 and led by the United States from Ramstein Air Base in Germany. It brings together more than 50 countries (all NATO members, plus some allies such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, and others) to organize and plan the delivery of weapons, ammunition, training, and logistical support to Ukraine during its conflict with Russia. The leader's abdication of responsibility significantly impacts its effectiveness.

¹⁵ PICKET, Kerry. *NATO chief Rutte grilled by journalists for 'gushing' behavior toward Trump*. The Washington Times (June 2025); available in: <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2025/jun/25/nato-chief-mark-rutte-grilled-journalists-gushing-behavior-toward/>, consulted 4/3/2026.

ADDLEY, Esther. *'Orchestrated grovel': critics react to Europe's attempts to tame Donald Trump*, The Guardian (June 2025), available in: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jun/27/critics-react-europe-donald-trump-nato-mark-rutte>, consulted 4/3/2026.

Even more worrying is Rutte's stance on the Greenland controversy. Faced with pressure and explicit threats from the United States regarding the island's status and Arctic security, the Secretary General's attempt to maintain a neutral position has been perceived by Copenhagen and Brussels as a dangerous and misguided policy of appeasement¹⁶. Treating the potential violation of a member state's territorial integrity as a matter open to negotiation, to satisfy Washington's whims, is undoubtedly a strategic error, as it demonstrates to any major rival power that NATO's internal cohesion is for sale, undermining the very principle of assured sovereignty that the Alliance affirms and seeks to protect. In this respect, NATO needs a Secretary General who acts more as a guardian of the Treaty than as a facilitator of a "security for a price" model.

5. European Strategic Responsibility with Omnidirectional Regional Security

The frictions within NATO's leadership lead us to the central argument for NATO's future: the urgent need for a "European Pillar" that is both politically autonomous and militarily capable. Thus, the current crisis is not so much a sign of NATO's obsolescence as an opportunity to respond to a call for its Europeanization¹⁷. In this way, the distinction between the EU's Strategic Compass and NATO's Strategic Concept should disappear in favor of a synchronized architecture. This would require that, in order for Europe to resist being treated as a secondary actor (or a mere collection of clients for the US defense industry), it must consolidate its own defense market.

In this way, European strategic responsibility would not consist of competing with NATO, but rather of saving it from its own internal imbalances. If Europe can provide 50% of the high-end enablers by 2030 (satellite constellations, in-flight refueling, and integrated missile defense), the transactional threat of a potential withdrawal by Washington would lose its logic.

¹⁶ Leaks concerning Secretary-General Mark Rutte's communications and terminology toward the US administration have been the subject of critical analysis in various European forums. For a critique of the policy of appeasement in the Arctic, see: *Arctic hold'em: Ten European cards in Greenland*, ECFR (January 2026), available in: <https://ecfr.eu/article/arctic-holdem-ten-european-cards-in-greenland/>, consulted 4/3/ 2026.

¹⁷ BENEYTO, José María. *El futuro de la OTAN: desafíos, estrategia y nuevo orden global*. Madrid: Editorial Biblioteca Nueva, 2025. Beneyto emphasizes the importance of European strategic autonomy as the only way to have a life insurance policy against an erratic Washington.

For Spain, and for the southern allies in general, a stronger European pillar would allow NATO to address the Southern Flank (the stability of the Sahel, North Africa, and the Mediterranean) decisively and without having to rely on US strategic enablers, which are increasingly focused on the Pacific (despite temporary distractions in the Middle East, in defense of Israel, which are ultimately circumstantial).

6. The Alliance's "Trilemma"

The convergence of the strategic lines proposed by Rynning, Perot, Spatafora, and Beneyto reveals a NATO that is robust in its military intentions but fragile in its political foundations. Thus, the Alliance faces what we might call the "cohesion trilemma": the need to maintain US interests, guarantee European unity, and confront a multidimensional Eurasian and African threat.

The current and future battlefield, dominated by AI-driven command and control, autonomous swarms, and the militarization of space, requires adaptation. While NATO's Strategic Concept 2022 laid the groundwork, current reality shows a dangerous internal divergence. The United States appears to be moving toward a "technological disengagement" from those allies that do not comply with its security and systems standards. According to this line of reasoning, the cost of the Trump 2.0 era could be technological protectionism that would ultimately turn European industries into mere subcontractors for their American counterparts.

A return to collective defense will be inappropriate without an industrial base capable of responding to the demands imposed by protracted conflicts. Currently, Europe still lacks a predominantly European defense market, with a fragmented landscape of national champions and a high percentage of purchases from outside Europe (78% of the total). This, combined with US transactional pressure to acquire its weapons systems (since 63% of these extra-European purchases are in the North American market¹⁸), seems to be overwhelming Europe, which, in a desperate attempt to avoid political friction with

¹⁸ BARIGAZZI, Jacopo. *Buy your guns, missiles and tanks at home, Draghi tells EU countries*. POLITICO (September 2024), available in: <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-defense-mario-draghi-arms-industry-guns-missiles-tanks-spending/>, consulted 13/3/2026.

Washington, is paradoxically contributing to undermining the very foundation of European defense.

But in any case, pressing military needs must not be divorced from the social foundations of member states, as this could create a gap between what is required and social resilience. As the Alliance demands larger defense budgets (approaching the 5% threshold), there is a palpable risk of security fatigue among European populations, who are already facing a socioeconomic crisis. The Alliance has failed to articulate a narrative in which defense spending is seen not as "a tax on Washington," but as an insurance policy for European security, by increasing deterrence. Without a comprehensive defense mindset that engages all of society (cognitive resilience), the most sophisticated weapons will be of little value against hybrid destabilization and internal polarization.

7. Conclusions

The analysis of the current state of the Atlantic Alliance, filtered through recent research and current geopolitical realities, suggests the following conclusions:

The end of the protective shield, in which the era of unconditional US security has ended. Whether through the transactionalism of Trump 2.0, or the inevitable US shift towards the Indo-Pacific, NATO seems forced to move from a US-led hierarchy to a truly bipolar partnership, where Europe provides the majority of conventional deterrence.

European strategic autonomy has evolved from an alternative to a necessity that could be the path to saving NATO. A weak Europe is a burden that invites US isolationism, while a strong Europe would become an indispensable, or at least desirable, partner.

It is estimated that the current appeasement stance towards Washington's most disruptive demands (Greenland or the dictates of 5% of GDP) is counterproductive. NATO requires leadership that defends the sovereign integrity of all members and the collective norms of the Treaty, not mere subservience, and certainly not the behavior of the Secretary General, which some readily describe as fatuous and servile.

It is clear that collective defense requires industrial sovereignty. Deterrence by denial seems more like an empty promise if it is not accompanied by the capacity to produce, sustain, and innovate within European borders.

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A strategic communication effort is needed to increase social resilience, articulating a narrative in which defense spending is accepted as insurance for European security, since it increases deterrence, and which involves all of society.

The return to collective defense must not result in a one-sided Alliance that, suffering from "geographical blindness," neglects the Southern Flank. For nations like Spain, the Atlantic obsession with the eastern flank cannot come at the expense of a strategic vacuum in the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Sahel. A NATO that ignores this flank leaves the door open to perverse non-state actors (terrorism, arms, drug, and human trafficking, etc.) and to the growing geopolitical footprint of the Chinese-Russian axis in Africa. The credibility of the 360-degree approach (advocated by the Alliance's Strategic Concept 2022) is at stake. If NATO becomes a purely anti-Russian club focused on the East, it will lose its relevance for Mediterranean allies and, ultimately, its claim to be the guarantor of European security as a whole.

The current model of fragmented national defense industries is the biggest obstacle to a credible European pillar. The tendency of member states (often encouraged by the desire of current European leaders to appease the White House) to purchase US systems creates a technological dependency that could last for decades. Europe must overcome its "sovereignty trap"—the illusion that 27 small, inefficient national markets can compete with the integrated military-industrial complexes of the US or China. True sovereignty in the current global situation lies more in Europe's collective capacity and cohesion than in national shopping lists.

The Atlantic Alliance is now a fragile ecosystem requiring active and constant maintenance. Subservient diplomacy, while it may seem to buy time, only erodes the dignity and strategic weight of European allies. To be fit for purpose in the Trump 2.0 era, NATO must redefine itself as an alliance where the United States is respected as a principal partner, but where Europe is also respected as a sovereign, capable, and indispensable pillar. The alternative could lead to a slow, transactional dissolution, leaving Europe vulnerable at the most dangerous moment of the 21st century.

Thus, NATO currently finds itself at a perilous crossroads. While it has the historical memory to survive and the reformist maps to adapt, it seems to lack the political courage to tell its citizens, and its transatlantic partners, the hard truths about the cost of freedom, in an era of permanent confrontation and increasing risks.

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