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Anticipating Allies' Responses to U.S. Retrenchment from Europe

How France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom Might Adapt to Alternative U.S. Approaches

This research was made possible by the Stand Together Trust and Peter Richards.

Research Report

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About This Report

The second Trump administration has reshaped U.S. foreign, defense, and economic policies toward Europe. In addition to imposing tariffs and seeking control of Greenland, the territory of an ally, the administration has said it will retrench militarily. And the United States has taken some initial steps to do so, including reducing planned contributions to the alliance in the event of a crisis, announcing the withdrawal of 5,000 troops stationed in Germany, and launching a posture review to inform further force reductions. The shifting distribution of power in the Indo-Pacific, growing pace of technological change, and intensifying U.S. fiscal challenges are likely to place pressure on future administrations to sustain some aspects of retrenchment and ensure that Europe carries a greater share of the burden for its own defense. To inform current and future deliberations, this report asks how alternative approaches to limited U.S. retrenchment—reductions in, but not elimination of, U.S. defense commitments and military posture—might affect the response of four key NATO allies: France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom. Because retrenchment is not occurring in isolation, we also consider how two other policies—further tariffs and changes in policy toward Russia—could affect allies' responses.

This report aims to provide rigorous analysis to inform debates inside and outside government about the implications of different approaches to retrenchment from Europe.

A research brief summarizes this report's findings: RAND Corporation, "How the U.S. Retrenches Matters: Key NATO Allies' Likely Responses to Alternative U.S. Approaches," RB-A5006-1, 2026, www.rand.org/t/RBA5006-1.

This report builds on the following related research:

- This analysis draws on RAND's findings about how allies have responded to U.S. retrenchment in the past, which are summarized in RAND Corporation, "Balancing Act—How Allies Have Responded to Limited U.S. Retrenchment," RB-A739-3, 2025, www.rand.org/t/RBA739-3.
- The full analysis is found in Miranda Priebe, Mina Pollmann, Naoko Aoki, Alexandra T. Evans, Kristen Gunness, Garrett Hinck, Samuel J. Leiter, Clara de Lataillade, Nathan Waechter, Nathaniel Edenfield, and Karl P. Mueller, *Anticipating Allies' Responses to U.S. Retrenchment: Lessons from Limited Military Withdrawals During the Cold War*, RAND Corporation, RR-A739-8, 2025, www.rand.org/t/RRA739-8.
- Subsequent analysis identified a variety of policies the Trump administration might pursue in Europe and offered a preliminary assessment of how NATO allies generally might respond to these alternatives: Miranda Priebe, Zachary Burdette, and Scott Behmer, *How Might NATO Allies Respond if the United States Retrenches from Europe?* RAND Corporation, RR-A2807-2, 2025, www.rand.org/t/RRA2807-2.

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In this report, we delve deeper, considering the potential responses of four individual NATO allies.

Center for Analysis of U.S. Grand Strategy

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Summary

Issue

The second Trump administration has reshaped U.S. policy toward Europe, including by raising doubts about U.S. treaty commitments, imposing higher tariffs on allies, threatening to seize allies' territories, and reducing support for Ukraine during its ongoing war with Russia. The administration has also called for retrenchment from Europe, citing the need to prioritize threats in the Western Hemisphere and the Pacific, as well as frustrations about burdensharing. The United States has taken initial steps in this direction, including reducing planned contributions to NATO crisis operations and launching a review of U.S. posture in Europe. As this and future administrations consider whether and how to retrench further, allies' responses are one factor that U.S. policymakers should consider. This report examines how four key NATO allies—France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom—might react to alternative U.S. approaches to retrenchment.

Approach

Earlier RAND research described strategic debates and options that could plausibly emerge for how to retrench. That research also considered how two other key U.S. policies in the region might change: economic policy toward allies and policy toward Russia. In this report, we explore how four NATO allies might react to changes in U.S. policy across those dimensions, focusing on allied reactions that have implications for U.S. interests: threat perceptions; defense spending; bilateral ties with Washington; and relationships with Russia, China, and other European partners.

We use three kinds of sources to anticipate allied reactions, each offsetting the limitations of the others:

- applied lessons from history
- public debates taking place in, and official documents from, allied countries
- interviews with allied policymakers and experts in mid-2025.

We aimed to isolate the effects of U.S. policies, even though they may not always be the primary driver of allies' choices. We have also noted when retrenchment's effects may depend on other aspects of an ally's circumstances, such as domestic politics or economic developments.

Key Findings

Although we approached each ally individually and considered its unique circumstances, we found that the four allies—France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom—will likely respond to U.S. retrenchment in similar ways. This is because all four countries, despite their differences, share some

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structural similarities that are important drivers of national security choices—especially a high threat perception of Russia. That said, there are differences among the four allies, and these findings do not necessarily apply to all NATO allies.

Our findings about allies' likely responses suggest that *how* the United States retrenches, including the other foreign policy choices it makes at the same time, will have a meaningful effect on allied responses.

Anticipated Changes in Allies' Policies Toward the United States

- **Allies will likely seek to sustain remaining security and economic ties with the United States in the face of coordinated, gradual U.S. retrenchment.** Allies see the United States as an irreplaceable partner and would likely try to preserve remaining ties in the face of what allies would see as an undesirable, but relatively responsible, U.S. approach to retrenchment.
- **But allies might see the United States as a less reliable arms supplier in the face of a large-scale, uncoordinated, rapid withdrawal.** Allies believe that such a U.S. move would create capability gaps that would leave them vulnerable to a Russian attack. In turn, allies might see the United States as indifferent to their security and therefore an unreliable source for arms. Allies might, therefore, take more-aggressive steps to reduce reliance on the U.S. industrial base if the United States approaches retrenchment in this way.
- **Other U.S. actions and statements that coincide with retrenchment and suggest fundamentally diverging U.S.-European interests could lead allies to reduce economic and technological dependence on and intelligence-sharing with the United States.** For example, U.S. pursuit of rapprochement with Russia while its war in Ukraine continues could lead allies to fear that Washington has fundamentally different interests. Such a policy, in turn, could lead allies to reduce intelligence-sharing, fearing the United States might share sensitive information with Moscow. Further U.S. tariffs or export controls might accelerate allies' efforts to reduce their economic and technological dependence on the United States.

Anticipated Changes in Allies' Policies Toward Russia and China

- **None of the four allies will pursue security alignment with Russia or China, regardless of the U.S. approach to retrenchment.** Allies see Russia as a threat and China's interests as misaligned with theirs. The four allies do not have risk factors for aligning with a rival.
- **Electoral gains by the far right or far left could make France or Germany more likely to adopt a less hardline approach to Russia, regardless of U.S. policy.**

Anticipated Changes in Allies' Defense Spending and Regional Cooperation

- **Initiating plans for large-scale force withdrawals and further reductions in crisis contributions would likely spur allies to cooperate more deeply with each other and increase defense spending or shift resources away from out-of-area missions.** Allies had

already begun such changes because of the threat from Russia, especially after 2022, and the growing prospect of U.S. retrenchment in 2025. Taking more-tangible steps to retrench would likely reinforce this trend.

- **U.S. pursuit of a rapprochement with Russia while the war in Ukraine is ongoing could have similar effects but could also lead allies to reduce cooperation with the United States.**
- **The costs and trade-offs associated with higher defense spending and regional cooperation also mean that political resistance within allies' domestic societies to both policies may grow in the future.**
- **France and the UK will struggle to meet defense spending targets, especially if U.S. policies add more economic headwinds.**
- **France and the UK may scale back—but not eliminate—spending for missions outside Europe in response to large-scale U.S. retrenchment or a U.S. détente with Russia that does not prioritize European security.** Poland and Germany already focus their resources on Europe.
- **Allies would likely have diverse responses to greater U.S. use of presence and commitments to reward and punish individual states, which might create fissures that undermine regional cooperation.**

Recommendations

The Trump administration announced a new vision for the transatlantic alliance, NATO 3.0, in February 2026. The United States should do the following to advance NATO 3.0 or other future concepts that aim to maintain a partnership with Europe while increasing burdensharing and reducing the U.S. military role:

- **Develop and coordinate with allies on long-term plans for reductions in peacetime presence and crisis contributions, as well as force structure changes.** Sharing this type of plan with allies would help them more thoughtfully phase their investments and signal U.S. desire for the continued partnership that NATO 3.0 envisions. As of October 2026, it is not clear whether the U.S. Department of War has a Europe posture review that will produce such a plan or only decisions about immediate changes in U.S. regional presence. If the latter is the case, a follow-on process could produce such a plan.
- **Take tangible steps to implement this long-term plan.** Initiating larger-scale force withdrawals and further reductions in U.S. crisis contributions—and continuing to do so over time as conditions allow—may help allies sustain momentum on defense spending even if it becomes more politically difficult. In deciding on the size of such changes and which forces to remove, U.S. policymakers should keep in mind that some allies, including France and the UK, already have significant fiscal challenges and may not quickly increase spending further. Alternatively, such allies may increase short-term defense spending, but at greater risk of social unrest and opposition to longer-term spending.

- **Encourage deeper regional cooperation.** NATO 3.0 envisions a self-sufficient Europe that reduces the burden on U.S. forces. Because no one ally is prepared to fill the U.S. role, allies will need to work together to increase their collective strength.
- **Avoid leveraging U.S. presence and commitments for secondary U.S. priorities.** Policymakers need to weigh the downside of U.S. pressure—undermining regional cooperation—against the value of the concessions that such pressure is meant to elicit.
- **Accept that promoting Europe's capacity for self-defense could mean that allies have fewer capabilities for missions in other regions.**
- **Support allies' economic growth.** Allies need an economic boost to support higher defense spending, not further headwinds, such as additional tariffs. U.S. policies in some areas could help. For example, ending the war with Iran could ease fiscal—and the associated political—pressures that make it hard for allies to meet spending targets.
- **Work with allies to promote a durable ceasefire in Ukraine.** NATO 3.0 calls for stabilizing ties with Russia, but some approaches could lead allies to weaken ties with the United States. Allies would perceive a one-sided deal favoring Russia, negotiated over their heads, as signaling a fundamental divergence of interests between the United States and Europe. This perception could, over the long term, lead to reductions in European defense equipment purchases, defense coordination, and intelligence-sharing with Washington. The United States does not necessarily need to shift from trilateral talks to direct European participation. But Washington should at least have a process to gain European input, especially because Europe's contributions—such as security guarantees and financial support to Ukraine—will likely be needed for Kyiv to accept a deal.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

If the United States further retrenched from Europe, how would allies in the region respond? And how would those responses affect U.S. security and economic interests? By *retrenchment*, we mean a reduction in U.S. commitments to European allies and U.S. military presence in Europe. For decades, there was a bipartisan consensus in the United States supporting a robust commitment to NATO and a large military presence in Europe. Starting with the Obama administration, U.S. leaders talked about the need to pivot to Asia, but Washington did not actually begin to retrench from Europe. As of September 2026, the second administration of President Donald Trump has taken some initial steps in this direction, including raising doubts about the U.S. willingness to defend allies, modestly reducing peacetime presence, and reducing the forces the United States commits to make available to NATO in a crisis.[1]

Allies' reactions are one consideration that U.S. policymakers should weigh as they decide whether, how, and over what time frame to retrench further. Other considerations include the effects on the behavior of Russia and the United States' ability to defend its interests in other theaters.[2] This report examines how four key NATO allies—France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom—are likely to respond to further, but still limited, U.S. retrenchment from Europe. We focus on these four because they are among the most influential and militarily capable European allies. France and the United Kingdom are Europe's only nuclear powers, Germany is its largest economy, and Poland is an increasingly capable ally that now has the third-largest active-duty force in NATO behind the United States and Turkey.[3] These four countries are not representative of all 30 European allies. Still, we focus on these four because their responses would have a disproportionate effect on U.S. interests.

Our assessment draws heavily on recent RAND research about the historical U.S. experience with retrenchment. During the Cold War, there were times when the United States retrenched and sought to stabilize relations with such rivals as the Soviet Union and China. Allies responded first by trying to prevent or limit changes in U.S. policy.[4] When Washington proceeded anyway, allies still wanted to

[1] U.S. European Command Public Affairs, "U.S. Rightsizes NATO Force Model Contributions," June 3, 2026. For more on the administration's policies in Europe to date, see Miranda Priebe, Zachary Burdette, and Scott Behmer, *How Might NATO Allies Respond if the United States Retrenches from Europe?* RAND Corporation, RR-A2807-2, 2025; and Miranda Priebe, "How to Deliver on NATO 3.0," *Orbis*, July 2, 2026.

[2] For examples of views on how to weigh these other factors, see Elbridge Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, Yale University Press, 2021; and Roger Wicker, "Chairman Wicker Leads SASC Hearing on EUCOM, AFRICOM Posture," press release, April 3, 2025.

[3] NATO, "Defense Investment of NATO Countries (2014–2026)," press release, July 3, 2026a, p. 11.

[4] Miranda Priebe, Mina Pollmann, Naoko Aoki, Alexandra T. Evans, Kristen Gunness, Garrett Hinck, Samuel J. Leiter, Clara de Lataillade, Nathan Waechter, Nathaniel Edenfield, and Karl P. Mueller, *Anticipating Allies' Responses to U.S. Retrenchment: Lessons from Limited Military Withdrawals During the Cold War*, RAND Corporation, RR-A739-8, 2025.

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preserve ties with the United States and did not align, or *bandwagon*, with rivals. Allies compensated for U.S. retrenchment by spending more on defense, deepening regional cooperation, reining in foreign policy ambitions, and/or trying to settle differences with rivals.

In this report, we consider whether allies will react in similar ways today. This requires accounting for two sets of differences from the past. First, allies face different strategic and domestic situations today than during past cases of retrenchment. Second, the United States has made or is considering other policy changes (e.g., tariffs on allies, threats to the territories of NATO allies) that differ from the Cold War cases. These differences could affect how allies respond to retrenchment.[5]

We ultimately find that U.S. choices about *how* to retrench—and the other policies the United States pursues at the same time—will affect how the four allies respond. Continuing to take concrete steps to retrench may help allies maintain momentum to meet the ambitious defense spending targets they have already set. The way the United States does this may affect other outcomes. For example, a rapid, uncoordinated U.S. withdrawal could lead allies to reduce security ties with the United States, especially over the long term. Using posture and commitments to reward and punish allies could undermine their cooperation with each other. This analysis therefore shifts the discussion beyond just whether retrenchment is "good" or "bad" for U.S. interests and toward the question of how choices about implementation could affect the outcomes.

Why the United States Is Considering Further Retrenchment

The Trump administration and outside strategists have made several arguments for reducing the U.S. security role in Europe.

Prioritizing the Western Hemisphere. The administration has argued that immigration and cartels are top national security concerns that require more military resources in the Americas. The 2025 National Security Strategy and the 2026 National Defense Strategy call for reducing the U.S. role in both Europe and the Middle East to free up resources.[6]

Prioritizing the Pacific. Given China's dramatic military rise and Asia's growing economic importance, every administration since that of President Barack Obama has called for a greater focus on the Pacific. But none significantly reduced the U.S. presence in (Figure 1.1) or commitment to Europe. The second Trump administration has argued that China poses a much greater challenge than Russia, especially because wealthy NATO allies can afford to balance Moscow themselves.[7] In February 2026, Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby shared a new concept for the alliance, called "NATO 3.0," that envisions Europe taking primary responsibility for its own

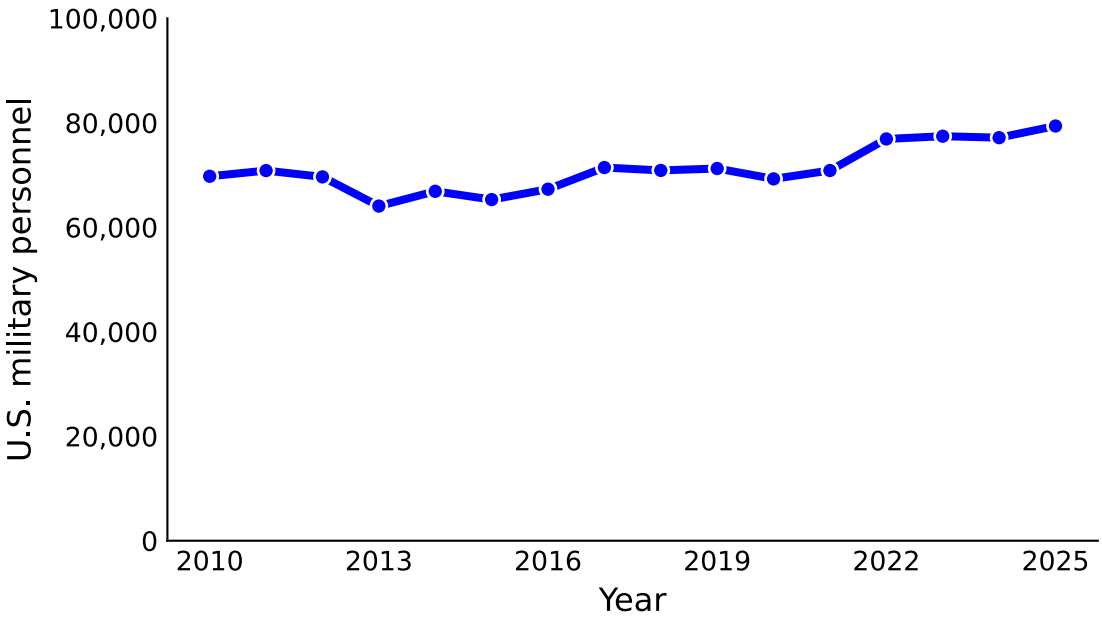
[5] Priebe, Burdette, and Behmer, 2025.

[6] White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, pp. 15–16; U.S. Department of War, *National Defense Strategy*, 2026, p. 3. The Department of War is designated the Department of Defense under Public Law 81-216, National Security Act Amendments of 1949.

[7] White House, 2025, p. 19; U.S. Department of War, 2026, p. 9. For earlier writings by current administration officials, see Colby, 2021; Alexander Velez-Green and Robert Peters, *The Prioritization Imperative: A Strategy to Defend America's Interests in a More Dangerous World*, Heritage Foundation, August 1, 2024; Elbridge Colby, "How We Can Help Ukraine While Genuinely Prioritizing Asia," *Time*, July 14, 2023.

conventional defense while the United States shifts resources to the Western Hemisphere and Pacific and uses negotiations to stabilize ties with Russia.[8]

Figure 1.1. U.S. Military Personnel Assigned in Europe, 2010–2025



SOURCES: Features data from Michael Flynn, "Troopdata: Tools for Analyzing Cross-National Military Deployment and Basing Data," R package version 1.0.4.9000, 2026; Michael A. Allen, Michael E. Flynn, and Carla Martinez Machain, "Global U.S. Military Deployment Data: 1950–2020," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 39, No. 3, 2022; Tim Kane, "Global U.S. Troop Deployment, 1950–2003," Heritage Foundation, October 7, 2004; and Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC), "Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency by State/Country: September 2025," Excel Workbook, September 30, 2025. For the sources that we used to estimate U.S. presence in Poland, see the appendix.
NOTE: These data cover forces assigned to U.S. European Command (except those based in Israel, which was part of the command's area of responsibility prior to 2021). These data largely capture permanently assigned forces and not those on temporary or rotational assignments. However, because the bulk of U.S. presence in Poland is rotational and Poland is one of the countries we focus on in this report, we also included those forces in the totals. We do not include the smaller rotational presence in other European countries, such as Romania.

Burdensharing concerns. European countries have historically spent less on defense as a share of their economies than the United States. Some strategists argue that U.S. security commitments create perverse incentives for allies to free ride and amount to "welfare for the rich."[9] Trump administration

[8] White House, 2025; Elbridge Colby, "Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the NATO Defense Ministerial (as Prepared)," U.S. Department of War, February 12, 2026.

[9] Barry R. Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 1, January/February 2013.

officials, including Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, have made similar arguments that NATO's division of labor is unfair.[10]

U.S. fiscal challenges. Fiscal concerns motivate many strategists who argue for retrenchment. The Trump administration has not emphasized this argument, instead requesting a roughly 50 percent increase in the defense budget that would amount to $1.5 trillion for fiscal year 2027.[11] But the U.S. debt and deficits continue to rise, so this concern may motivate future administrations. Interest payments on the national debt exceeded the defense budget for the first time in 2024.[12] The defense budget is not the primary driver of U.S. debt burdens, but some strategists argue that reducing the U.S. security role abroad would help put defense spending on a more sustainable trajectory as part of a larger effort to address fiscal challenges.[13]

Concerns that the U.S. security role is counterproductive. Some analysts argue that hardline U.S. policies toward Russia and a large forward military presence in Europe have exacerbated Moscow's insecurity and made conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine, more likely. These strategists view retrenchment from Europe as part of a broader effort to reduce tensions with Russia and the risk that the United States could become entangled in conflict in the region.[14] The Trump administration has called for stabilizing U.S.-Russia relations, but it has not explicitly stated that retrenchment is intended to promote this goal.

Debates About How Allies Would Respond

The long-standing debate about the effects of U.S. retrenchment tends to make two simplifying assumptions:

- Strategists on both sides tend to focus only on extreme U.S. policy changes: complete withdrawal from a region or alliance versus maintaining the status quo.
- Arguments also tend to assume that all allies will respond similarly.

In this report, we do not make either assumption. We explore alternative forms of *limited retrenchment*—reducing but not eliminating security ties—as the Trump administration has proposed. Moreover, we consider how differences in allies' circumstances and the way that the United States retrenches might affect allies' responses. Still, the long-standing (but simplified) debate in the United

[10] White House, 2025, p. 10; U.S. Department of War, 2026, p. 4; Jesse Johnson, "'Free-Riding' U.S. Allies That Don't Step Up 'Will Face Consequences,' Hegseth Warns," *Japan Times*, December 7, 2025.

[11] White House, "Rebuilding Our Military," April 2026.

[12] Benn Steil and Elisabeth Harding, "For the First Time, the U.S. Is Spending More on Debt Interest Than Defense," Council on Foreign Relations blog, May 23, 2024.

[13] See, for example, Colby, 2021; Benjamin H. Friedman, "A Plan to Cut Military Spending," Cato Institute, August 1, 2017; and Matthew Mai, "The Real Problem with the Defense Budget," 2025.

[14] For a summary of such arguments, see Miranda Priebe, Bryan Frederick, Alexandra T. Evans, Samuel Charap, Gabrielle Tarini, and Bryan Rooney, *Future U.S. Peacetime Policy Toward Russia: Exploring the Benefits and Costs of a Less-Hardline Approach*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1862-1, 2023; and Miranda Priebe, Bryan Rooney, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Jeffrey Martini, and Stephanie Pezard, *Implementing Restraint: Changes in U.S. Regional Security Policies to Operationalize a Realist Grand Strategy of Restraint*, RAND Corporation, RR-A739-1, 2021.

States is valuable to understand because these arguments still animate policy discussions and motivate the choice of which outcomes we focus on in this report.

In sum, retrenchment optimists argue that a smaller U.S. security role would incentivize NATO allies to spend more on defense and coordinate more effectively with each other. These strategists also contend that shared interests would lead allies to sustain security and economic cooperation with Washington despite opposition to retrenchment.[15] Retrenchment pessimists argue the opposite: that NATO allies would fail to spend more on defense and cooperate with each other effectively and that this would raise the prospect of Russian aggression against NATO members. These strategists also expect that the United States would have less leverage or goodwill to convince its erstwhile allies to cooperate with it on other political and economic issues.[16]

In the remainder of this section, we consider in more detail the views of retrenchment optimists and retrenchment pessimists on key outcomes.

Defense Spending and Regional Cooperation

Strategists on both sides of the debate see European stability as a U.S. interest, even if they disagree about its importance. There is also widespread agreement that to check Russia with less U.S. support, allies would need to increase defense spending and cooperate more deeply together to improve interoperability, avoid capability gaps, and reduce duplication.[17] The debate is centered on whether allies can and will do this as the United States retrenches.

Retrenchment pessimists are skeptical that allies would generate sufficient new military capabilities to balance Russia after decades of relying on the U.S. military for key enablers, such as command and control (C2); intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR); lift and logistics; and tactical nuclear weapons. These strategists point to obstacles—competing domestic priorities, such as generous welfare programs, fiscal constraints, and incentives to buck pass to other Europeans—that impede higher defense spending. Pessimists note that other factors—such as divergent threat perceptions, incentives to privilege domestic firms, and sovereignty concerns—would limit the depth of regional cooperation.[18]

Retrenchment optimists believe that the main barrier to greater European defense spending and regional cooperation is allies' incentive to *free ride*—that is, let Washington pay the costs of balancing against Russia.[19] Optimists argue that, with the United States providing security in the region, allies

[15] Max Bergmann and Sophia Besch, "Why European Defense Still Depends on America," *Foreign Affairs*, March 7, 2023; Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks, "Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security if the United States Pulls Back," *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 4, 2021.

[16] For examples of these competing views, see Stephen G. Brooks and Hugo Meijer, "Europe Cannot Defend Itself: The Challenge of Pooling Military Power," *Survival*, Vol. 63, No. 1, 2021; and Barry Posen, "Europe Can Defend Itself," *Survival*, Vol. 62, No. 6, 2020.

[17] See, for example, Colby, 2026.

[18] Francis J. Gavin and Alina Polyakova, "Macron's Flawed Vision for Europe: Persistent Divisions Will Preclude His Dreams of Global Power," *Foreign Affairs*, January 19, 2022; Meijer and Brooks, 2021, p. 30.

[19] Norbert Röttgen, "Europe Has Run Out of Time: With Trump's Return, the Continent Must Take Charge of Its Own Security—and Quickly," *Foreign Affairs*, November 22, 2024.

have weak incentives to overcome the other impediments to higher defense spending and deeper cooperation. Retrenchment, according to this line of thought, would increase allies' sense of vulnerability and therefore incentives to act.[20]

Security Alignment with the United States

By *alignment*, we mean the degree to which countries expect policy coordination and mutual support from each other in the future.[21] Alignment exists on a spectrum, ranging from intimate security coordination and mutual defense commitments to having no mechanisms for coordination or expectations of mutual support. Alignment can also vary by issue. For example, NATO allies have historically been deeply aligned with the United States on transatlantic security issues but more weakly aligned on defense issues in the Indo-Pacific (e.g., on the Vietnam War or how to deal with a rising China today) and the Middle East (e.g., on U.S. interventions in Iraq 2003 and in Iran 2026).

Retrenchment pessimists fear that the United States would lose significant influence as allies become less dependent on the United States.[22] When allies are less dependent, they have less to fear from the loss of U.S. support. Self-sufficient allies are less likely to preemptively take stances the United States prefers and less vulnerable to explicit U.S. threats.[23] Optimists acknowledge this dynamic but expect the effect to be more modest, arguing that U.S. leverage has not been enough to convince allies to burdenshare and that allies would continue to work with Washington where interests align.[24]

Policy Toward Rivals

Retrenchment optimists expect allies to take steps to reduce the likelihood of conflict with adversaries—in Europe's case, Russia.[25] Most importantly, as noted above, this means arming themselves to deter that rival from aggression. But there are also other pathways to conflict, and some allies might want to reduce those risks, too, in the context of U.S. retrenchment. For example, Russia might attack preemptively if it misperceives a signal from European NATO allies, such as putting forces on higher alert, as a step toward conflict. Allies might try to address these other pathways to

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[20] Moritz S. Graefrath, "U.S. Troop Withdrawals from Europe Won't Benefit Its Rivals," *War on the Rocks*, September 30, 2024. For an example of optimism, see Jaroslaw Adamowski, "Poland to Join European Sky Shield Scheme, Following Thaw with Berlin," *Defense News*, April 17, 2024.

[21] This definition does not include the ideological component that the term *alignment* implied during the Cold War.

[22] L. Desmaele, "America's 'China-First' Grand Strategy and the Transatlantic Bargain: Revisiting the Security–Economics Nexus," *International Politics*, 2024, p. 5.

[23] Paul van Hooft, "Land Rush: American Grand Strategy, NATO Enlargement, and European Fragmentation," *International Politics*, Vol. 57, 2020.

[24] See, for example, Justin Logan, "Uncle Sucker: Why U.S. Efforts at Defense Burdensharing Fail," Cato Institute, March 7, 2023. Retrenchment optimists also make this argument more generally, often pointing to U.S. decisions not to restrain Israel from policies that hurt U.S. interests as a prime example (Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*, Cornell University Press, 2014).

[25] See, for example, Posen, 2020.

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conflict by moderating their signaling or pursuing negotiations to resolve or better manage conflicts of interest with Moscow.[26]

Retrenchment pessimists sometimes worry that allies might go so far as to align with a powerful rival.[27] However, this argument is not prominent among analysts of contemporary Europe, given the levels of anti-Russian sentiment in most NATO countries since February 2022.[28]

Approach

This report focuses on assessing these general claims in the case of four NATO allies. To make this assessment, we made several choices about scope and approach:

Four key allies. Anticipating the responses of all 30 European allies was impracticable, so we focus on four. As noted above, we chose France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom because of their influence and significance to U.S. interests based on such factors as their military and economic power and their geographic position—not because they necessarily represent other European allies' views.

Allies' circumstances. Many factors shape allies' national security policies, including domestic politics and the threats they face. Therefore, we allowed the possibility that allies might not react the same way as the traditional debate assumes. Instead, we allowed the possibility that each ally's circumstances might affect its responses to retrenchment. We selected the circumstances we focus on based on the international relations literature, as detailed in the chapters that follow.

We analyzed each ally's potential responses individually. But we present the results of that analysis thematically in the chapters that follow to better highlight how similarities and differences in allies' circumstances (Table 1.1) affect their likely responses to U.S. retrenchment. For example, all four allies increasingly assess that the United States sees its interests in Europe as secondary, not vital, which has motivated all four to spend more on defense. But allies differ in their levels of public debt, which could affect the size of these increases and how long each ally can sustain them over time.

[26] John Glaser, "Withdrawing from Overseas Bases: Why a Forward-Deployed Military Posture Is Unnecessary, Outdated, and Dangerous," Cato Institute, July 18, 2017. For discussion of this dynamic more generally, see Priebe et al., 2025.

[27] For a discussion of these views, see Priebe et al., 2025.

[28] For an exception, see Liana Fix and Michael Kimmage, "Trump's Threat to Europe," *Foreign Affairs*, March 22, 2024.

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Table 1.1. Allies' Circumstances

	France	Germany	Poland	United Kingdom
Threat perceptions	High	High	Very high	High
Revisionist ambitions	None	None	None	None
Perception of U.S. interests at stake in European security	Belief that the United States sees these as secondary, not vital, interests	Belief that the United States sees these as secondary, not vital, interests	Belief that the United States sees these as secondary, not vital, interests	Belief that the United States sees these as secondary, not vital, interests
Domestic politics	Growing political divisions	Growing political divisions	Growing political divisions	Growing political divisions
Economic growth and debt	Limited growth, heavy debt	Limited growth, manageable debt	Robust growth, low but rising debt	Limited growth, heavy debt

Plausible U.S. policy alternatives. We focus on U.S. retrenchment—defined as reduced political commitments and military presence in Europe—but we also consider two other dimensions of U.S. policy that shape the strategic context: tariffs on allies and policy toward Russia. Given uncertainty about U.S. policy changes in the Trump administration and beyond, we consider how allies would respond to alternative U.S. policies rather than making point predictions about what policy the United States would choose in each area. Chapter 2 summarizes the plausible U.S. policy alternatives that we focus on and that we developed in earlier research.[29]

Allies' responses across several dimensions. We consider allies' responses in the near to medium term (1–5 years) to possible U.S. policy changes on several dimensions that have been the focus of the long-standing debate about retrenchment described above:

- threat perceptions
- economic and security relations with the United States, Russia, and China
- defense spending
- security ties with other allies.

These are not the only areas that might be influenced by U.S. policy, but they capture categories with significant implications for U.S. interests. U.S. policy is not necessarily the main driver of outcomes on these dimensions, but understanding how U.S. choices shift the probability of different outcomes should still be part of any U.S. governmental assessment of its policy options.

Three sources. Our assessments draw on three sources:

- *Applied lessons from history.* We apply findings from recent RAND research on past allied responses to U.S. retrenchment, as well as international relations scholarship on threat perceptions, alignment choices, and defense spending.[30]

[29] Priebe, Burdette, and Behmer, 2025.

[30] We draw on our detailed historical analysis and review of the literature in Priebe et al., 2025.

- *Official documents and public debates*. We reviewed official documents and expert analysis and commentary in each allied country, focusing on debates about how to respond to potential U.S. retrenchment and key national security choices in 2025 and 2026. We translated all such foreign-language sources ourselves when official English-language translations were unavailable.
- *Interviews with experts and policymakers*. We conducted interviews primarily between April and November 2025, in person and via video call. Interviews helped fill gaps in the literature and explore "what if" scenarios. But these discussions have limitations: Even with anonymity, interviewees may be inhibited when discussing sensitive national security debates and have incentives to shape U.S. policy rather than provide entirely candid assessments. With this in mind, we compared interview insights against the expectations we developed based on historical cases and the broader international relations literature. Throughout the report, we use the terms *officials* or *policymakers* to refer to interviewees who hold government positions and the term *experts* to refer to those working at research and policy organizations. Table 1.2 summarizes the numbers, dates, and types of interviews conducted for each ally.

Table 1.2. Interviews Conducted for France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom

Country	Interviewees	Date	Type
France	18	April–May 2025	Researchers, officials from the French Ministry of Armed Forces and Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs
Germany	10	July–August 2025	Researchers, politician, official from the Federal Ministry of Defence, official from the German Federal Foreign Office
Poland	14	April–May 2025; September 2025; November 2025; June 2026	Current and former officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense, members of the Polish Armed Forces, and experts from academic and policy communities
UK	9	June–July 2025	Officials and nongovernmental experts

Because these interviews overwhelmingly took place in mid-2025, they preceded several significant developments, including the U.S.-Israel war with Iran and the height of the U.S. campaign to coerce Denmark into relinquishing control of Greenland. We have continued to monitor the public discussions in these countries to ensure that we were not missing any major policy or opinion shift. We find that these additional challenges to the transatlantic relationship have generally confirmed the views that were forming during the interview period. A poll conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations and published in June 2026 shows that some of the key trends we identified in early 2025, including a growing mistrust of the United States as an ally, a recognition of the need to have a

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more autonomous security, and a desire to maintain a transatlantic relationship, have been holding since.[31]

Drawing on the lessons from history is important because interviewee responses and public debates might be disproportionately influenced by recent events, withhold sensitive information about ongoing deliberations, or be shaped to influence U.S. policy. At the same time, using interviews and contemporary writings helps capture allies' own perspectives.

Assumptions of no other major strategic changes. In this report, we consider the likely effect of U.S. policy changes assuming no other major strategic changes. Our assessments might change if, for example, there is a major global financial crisis or another war involving the United States or Europe.

Report Organization

The remainder of the report proceeds as follows. In Chapter 2, we describe the U.S. policy alternatives explored in this report. In Chapters 3–7, we apply this framework to France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom. Each chapter describes our analysis and findings about a key outcome relevant to U.S. interests: allies' threat perceptions (Chapter 3), relations with the United States (Chapter 4), ties with Russia and China (Chapter 5), defense spending (Chapter 6), and security ties with each other (Chapter 7). In Chapter 8, we draw on the analysis in the preceding chapters to provide recommendations to advance the U.S. vision for NATO 3.0.

[31] Jana Kobzová and Pawel Zerka, "Home Alone: Europeans Are Ready to Defend Themselves," European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2026.

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Chapter 2

Alternative U.S. Policies Toward Europe

The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (and associated 2026 National Defense Strategy) calls for U.S. retrenchment from Europe.[32] However, the administration has not yet put forward a plan for how it will implement this broad proposal. Moreover, in practice, U.S. policy has not been fully aligned with these strategic documents. For example, the United States engaged in a war against Iran despite these documents calling for a reduced U.S. military role in the Middle East. Therefore, it is unclear how this and future administrations might approach retrenchment from Europe or other policies toward the region. Given this uncertainty, we draw on earlier RAND research that generated plausible policy alternatives across four key dimensions: commitment to allies, military posture, policy toward Russia, and economic policy toward allies.[33] This chapter summarizes those alternatives. These are not the only options that the United States could pursue, but they provide a starting point for evaluating alternatives.

Commitments to Allies

The United States has a formal, political commitment to European allies through the North Atlantic Treaty. Membership in NATO is binary—the United States is either a member of the alliance or not—and the core obligation of membership—to treat an attack on one as an attack on all—has been static over time. But the extent of U.S. willingness to defend its allies—the cost and risks that the United States will bear for allies' security—can vary over time, by issue, or by ally. In this report, we focus on U.S. policy changes intended to communicate changes in these *underlying commitments*, as well as allies' beliefs about them.

The United States has policy tools—ranging from leaders' statements to planned wartime contributions—to communicate the strength and certainty of its underlying commitment. Traditionally, the United States used these tools to signal a strong, unwavering willingness to defend NATO members to both deter Russia and reassure allies. Trump has taken a different approach: He has intentionally sought to message to allies that the United States' willingness to bear costs is lower and that the likelihood of doing so is more uncertain than in the past. The administration has also

[32] These documents list the Western Hemisphere and Asia as higher-priority theaters than Europe and the Middle East and call for adjusting resources accordingly (White House, 2025; U.S. Department of War, 2026).

[33] For more details on the alternatives and the logic behind them, see Priebe, Burdette, and Behmer, 2025.

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reduced the forces it will make available to NATO in the event of a crisis, a practical manifestation of a lower underlying commitment.[34]

The United States has also increased uncertainty about whether these commitments are uniform for all allies. At times, the administration has affirmed its "ironclad commitment" to "collective defense."[35] But, at other times, the administration has threatened not to defend allies that fail to meet NATO's defense spending targets (e.g., Spain) or fail to support U.S. policies (e.g., Germany over the war in Iran), while sustaining commitments to those who do.[36] But the United States has not made any explicit statements that it is carrying out these threats.

Short of withdrawing from NATO, the United States has more than one option for how it could weaken commitments further:

- **Uniformly weaker commitment.** The United States could reduce its commitment to all allies with steps such as further limiting the forces the United States plans to make available to NATO in the event of a crisis or war or having U.S. officials consistently raise doubts about whether the United States would fight to defend any NATO member.[37] Under this approach, the United States would also stop using threats of abandonment to punish individual allies and would consistently state that the United States is committed to all allies.
- **Weakening commitments to punish individual allies.** Under this approach, U.S. officials would state that the United States is making weaker commitments to disfavored allies and reducing U.S. contributions to defending disfavored allies in NATO plans.

Military Posture

The United States has around 80,000 service members stationed in Europe across roughly 30 bases.[38] Even without changing its political commitment to NATO, Washington could retrench by reducing the size of this force. In the chapters that follow, we consider how the following affect allies' responses:

1. the size of these changes
2. using in-country force levels to reward and punish individual states (along the lines described for changes in commitments) rather than assessments based on military need
3. the pace of any drawdown and whether it is coordinated with allies. We compare two options:

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[34] U.S. European Command Public Affairs, 2026.

[35] NATO, "The Ankara Summit Declaration," July 8, 2026b.

[36] Annie Linskey and Robbie Gramer, "Trump Team Explores Punishment for NATO Countries That Didn't Support Iran War," *Wall Street Journal*, April 8, 2026; Lili Bayer, Andrew Gray, and Humeyra Pamuk, "Trump Turns on Spain and Demands Greenland as NATO Summit Exposes Cracks," *Defense News*, July 8, 2026.

[37] The President has raised such doubts episodically, but U.S. officials have reaffirmed commitments to NATO at other times, including by signing statements, such as the recent Ankara declaration stating an "ironclad commitment" to NATO allies (NATO, 2026b). For examples of officials' statements earlier in the administration, see Priebe, Burdette, and Behmer, 2025.

[38] Christopher G. Cavoli, "Statement of General Christopher G. Cavoli, United States Army, United States European Command," statement before the U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, April 8, 2025.

a. **Coordinated, gradual withdrawal.** The United States could engage in a phased withdrawal of U.S. forces, planned in coordination with allies. This alternative would aim to give allies the information and time they need to fill the resulting capability gaps and avoid rushed, potentially inefficient investments. Such an approach might be more acceptable to Congress, which has expressed concerns that retrenchment would lead to capability gaps that Russia might exploit by attacking NATO.[39]
b. **Rapid, uncoordinated withdrawal.** This would involve large reductions on a fast timeline without coordination with allies on backfilling capabilities. This alternative would limit the influence of allies, who might try to slow the U.S. withdrawal, and instead prioritize faster resource reallocation and/or jolting Europe into making bigger changes.

Policy Toward Russia

The Trump administration has already shifted policy toward Russia by talking to Moscow directly even as the war with Ukraine is ongoing. This has included trilateral talks with Kyiv to bring about a ceasefire. Going forward, the United States might also seek to reshape its relationship with Russia. We consider three alternatives.

Deprioritize Russia. Such a policy could reflect the view that U.S. interests in Europe are too peripheral to warrant significant U.S. resources, including leadership attention on the threat Moscow poses to them. In practice, this approach would include such actions as ignoring small-scale Russian incursions into allies' airspace and abandoning talks to end the war in Ukraine.

Pursue a détente that does not prioritize European stability. Under this approach, the United States would pursue better ties with Russia by focusing on issues outside the scope of European security—such as business deals, Arctic disputes, or security in Asia. Normalization of bilateral relations would not be conditional on a settlement of the war in Ukraine or reduction of other Russia-NATO tensions. To the extent that such an approach included issues in Europe, it would be in service of a bilateral deal. This policy might even involve pressuring Ukraine into an unfavorable settlement to facilitate better U.S.-Russia ties.

Pursue a détente that prioritizes European security. This approach would aim to stabilize Russia-NATO relations, not just bilateral relations. Because escalation of the ongoing war is the greatest risk of a NATO-Russia conflict, this approach would start with seeking a durable ceasefire in Ukraine.[40] This approach would therefore promote an agreement with provisions that help prevent the resumption of violence, such as demilitarized zones and monitoring. To reduce the risk that either side resumes fighting in the belief that it can get a better outcome, the deal would also need to reflect battlefield realities, meaning that Ukraine would largely continue to control territory it has held or retaken during the war. A durable ceasefire that deters Russian aggression against Ukraine would likely need to include European allies at some point to make security guarantees, provide financial support for reconstruction and rearmament, and confirm the option to accede to the EU. The latter

[39] Public Law 119-60, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026, December 18, 2025.

[40] Bryan Frederick, Mark Cozad, and Alexandra Stark, *Escalation in the War in Ukraine: Lessons Learned and Risks for the Future*, RAND Corporation, RR-A2807-1, 2023.

two steps would help Ukraine have the economic basis for sustaining its military capabilities in the longer term.[41] Beyond a ceasefire in Ukraine, pursuit of this kind of détente with Russia would include seeking broader risk-reduction measures to strengthen communication and reduce dangers of NATO-Russia miscalculation.[42]

Tariffs on Allies

Since 2025, the United States has raised tariffs on Europe, ending decades of low-tariff policy toward Europe.[43] U.S. tariffs and threats of tariffs have been framed as a negotiating tool, meant to extract concessions from European nations, as well as a way to reduce the U.S. deficit.[44] The future of U.S. economic policy toward allies remains uncertain, including because of the possibility of further legal challenges to existing U.S. tariffs. As of August 2026, average U.S. tariffs on EU trading partners are between 9 and 12 percent.[45] In this report, we consider how allies might respond if the United States raised tariff levels further.[46]

Such an outcome would involve the continuation of current tariffs and the imposition of new ones. This could come about if the administration's current justification for tariffs survives legal challenges or, in the event that the current tariffs are struck down, if the administration imposes new tariffs under an alternative legal authority.

While most economic models suggest that current U.S. tariffs will have only modest impacts on aggregate economic measures, such as gross domestic product (GDP), in allied countries,[47] tariffs could cause more significant economic harm in certain sectors, such as automotive manufacturing.[48]

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[41] That said, such a deal might adjust the lines of control to ensure territory is defensible or involve land swaps. For a summary of the literature on terms that promote a lasting peace, see Samuel Charap and Miranda Priebe, *Planning for the Aftermath: Assessing Options for U.S. Strategy Toward Russia After the Ukraine War*, RAND Corporation, RR-A2510-2, 2024.

[42] Samuel Charap and Hiski Haukkala, "Europe's Next War: The Rising Risk of NATO-Russia Conflict," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2026.

[43] "New U.S. Tariffs on EU Goods Would Be Unacceptable, EU Trade Committee Head Says," Reuters, June 3, 2026; Johannes Fritz, "Section 122 in Effect: What the US Tariff Regime Looks Like Now," *Global Trade Alert*, February 21, 2026a; White & Case, "Trump Administration Imposes 10% Section 122 Tariff in Plan to Replace IEEPA Tariffs," March 2, 2026; Johannes Fritz, "The US Tariff Level Barely Moves as Section 122 Lapses as Two Section 301 Duties Take Its Place," *Global Trade Alert*, July 24, 2026b.

[44] Isabella Murray and Ivan Pereira, "Trump Announces Tariffs on NATO Allies for Opposing US Control of Greenland," *ABC News*, January 17, 2026.

[45] These tariffs were imposed under Section 301, after tariffs imposed under other legal authorities were either struck down by the courts or were not approved by Congress (Fritz, 2026b).

[46] For a more detailed assessment of ways that U.S. economic policy could shift and how allies generally might respond, see Priebe, Burdette, and Behmer, 2025.

[47] In spring 2025, many economists disregarded leading economic models and instead predicted that tariffs would cause a global recession (see Priebe, Burdette, and Behmer, 2025, for an overview), but so far the more modest predictions from economic models have been more accurate (Jason Furman, "The Tariffs Kicked In. The Sky Didn't Fall. Were the Economists Wrong?" *New York Times*, July 31, 2025).

[48] Kiel Institute, "KITE Insta Analysis: US Tariffs Could Significantly Impact Europe's Automotive Sector," January 5, 2026.

This concentrated harm on politically sensitive industries could, in turn, influence domestic politics in allied countries.[49]

Other U.S. strategic choices can provoke economic shocks that undermine allies' efforts to rearm in the face of retrenchment. For example, the U.S.-Israel war with Iran disrupted global energy markets and created other supply chain shocks. However, our analysis focuses narrowly on U.S. tariff policies and their effects on allied behaviors. We also do not focus on U.S. export controls on allies. However, in Chapter 4, we do briefly discuss allies' views of U.S. temporary restrictions on frontier artificial intelligence (AI) models that the Trump administration imposed in June 2026 as we were completing this analysis.[50] Future analysis should consider these and other policy areas that could shape transatlantic ties.

Conclusion

In Chapters 4 to 7, we examine possible French, German, Polish, and UK responses to the alternatives discussed in this chapter. We focus on how U.S. policies might affect these allies' threat perceptions, ties with the United States, ties with Russia and China, defense spending, and security relationships with other allies.

[49] Foo Yun Chee, "EU Targets Big Tech Dependence with 'Made-in-Europe' Drive," Reuters, June 3, 2026.

[50] "Trump's Anthropic Restrictions Rattle U.S. Allies as AI Leaders Gather at G-7," *Washington Post*, June 17, 2026.

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Chapter 3

Threat Perceptions of Russia

In this chapter, we analyze how France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom perceive the threat from Russia and how the changes in U.S. policy outlined in Chapter 2 might shift these assessments.[51] Threat perceptions occupy a critical place in this report's framework because they are an outcome that U.S. policy influences that, in turn, also drives other allied behaviors we examine in subsequent chapters—defense spending, security cooperation, and policy toward Russia and China. Given their importance, we examine threat perceptions first.

To preview, we find substantial convergence among the four allies alongside a few consequential differences. All four countries view Russia as their main threat. This threat assessment hardened after Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and it now cuts across the political mainstream in all four countries. Still, allies differ on the exact nature of the Russian threat. Poland sees Russia as a direct territorial threat. Other allies see a threat to their vital interest in European stability, which indirectly affects the security of their homelands.

Of the U.S. policy options we described in Chapter 2, we find that three would raise allied threat perceptions and one could lower them. The three policies that would aggravate European concerns about their vulnerability to Russia are a reduction in the U.S. commitment to NATO's collective defense; a rapid, uncoordinated U.S. withdrawal; and a U.S.-Russia détente that does not account for European security. By contrast, a détente that prioritizes European security—if it is achieved and held—could reduce allies' threat perceptions over time. However, achieving such a détente would be difficult, and Poland would likely remain especially wary.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, we describe how the four allies perceive their threat environment today. Second, we assess how the U.S. policy alternatives from Chapter 2 would affect these perceptions.

Drivers of Threat Perceptions

Threat perceptions are a state's assessment of its vulnerability to a rival.[52] That assessment depends on beliefs about a rival's relative capabilities and its intentions. The relative balance of capabilities is a function of both sides' military forces, geography, and technology. All else equal, a rival will appear more threatening if it has larger and more-sophisticated military forces; if it is geographically proximate; and if military technology appears to favor the success of offensive

[51] Chapter 6 discusses how U.S. policy changes might lead allies to prioritize resources devoted to countering other threats.

[52] Priebe et al., 2025, p. 19.

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operations over the defensive ones.[53] The contributions of allies also shape the balance: States that enjoy strong commitments from powerful allies should feel more secure than those standing outside such alliances or doubting the commitments they have.[54] For example, during the Cold War, U.S. retrenchment—reductions in U.S. presence, commitments, or both—increased concerns about U.S. commitments and, in turn, allies' threat perceptions.[55]

Beyond capabilities, a rival's intentions matter, as well. States tend to infer intentions from a rival's behavior and regime type. A rival's recent uses of military force raise fears that the rival is likely to use force again in the future. Some leaders also believe that another country's domestic political character shapes its predisposition to using force, making democratic leaders especially wary of autocratic states (and autocrats especially wary of regime change being imposed by democracies).[56]

In this chapter, we also discuss the extent of elite consensus about threats, because that can shape the outcomes we talk about in the chapters that follow (e.g., defense spending and alignment). Within a state, policymakers can disagree about the threats another state poses. For example, because political ideology can affect threat assessments, politicians from different political parties might disagree in their assessment of the threat from the same rival.[57] When policymakers disagree about a threat, it is harder for them to take decisive steps to respond to it, such as increasing defense spending or strengthening an alliance.[58]

Threat Perceptions Today

The four allies' threat perceptions align with the core expectations of the international relations literature. All four countries view Moscow as a significant military threat, because of its military capabilities, risk-taking, and use of nuclear coercion. This has led to a growing belief following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine that Moscow may use force against its European neighbors again, including NATO members. Table 3.1 summarizes allied assessments of their threat environment, and the following sections discuss the key similarities and differences between the four allies.

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[53] Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell University Press, 1987; Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Structures of Power and the Roots of International Conflict*, Cornell University Press, 1999; Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1, 1997.

[54] Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics*, Cornell University Press, 1996; Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 4, July 1984.

[55] Priebe et al., 2025.

[56] Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Transformative Choices: Leaders and the Origins of Intervention Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2, Fall 2009.

[57] Mark L. Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789–1989*, Cornell University Press, 2005.

[58] Randall L. Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Fall 2004.

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Table 3.1. Summary of How Allies Assess Threats and Prioritize Interests

	Overall Threat Level from Russia	Nature of Russia Threat	Extent of Consensus on Threat Russia Poses
France	High	Threat to European stability	Far-right and far-left parties downplay the threat from Russia
Germany	High	Threat to European stability	Far-right and far-left parties downplay the threat from Russia
Poland	Very high	Existential threat	Very high threat perceptions across the political spectrum
UK	High	Threat to European stability	High threat perceptions across the political spectrum

The Four Allies Agree That Russia Is a Major Threat and the Highest Priority

All four allies describe Russia as their primary security threat in their key strategic documents.[59] The 2025 French defense strategy ranks Russia ahead of Iran and China, warning that "the main threat to France and Europeans is the risk of open warfare against the heart of Europe."[60] The strategy cites Russia's aggression against Ukraine, hybrid actions against France and its allies, and growing military capabilities as evidence of the Russian threat.[61] The UK 2025 Strategic Defence Review identifies the most "immediate and pressing threat" as Russian territorial aggression in Europe, ahead of other British security concerns that include China, Iran, and North Korea.[62] Similarly, German officials have identified Russia as the priority,[63] and strategic documents have described NATO as playing the role of "the primary guarantor of protection against military threats."[64] Poland's 2020

[59] Secrétariat Général de la Défense et de la Sécurité Nationale (SGDSN) [Secretariat-General for National Defence and Security], *National Strategic Review*, July 14, 2025, p. 1; Federal Foreign Office, *Integrated Security for Germany: National Security Strategy*, 2023, p. 5; Government of the United Kingdom, *The Strategic Defence Review 2025—Making Britain Safer: Secure at Home, Strong Abroad*, updated July 8, 2025c, p. 28; Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego (BBN) [National Security Bureau], *Strategia Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2020* [*National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland 2020*], 2020.

[60] Secrétariat Général de la Défense et de la Sécurité Nationale (SGDSN), 2025, p. 10.

[61] Emmanuel Macron, preface to Secrétariat Général de la Défense et de la Sécurité Nationale (SGDSN), 2025, p. 1.

[62] Government of the United Kingdom, 2025c, p. 28.

[63] Foreword of Chancellor Scholz in Federal Foreign Office, 2023, p. 5.

[64] Federal Foreign Office, 2023, pp. 23–32; Federal Ministry of Defence, *White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr*, 2016, p. 49.

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National Security Strategy states plainly that "[t]he most serious threat is the neo-imperial policy of the authorities of the Russian Federation, pursued also by means of military force."[65]

This convergence of threat assessments is recent, driven largely by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. After the end of the Cold War, most European states did not view Russia as a serious threat and instead prioritized such concerns as terrorism, fragile states, and climate change. For example, Germany's 2003 defense policy guidelines explicitly stated that "at present, and in the foreseeable future, there is no conventional threat to German territory."[66] Even after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, Berlin described Russia in strategic documents only as a "challenge to the security of our continent for the foreseeable future" while still noting that Europe and Russia remain "linked by a broad range of common interests and relations."[67] After the 2022 invasion, Russia became Germany's undisputed priority.[68] This same shift is visible elsewhere. After decades in which the UK focused on out-of-area operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, Russia has once again risen to the top of British threat assessments. France abandoned its policy of "dialogue and firmness" with Russia and gave up on the hope that maintaining engagement with Russia could end the war in Ukraine.[69] Even in Poland, where concerns about the Russian threat have traditionally been higher, fears peaked after Russia's 2022 invasion. From 2018 to 2022, the number of Poles identifying Russia as a major threat rose from 65 percent to an overwhelming 94 percent.[70] Warsaw believes that Moscow will not stop at Ukraine, fearing that it will invade or launch unconventional operations against Poland and other countries it has dominated in the past.[71]

Poland's Threat Perceptions Are Most Acute

Although all four allies see the Russia threat to European stability as high, only Poland sees Russia as a direct territorial threat. Poland's threat perceptions are among the highest in the NATO alliance, shaped by its geography and the history of foreign domination.[72] The shared borders with Russian-controlled Kaliningrad and Belarus, both heavily militarized, expose Poland directly to Russian

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[65] Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego (BBN) [National Security Bureau], 2020.

[66] Federal Ministry of Defence, *Defence Policy Guidelines*, 2003, p. 4.

[67] Federal Ministry of Defence, 2016, pp. 31–32.

[68] Foreword of Chancellor Scholz in Federal Foreign Office, 2023, p. 5.

[69] Laurent Fabius, "Politique étrangère de la France: Quelle autonomie pour quelle ambition" ["France's Foreign Policy: What Autonomy for What Ambition"], speech before the French Senate, October 15, 2015; Dimitri Minic, "La Politique Russe d'Emmanuel Macron: Étapes et Racines d'une Nouvelle Approche" ["Emmanuel Macron's Russia Policy: Stages and Roots of a New Approach, 2017–2024"], Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), April 23, 2024, p. 13.

[70] Pew Research Center, "Spotlight on Poland: Negative Views of Russia Surge, but Ratings for U.S., NATO, and EU Improve," June 22, 2022.

[71] "Zagrożenie ze Wschodu. Sikorski o tym, co oznaczałaby porażka Ukrainy" ["Threat from the East: Sikorski on What Ukraine's Defeat Would Mean"], *Polskie Radio 24*, March 24, 2025.

[72] Joe Hernandez, "For Years, Poland Warned of the Russian Threat. Now the West Is Listening," *Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2022; Marta Prochwicz Jazowska, "Home and Away: Why Poland Is Fighting a War on Two Fronts," European Council on Foreign Relations, September 8, 2025.

conventional military, hybrid, and tactical nuclear capabilities.[73] Warsaw's view of Moscow as a revisionist power intent on undermining Polish sovereignty and the broader European security order has been shaped by Poland's history of partitions, annexations, uprisings, Russification, and Soviet domination.[74] Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, 2014 annexation of Crimea, and 2022 invasion of Ukraine reinforced those historical fears about Russian intentions.[75] Russia's offensive military capabilities, hybrid operations, activities in the "gray zone" below the threshold of conventional war, aggressive rhetoric, and repeated use of nuclear intimidation further heighten Warsaw's sense of vulnerability.[76]

The other three allies also perceive Russia as a threat to European stability, but only an indirect territorial threat. The 2025 French defense strategy states that "in the years to come, and by 2030, the main threat to France and Europeans is the risk of open warfare against the heart of Europe."[77] The UK assesses that its own security—and that of the Euro-Atlantic region more broadly—is inextricably linked to the security of Ukraine, necessitating a strong focus on preventing Russia from achieving its strategic goals in that ongoing conflict or any future peace. Like France and the UK, Germany sees stability and democracy in Europe as vital interests.[78] German policymakers understand that Russian tanks are unlikely to roll through the streets of Berlin as they feared Soviet tanks might during the Cold War.[79] Rather, Berlin sees Moscow as a larger threat to its eastern NATO allies. Still, Germany sees its security as "indivisible from that of its allies and European partners," describing "collective and national defence" as "one and the same."[80] One German interviewee explained conflict in the east would disrupt the large amount of trade Germany has with the Eastern EU member states, create refugee flows, and, most importantly, draw Germany into a war with Russia in which there would be a chance of nuclear escalation. In the event of a Russian attack, Germany expects to provide air and missile defense to more-exposed NATO member states and be a logistics hub for reinforcements and resupplies, making it a target for Russian attacks.[81] Berlin also sees supporting democracy in the region as part of a stable and secure Europe.

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[73] Artur Kacprzyk, "Rosja wzmacnia sygnalizowanie nuklearne wobec NATO" ["Russia Increases Nuclear Signaling Toward NATO"], Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych [Polish Institute of International Affairs], June 30, 2023.

[74] P. Żurawski vel Grajewski, "Polska polityka wschodnia 1989–2015: Wymiar narodowy i unijny" ["Polish Eastern Policy 1989–2015: National and EU Dimensions"], *Kraków*, 2016; Mariusz Antoni Kaminski and Zdzisław Śliwa, "Poland's Threat Assessment: Deepened, Not Changed," *PRISM*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2021.

[75] Elisabeth Zerofsky, "Poland's War on Two Fronts," *New York Times*, April 4, 2023.

[76] Government of Poland, "Koncepcja Obronna Kraju" ["The Country's Defense Concept"], 2017; Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego (BBN) [National Security Bureau], 2020.

[77] Secrétariat Général de la Défense et de la Sécurité Nationale (SGDSN), 2025, p. 10.

[78] Federal Ministry of Defence, 2016, pp. 23–24.

[79] German policymaker, interview with author, via video call, August 2025.

[80] Federal Foreign Office, 2023, pp. 23–32; Federal Ministry of Defence, 2016, p. 22. German interviewees emphasized the same point.

[81] German policymaker and expert, interview with authors, via video call, July 2025.

Extremist Parties in France and Germany Are Less Concerned About the Threat Russia Poses

In all four countries, mainstream parties share a high threat perception of Russia.[82] However, in France and Germany, extremist parties assess the threat as lower. If these parties gain more influence in future elections, these countries' official threat assessments could be lowered.

In France, the outcome of the 2027 presidential election is particularly uncertain, as President Emmanuel Macron cannot run again, and mainstream parties are struggling to maintain electoral support and overcome divisions.[83] This makes the threat perceptions of more-extreme parties, whose past electoral scores have been on the rise, relevant for the future.

Pro-Russian positions are rare in France, but extreme parties place less emphasis on the Russia threat. The efforts of Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN) to counter accusations of continuing ties with Russia suggest that even populist parties believe that being pro-Russian is not politically acceptable.[84] One interviewee assessed that even a far-right victory in 2027 would not radically alter the core tenets of France's defense strategy.[85] Similarly on the far left of the political spectrum, although La France Insoumise (LFI) opposed sanctions on Russia, military support to Ukraine, and a possible entry of Ukraine intp NATO and has long pushed for negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, the party has forcefully denied any sympathy for the Russian regime.[86]

In Germany, the mainstream parties on the left (the Social Democrats and the Greens [Grünen]) and right (the Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands [CDU], the Christlich-Soziale Union [CSU], and the Freie Demokratische Partei [FDP]) broadly agree on the threat Russia poses.[87] However, far-left (Die Linke) and far-right (Alternatives for Germany [AfD]) parties are less

[82] Some level of Russian influence remains perceptible in certain business, political, and military circles but is overall marginal (Nicolas Hénin, *La France russe: Enquête sur les réseaux Poutine* [*Russian France: Investigation into Putin's Networks*], Fayard, 2016; Alina Polyakova, Marlène Laruelle, Stefan Meister, and Neil Barnett, *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses*, Atlantic Council, November 15, 2016; Cécile Vaissié, *Les réseaux du Kremlin en France* [*Kremlin Networks in France*], Les Petits Matins, 2016).

[83] Michele Barbero, "France's Mainstream Political Parties Are a Dying Breed," *Foreign Policy*, November 10, 2021; Aurelien Breeden and Constant Méheut, "Are Traditional Political Parties Dead in France?" *New York Times*, April 28, 2022; Anne-Sylvaine Chassany, "France Struggles to Revive Lost Art of Political Compromise," *Financial Times*, July 16, 2024.

[84] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025; Clément Guillou, "Ciblé par le rapport sur les ingérences étrangères, le Rassemblement national pris à son propre piège" ["Targeted by the Report on Foreign Interference, the National Rally Caught in Its Own Trap"], *Le Monde*, June 1, 2023; Benjamin Dodman, "Le Pen's Far Right Served as Mouthpiece for the Kremlin, Says French Parliamentary Report," *Le Monde*, March 6, 2023.

[85] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

[86] "Ukraine: Manon Aubry lassée d'une 'soi-disant ambiguïté de LFI à l'égard de Vladimir Poutine" ["Ukraine: Manon Aubry tired of LFI's 'So-Called Ambiguity' Toward Vladimir Putin"], *Franceinfo (Radio France)*, April 3, 2024; "Débat sur l'Ukraine au Parlement: LFI annonce voter contre la stratégie française d'aide à Kiev, le RN s'abstiendra" ["Debate on Ukraine in Parliament: LFI Announces Vote Against French Aid Strategy to Kyiv, RN Will Abstain"], *Le Monde*, March 12, 2024; La France Insoumise (LFI), "Guerre en Ukraine: La réponse à Trump rate la cible" ["War in Ukraine: Response to Trump Misses the Mark"], February 18, 2025.

[87] Federal Foreign Office, 2023, pp. 7, 30.

concerned about Moscow and could change official German assessments if they were part of a future government.[88]

In Poland and the UK, consensus on threats crosses even more of the political spectrum than in France and Germany. High threat perceptions of Russia are deeply rooted across Polish society and cut across political divisions.[89] In the UK, leader of the far-right Reform UK party, Nigel Farage, has expressed positive views of Putin in the past but has since walked these comments back and even called for Ukraine to join NATO,[90] as well as for a 42-percent expansion in the size of the British Army.[91]

U.S. Policy Changes—Including Threats of U.S. Retrenchment and Talks with Russia—Have Made Allies Feel More Vulnerable

The four allies' growing threat perceptions are not only a function of Russia's conduct but also beliefs about NATO allies' commitments to each other. For example, Warsaw's deepest fear is that Russia could exploit a moment of Western disunity to launch a rapid military operation, potentially overrunning Polish territory before a divided NATO could respond effectively. In Warsaw's view, disunity breeds weak responses to Russian aggression, which in turn leads Moscow to expect that future aggression will be cheap and easy.[92]

Allies' growing concerns about U.S. commitments have been driven by U.S. policy changes since 2025, including stated plans to retrench, statements indicating that the United States might accept Moscow's demands in Ukraine, and tariffs. Underlying these concerns is a fear that Washington increasingly views European security as a secondary rather than a vital interest, which official French documents describe as the risk of "strategic isolation,"[93] or even worse, as detailed in Chapter 4, a United States that is actively hostile to European interests.

Experts and policymakers in all four countries judged that doubts Washington has sown about its commitments since 2025 have emboldened Russia, making aggression—unconventional or conventional—more likely. In Warsaw, those concerns crystallized around the September 2025 Russian drone incursion into Poland, when roughly 19 Russian drones penetrated Polish airspace over seven hours, weeks after Trump's summit with Putin. Warsaw read the episode as a deliberate Russian probe of NATO's reaction thresholds and rejected Trump's suggestion that the incursion "could have been a mistake."[94] Washington offered reassurance, and NATO reinforced air policing on

[88] German experts, interview with authors, via video call, July 2025.

[89] Pew Research Center, 2022.

[90] David Lynch, "'Essential' for Ukraine to Join Nato, Nigel Farage Says," *Independent*, February 12, 2025.

[91] George Allison, "Reform UK Leader Nigel Farage Launched His Party's Election Manifesto, Titled "Our Contract with You," with a Pledge to Recruit 30,000 Personnel to the British Army, Aiming to Restore Its Strength to 100,000 Troops," *UK Defence Journal*, 2024; Dominic Penna, "Reform UK Manifesto: Nigel Farage's Key Policies at a Glance," *The Telegraph*, May 2, 2025.

[92] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, "Information of Minister of Foreign Affairs on Polish Foreign Policy Tasks in 2025," April 23, 2025.

[93] Secrétariat Général de la Défense et de la Sécurité Nationale (SGDSN), 2025, p. 23.

[94] Shaun Walker, "Russian Drone Incursion Into Poland 'Was Kremlin Test on Nato'," *The Guardian*, September 14, 2025.

the eastern flank. For Warsaw, this amounted to a passive nonresponse that risked emboldening Moscow to further acts of aggression.[95] Similarly, the UK sees its—and NATO's—security as closely related to preventing Russia from believing its aggression against Ukraine was a strategic win.

In other examples, the Trump administration's hostility toward Europe and its values sent shocks through the German political establishment, as did the U.S. willingness to contemplate accommodating Russia over Ukraine.[96] Macron linked recent U.S. policy changes to a more acute Russian threat in a speech on March 5, 2025, delivered after a series of transatlantic disagreements over Ukraine and U.S. tariffs.[97]

These developments show that U.S. policy has already affected allies' beliefs about U.S. commitments, which, in turn, have heightened allies' threat perceptions. This pattern is consistent with the international relations literature and suggests that future U.S. retrenchment could follow a similar logic, as we discuss next.

How Future U.S. Policies Could Affect Allies' Threat Perceptions

To assess how the U.S. policy alternatives from Chapter 2 would affect allied threat perceptions, we draw on the three sources introduced in Chapter 1: lessons from history, the logic outlined in official documents and statements, and interviews with experts and officials from each allied country.

U.S. Commitments: Further Reductions Would Increase Allies' Threat Perceptions

Our three core sources all suggest that a further reduction in the U.S. commitment to NATO would raise allies' doubts about whether they could rely on the United States to defend them and, thereby, raise threat perceptions further.

Our analysis of the three sources did not lead to a definitive conclusion about whether a uniform weakening of the U.S. commitment would have a bigger effect than the United States using commitments to reward and punish allies. On the surface, it may seem like the differential commitments could leave favored allies at least feeling more secure than in a uniformly weaker U.S. commitment. But the conditionality of the second model could leave even favored allies uncertain about how long their good standing will last, and therefore about the durability of the U.S. commitment.

[95] Walker, 2025.

[96] German policymaker and experts, interviews with authors, via video call, July 2025.

[97] Emmanuel Macron, "Déclaration de M. Emmanuel Macron, président de la République, sur la guerre en Ukraine et l'Europe de la défense, à Paris le 5 mars 2025" ["Statement by Mr. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, on the War in Ukraine and European Defense, in Paris on March 5, 2025"], March 5, 2025b.

Changes in Posture

A rapid, uncoordinated withdrawal would heighten threat perceptions more than a gradual, coordinated withdrawal. A rapid, uncoordinated withdrawal should increase allies' threat perceptions more than a gradual, coordinated one, through two mechanisms. First, interviewees from all four countries assess that they cannot replace critical U.S. capabilities quickly, so a sudden U.S. drawdown could leave capability gaps that allies worry would tempt Russian aggression. Polish interviewees said that it will take at least a decade for Europe to "get on its feet" and that European-only security arrangements would be insufficient to deter Moscow in the near term. German and UK interviewees argued that Russia would be more likely to take advantage of a rapid U.S. withdrawal to opportunistically attack a NATO member, conventionally or unconventionally, to test NATO's resolve.[98] French interviewees equally saw a rapid, uncoordinated U.S. drawdown as the most concerning scenario. They described a variant of a sudden and complete withdrawal of all U.S. conventional forces in Europe—a scenario dubbed "Option Zero" by one of our interviewees. We did not objectively assess allies' ability to replace U.S. capabilities, but this type of concern is unsurprising and echoes allies' worries in historical cases.

Second, a gradual and coordinated drawdown might also be less concerning because of what it would signal about U.S. commitments. Extending allies' logic, they would likely see such a withdrawal as signaling greater U.S. interest in European stability and commitment to a stable transition. Conversely, a rapid withdrawal of the same size could signal less concern for European security and make allies less confident in U.S. willingness to fight for their defense.

A larger drawdown should increase allies' threat perceptions more, including by decreasing faith in U.S. nuclear commitments. Following the logic above, a larger drawdown should prompt more concern than a smaller one: It would signal less U.S. concern about stability and prompt more concern from allies about capability gaps. Moreover, Polish interviewees stated that drastic cuts to U.S. conventional forces, regardless of how they are implemented, would undermine the credibility of U.S. nuclear guarantees. Given the limited evidence, this is a topic that merits additional research, because it bears on Washington's vision of allies taking the lead in conventional defense and the United States providing primarily nuclear commitments.[99]

Changes in Policy Toward Russia

The three options for U.S. policy toward Russia set out in Chapter 2 differ sharply in their effect on allied threat perceptions.

Deprioritizing Russia would be perceived by Poland (and possibly other allies) as signaling a weakening U.S. commitment and, in turn, increase Poland's threat perceptions. Warsaw is especially concerned that Moscow is easily emboldened by insufficiently hardline policies, such as a nonresponse to unconventional Russian attacks on NATO member countries.

[98] UK officials and experts, interviews with authors, in person in London and via video call, June–July 2025.

[99] Colby, 2026.

U.S. pursuit of détente with Russia that does not prioritize stability in Europe, particularly as the Ukraine war is still ongoing, would increase allies' threat perceptions. Intermittent U.S. statements supportive of Russia's position in negotiations with Ukraine have already raised allies' concerns about U.S. threat perceptions being misaligned with theirs, as discussed above. So, a settled policy of this type would be seen as a stronger signal that U.S. threat perceptions differ radically from the four allies'. Following allies' logic, this belief would undermine confidence that the United States would intervene to defeat future Russian aggression. In turn, the four allies would likely expect Russia to be more likely to attack and Europe to be more vulnerable. For example, strategic writings in Poland and the UK show an expectation that an end to the war in Ukraine that is unfavorable to Kyiv could embolden Moscow to engage in conventional or unconventional attacks on Poland or other frontline NATO states.[100]

A détente that prioritizes European security, if it holds, has the prospect of reducing allies' threat perceptions. UK interviewees indicated that this U.S. policy, if it led to an agreement to end the war in Ukraine, would reduce the UK's threat perceptions over time, though the UK would remain vigilant and wary of Russian noncompliance.[101] Achieving such a détente would be difficult, however, and Poland in particular would remain wary given its conviction that any sign of Western softness emboldens Moscow. In fact, Poland worries that Russia could pose a more acute threat once the war in Ukraine ends and Moscow focuses its attention on NATO.[102]

Higher Tariffs on Allies

U.S. economic policy did not come up as a major driver of allied threat perceptions. While important to the transatlantic relationship, tariffs do not change how allies assess their vulnerability to Russia. Some Polish interviewees argued that further U.S. tariffs could trigger a severe European or global economic crisis that would generate unemployment, fiscal instability, and social unrest in ways that could generate internal pressures to focus resources on domestic priorities rather than deterring Russia. Allies appear to view U.S. economic policy as shaping threat perceptions chiefly through how it influences their capacity to respond to the threat, which is a concern we return to when we discuss defense spending in Chapter 6.

Conclusion

The four allies have substantial convergence in their threat perceptions. All four treat Russia as their priority threat. Of the four, Poland stands out as having the most-acute fears, driven by its geographic proximity and threats of direct territorial aggression from Russia, and compounded by

[100] Daniel Szeligowski, "Teoria ukraińskiego zwycięstwa" ["Theory of Ukrainian Victory"], Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), April 16, 2025. For evidence of this way of thinking in the UK, see UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, "UK Sanctions Russian Spies at the Heart of Putin's Malicious Regime," July 18, 2025.

[101] UK officials and experts, interviews with authors, in person in London and via video call, June–July 2025.

[102] Government of Poland, "Information from the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the Tasks of Polish Foreign Policy in 2026," February 2, 2026.

sustained hybrid pressure, including drone incursions, sabotage, cyberattacks, and disinformation that Warsaw treats not as a future risk but as an ongoing campaign. Growing concerns about Russia now cut across the political mainstream of all four countries, but future elections—especially in France and Germany—could lead to more influence from parties on the far left or right that are less concerned about Russia.

Changes to U.S. policy could affect the vulnerability that allies feel to the Russian threat. Already, all four allies are concerned that early steps toward retrenchment in 2025 are increasing their vulnerability. Looking to the future, three U.S. policy choices would notably increase allied fears: a rapid and uncoordinated withdrawal of U.S. forces, a lessening of the U.S. commitment to the alliance in any form, and a U.S.-Russian détente that did not include terms to bolster European security. On the other hand, success in reaching a détente with Russia has the prospect of reducing allies' fears over time.

Threat perceptions drive many other national security choices. For example, higher and more closely aligned threat perceptions facilitate greater defense spending and deeper security cooperation. Therefore, chapters on defense spending, security cooperation, and policy toward Russia and China take up these downstream effects of changing threat perceptions in turn.

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Chapter 4

Relations with the United States

In this chapter, we analyze how France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom are managing their security relationships with the United States and how the changes in U.S. policy outlined in Chapter 2 might reshape those relationships.

All four allies regard the United States as an irreplaceable security partner and seek to preserve those ties but are hedging against the United States weakening them. A central question for this report is whether U.S. retrenchment might lead any of the allies to take steps to further loosen those ties. We find that allies have not done so yet and are unlikely to in response to further U.S. retrenchment alone. However, a separate set of U.S. policies is straining the relationship, and that strain has already begun to alter allied behavior.

In the face of further U.S. retrenchment, allies differ over how aggressively they are trying to stay bound to Washington. At one end, Warsaw pursues a "last light" approach—doing everything possible to remain a privileged ally, from subsidizing U.S. presence to buying U.S. arms, in the hope of limiting U.S. retrenchment, especially from Poland. At the other end of the spectrum, France seeks to preserve the relationship with the United States but treats the reduction of its dependence on the United States as a higher priority. The United Kingdom is in a position close to Poland, anchored by an unusually deep integration with the United States in nuclear, intelligence, and military affairs. Germany is closer to a middle position but still aims more than France to shape U.S. choices about retrenchment.

We find that none of the alternative policies examined in Chapter 2 would lead an ally to abandon security ties with the United States. But several would weaken the congruence between allied and U.S. policy, reduce allies' commitment to aggressive binding strategies, or even lead to reductions in security cooperation with the United States. These policies are a rapid, uncoordinated withdrawal or a U.S.-Russia détente that disregards European security. Both of these would signal to allies that Washington's assessment of the Russian threat diverged sharply from their own. In the extreme, such policies could lead allies to withhold sensitive intelligence and military information from the United States out of concern that Washington could disclose it to Moscow.

Drivers of Ties with a Great-Power Patron

In past research, RAND found that Cold War allies sought to sustain close ties with Washington even as it retrenched, pursued détente with the Soviet Union, and pursued rapprochement with China. Allies' first response in these cases was to try to limit or shape U.S. retrenchment through such steps as increasing purchases of U.S. arms. When those policies failed to stop retrenchment, allies sought to maintain as much of the remaining U.S. commitment and presence as they could. Allies simultaneously sought to strengthen regional ties to offset the reduction in U.S. support, but not at

the expense of ties with Washington. For example, in the 1960s, Germany strengthened ties with France but would not join France's vision for greater foreign policy independence, fearing it would further weaken ties with the United States.[103]

The literature on drivers of security cooperation more generally (see Chapter 7) also informed our assessments in this chapter.

European Cooperation with the United States Today

France, Germany, Poland, and the UK see the United States as an irreplaceable ally and want to preserve strong ties. They also accept that some amount of U.S. retrenchment is inevitable and do not see this as undercutting the basis for continued partnership. However, some other U.S. policies—such as using coercion to try to gain control of Greenland, the open critique of how Europe handles domestic affairs, or aggressive tariffs—have increased the sense of diverging transatlantic interests and values. Such policies are driving allies' concerns about U.S. reliability as an arms supplier and leading allies to take steps to reduce dependence on Washington.

The Prospect of U.S. Retrenchment Has Not Undercut Allies' Desire to Sustain Close Security Ties with the United States

In early 2025, as U.S. retrenchment looked increasingly likely and Washington sought Russia-Ukraine ceasefire negotiations, contemporary allies looked likely to follow the same path as allies in the Cold War cases. Like allies in the past, contemporary France, Germany, Poland, and the UK see the United States as an irreplaceable ally and still seek to salvage what they can of the relationship.

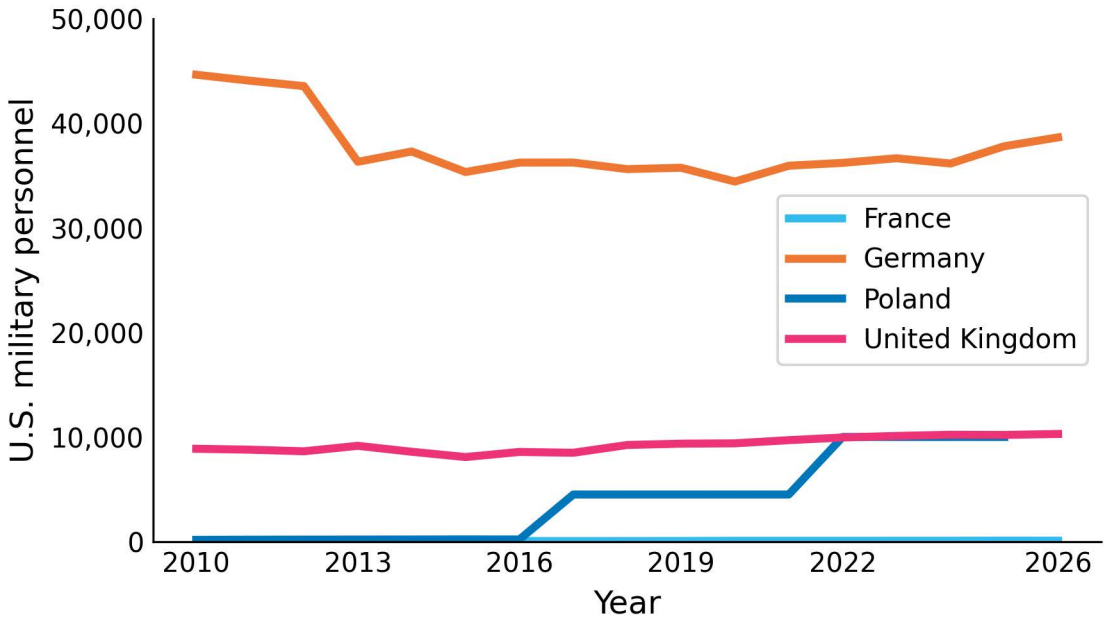
All four allies have strong, long-standing security relationships with the United States. Germany and the UK have been hosting U.S. troops since the Second World War, and Poland has been doing the same—in increasing numbers—since 2010 (see recent levels in Figure 4.1). The UK's nuclear deterrent is deeply integrated with the United States'. Even France, which does not host U.S. forces, is a long-standing NATO ally and hopes to achieve what one interviewee described as a "soft landing" from the currently tumultuous state of the relationship.

European allies depend heavily on U.S. capabilities, such as ISR, strategic airlift and mobility, missile defense, and air defense and C2 integration.[104] Europe's inability to replace these capabilities quickly means that all four allies seek to retain U.S. presence in theater and what they can of the U.S. commitment to use these and other forces in a European contingency, even if that commitment is weaker and less certain than before.

[103] Priebe et al., 2025.

[104] International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Progress and Shortfalls in Europe's Defence: An Assessment, Strategic Dossier," September 5, 2025.

Figure 4.1. U.S. Military Personnel Assigned to France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom



SOURCES: Features data from Flynn, 2026; Allen, Flynn, and Machain, 2022; Kane, 2005; DMDC, 2025; and DMDC, "Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency by State/Country: March 2026," Excel Workbook, March 31, 2026, for U.S. presence in France, Germany, and the UK. For the sources on U.S. presence in Poland, see the appendix. NOTE: We depict permanently assigned personnel for France, Germany, and the UK. Most U.S. military personnel in Poland are rotational. The U.S. Department of War does not provide the same kind of public data about those force levels as it does for permanently assigned forces. The appendix describes how we derived estimates of the approximate maximum number of rotational personnel present in Poland each year. The United States had a small presence in Poland from 2010 to 2016, which is not easy to see at this scale.

Paris believes that the U.S. presence in Europe, the U.S.-French alliance, intelligence-sharing, and trade ties contribute to French prosperity and security and so seeks to preserve ties with Washington.[105]

Similarly, German policymakers widely believe that the United States remains indispensable for European security, both because the United States directly provides security and because U.S. leadership facilitates intra-European cooperation where no individual major European power has the capabilities or the legitimacy to do so. Official German documents stress that "only together with the United States can Europe effectively defend itself"[106] and that Germany has a "long-standing partnership with the United States which is deeply rooted in our society and is reflected by a broad spectrum of common security policy interests."[107]

[105] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

[106] Federal Ministry of Defence, 2016, p. 49.

[107] Federal Ministry of Defence, 2016, p. 31.

Warsaw, too, believes that U.S. leadership remains vital for effective alliance coordination and credible deterrence against Russian aggression.[108] To sustain this partnership, Poland has supported U.S. policy priorities, including through military contributions to U.S. operations in Afghanistan.[109] Poland also sees host nation support as important for sustaining strong ties. For example, Warsaw gained a larger U.S. presence through the 2020 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, which saw Poland shoulder more of the logistics, infrastructure, and maintenance costs for U.S. troops and prepositioned equipment on Polish territory.[110]

The UK's security is particularly closely integrated with the United States'. Since the end of the Second World War, the UK has equipped itself to operate globally alongside U.S. forces on "day one of the fight." The UK has generally sought to be the closest U.S. ally in the military, nuclear, and intelligence domains. Although the relationship is asymmetrical, the United States has some dependencies on the UK. For example, the UK and its Overseas Territories are home to many of the most important and sensitive U.S. overseas military or intelligence installations, including key airbases and aspects of missile early warning infrastructure.[111]

The UK has also sought to position itself as a strategic bridge between the United States and Europe.[112] For example, the UK has tried to use its close relationship with Washington to influence and, at times, moderate the actions of its larger ally in ways that European allies prefer. Conversely, the UK sought to influence European allies to avoid duplicating NATO (e.g., in the EU) or taking other steps that could reduce U.S. interest in Euro-Atlantic defense cooperation.

This asymmetric "special relationship" has not been without tensions.[113] Most recently, the UK and the United States clashed over the latter's decision to follow Israel into a war with Iran.[114] Favorability toward the United States in the UK dropped 12 percentage points, to 37 percent, after

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[108] Radoslaw Sikorski, "Europe's Existential Choice," *Project Syndicate*, May 19, 2025; Monika Sus, "Status-Seeking in Wartime: Poland's Leadership Aspirations and the Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2025.

[109] Andrzej Skwarski, "Misja Wojskowa w Iraku i Afganistanie oraz Skutki dla Polskich Sił Zbrojnych, Gospodarki i Międzynarodowej Pozycji Polski" ["Military Mission in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Consequences for the Polish Armed Forces, Economy, and Poland's International Position"], Akademia Obrony Narodowej [National Defense Academy], undated.

[110] Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Poland, "New US-Poland Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement Signed," 2020; U.S. European Command, "Infrastructure Program Enhances Cooperation, Collaboration Between US and Poland," 2022.

[111] Claire Mills and Louisa Brooke-Holland, "US Military Forces in the UK: Legal Agreements," research briefing, House of Commons Library, No. 6808, March 2, 2026.

[112] Alexander Gale, "Global Britain in Context: The History of British Grand Strategy," *Strategy, Defense and Foreign Affairs*, December 12, 2021.

[113] Episodes of transatlantic tension include the refusal of the United States to share nuclear technology in the 1940s despite UK involvement in the Manhattan Project; the U.S. decision to wield its financial clout to force the UK, France, and Israel to back down during the Suez crisis; and the lack of direct U.S. participation in the Falklands War.

[114] Though the UK refused to join in offensive strikes, it has subsequently permitted the U.S. military to use bases in the UK, Cyprus, and Diego Garcia for defensive activities. The UK also moved significant British air defense capabilities and other UK military assets to the Middle East to protect allies.

the 2024 U.S. election.[115] Despite such reservations, there is little appetite for weakening ties with Washington, given shared interests and close security integration.[116]

Some Parties in France and Germany Prefer Looser Ties with Washington

In France, support for ties with the United States is generally shared across the political spectrum, except on the far left, where such parties as LFI are traditionally anti-Atlanticist.[117] On the far right, RN is ambivalent: It does not have the deep Atlanticist views of some other European extreme-right parties, such as Giorgia Meloni's in Italy, but it no longer favors pulling France out of NATO's integrated command, at least while the war is still going on in Ukraine.[118]

In Germany, as in France, the view of the United States varies across the political spectrum. The center right—the Christian Democrats, represented by the CDU and the CSU, and the FDP—supports Germany's ties with the United States. The emphasis on transatlantic relations is particularly strong among CDU politicians from western Germany. The center left—represented by the Social Democrats and the Greens—has more-pronounced skepticism toward the United States. The far-right AfD and far-left Die Linke in eastern Germany have anti-Americanist streaks, though on the far right these have softened somewhat during the second Trump administration.[119]

Across the political spectrum, Polish political elites view the alliance with the United States as the cornerstone of Polish national security and seek to sustain deep security cooperation.[120] But Polish political parties differ about how much to privilege the relationship with the United States over cooperation with European allies when these relationships are in tension. The Civic Coalition (KO)–led government reoriented Poland's strategy toward deeper integration within the European Union while treating ties with the United States as complementary.[121] KO argues that Poland's influence is maximized when it serves as a bridge between U.S. and European perspectives, rather than choosing

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[115] Hannah Britton, "European Favourability of the USA Falls Following the Return of Donald Trump," YouGov, March 4, 2025.

[116] Gustav Meibauer and Gesine Weber, "What IR Can Teach the UK About How to Handle Trump," *LSE Blogs*, May 24, 2025.

[117] Sandrine Cassini, "Sur l'Ukraine et la défense européenne, Jean-Luc Mélenchon et LFI s'éloignent encore du reste de la gauche" ["On Ukraine and European Defense, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and LFI Are Further Distancing Themselves from the Rest of the Left"], *Le Monde*, March 12, 2025; Marceau Taburet, "Trump. Poutine, Zelensky . . . Comment la nouvelle donne internationale oblige LFI à revoir son logiciel" ["Trump. Poutine, Zelensky . . . How the New International Landscape Is Forcing LFI to Rethink Its Approach"], *Le HuffPost*, March 6, 2025.

[118] French officials and experts, interview with authors, Paris, April 2025; EURACTIV France and AFP, "OTAN: Jordan Bardella s'oppose à une sortie du commandement intégré 'en période de guerre'" ["NATO: Jordan Bardella Opposes Exit from Integrated Command 'in Time of War'"], March 29, 2024.

[119] Many right-wing commentators share Trump's distaste for liberal internationalism and therefore applauded Vance's speech in Munich and hope to collaborate on anti-migration and anti-Islam policies (German experts, interviews with authors, via video call, July 2025).

[120] Government of Poland, *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland*, 2020; Sus, 2025.

[121] Marta Prochwicz Jazowska, "Between Two Donalds: How Tusk's Relationship with Trump Could Foster EU-US Cooperation," European Council on Foreign Relations, November 21, 2024.

between them.[122] Conversely, Law and Justice (PiS)—a populist, conservative party that led the Polish government from 2015 to 2023—has often prioritized the bilateral relationship with Washington over ties with European allies, which PiS sees as insufficiently focused on Eastern European security concerns.[123]

The UK, meanwhile, is more likely to seek a close relationship with the United States regardless of what parties prevail in the next election. On the far right, leader of the Reform UK party, Farage, is known for his support for Trump, even though the foreign policy stance of Reform as a party toward the United States remains unclear.[124]

All Four Allies Expect Further U.S. Retrenchment but Are Uncertain About How It Will Unfold

All four allies are preparing for further U.S. retrenchment. France's defense policy since the 1960s has assumed eventual U.S. retrenchment and so aimed for strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the United States. Germany, Poland, and the UK now see some degree of U.S. retrenchment as unavoidable, too, and are taking steps to hedge against it.

France

Paris has long believed that Washington views its interests in Europe as important but not vital because U.S. national survival is not at stake.[125] The French view was crystalized by the U.S. pressure to end France's intervention in the 1956 Suez crisis, and French leaders have also long assessed that U.S. and French interests will not always align and that some degree of autonomy is therefore essential to hedge against the risks of dependence.[126] President Charles de Gaulle developed a sovereign nuclear deterrent, emphasized a strong French defense industry, and maintained robust conventional military capabilities—all priorities that his successors preserved. Since 2017, Macron has championed the concept of "European strategic autonomy," which is Europe's capacity to act independently without undue dependence on others.[127] Macron's 2017 Sorbonne speech calling "for a sovereign, united, and

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[122] Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Poland, "Polska jest transatlantykiem, który łączy Stany Zjednoczone z Europą" ["Poland is a Transatlantic Liner That Connects the United States with Europe"], video, May 28, 2025.

[123] Zsuzsanna Végh, "Central Europe's Radical Right and EU Foreign Policy," German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 2021. Representing this view during his campaign, President Nawrocki was skeptical about greater Polish involvement in European defense initiatives, arguing that these efforts prioritize Western European interests at Poland's expense and could risk weakening Poland's strategic partnership with the United States (Oscar Luigi Guccione, "Poland's Political Pendulum: President Nawrocki Will Test Prime Minister Tusk's 2023 Victory," German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 3, 2025).

[124] Olivia O'Sullivan, "Does Reform UK Have a Foreign Policy?" Chatham House, September 12, 2025.

[125] Jean-Pierre Stroobants, "The Three Lives of NATO, Born from a Gamble, Now Deemed Obsolete by Trump," *Le Monde*, June 24, 2025.

[126] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

[127] "Macron Was Right About Strategic Autonomy," *The Economist*, July 24, 2025; Laura Kayali and Marion Solletty, "Macron's Told-You-So Moment," *Politico*, February 28, 2025; Mario Damen, "EU Strategic Autonomy 2013–2023: From Concept to Capacity," European Parliament, July 2022.

democratic Europe" can be interpreted as part of an early effort to prepare for possible U.S. disengagement.[128] Against this backdrop, French officials and experts we interviewed were not surprised that the second Trump administration was considering pulling at least some forces from Europe.[129] Interviewees viewed the 2011 announcement of the U.S. "pivot to Asia,"[130] Trump's first-term threats to leave NATO, and recurring tensions over burdensharing as already signaling that the United States might reduce its role in the region.[131] The Biden administration's focus on Europe in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine was seen as temporary in this context.[132]

What came as a greater surprise was how quickly and significantly U.S. policy discussions shifted in 2025.[133] Perhaps the deployment of U.S. troops to Eastern Europe by Trump in his first term (2017) and by President Joseph Biden (2022) gave the false impression to France that the United States would not retrench from Europe while the war in Ukraine was ongoing. French scholar Olivier Schmitt has described Trump's reelection as a "Black Elephant" event—"an important and obvious threat that no one wanted to face."[134] By mid-2025, however, the new French defense strategy stated plainly that "a new cycle of US disengagement from European security is beginning."[135]

French interviewees expressed uncertainty about the timing and scale of a U.S. withdrawal, but they converged on two possible scenarios.[136] A first scenario is a coordinated drawdown that involves a limited, phased, and coordinated withdrawal of conventional forces while preserving the nuclear umbrella and providing a timeline for European allies to replace U.S. capabilities.[137] A second (and much more concerning to France) scenario is a rapid, uncoordinated withdrawal, potentially differentiated by country based on bilateral relations. Interviewees did not see a withdrawal of the U.S. nuclear umbrella as likely but expressed concerns that drastic conventional reductions could undermine U.S. extended nuclear deterrence by signaling lack of U.S. interest in European security.

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[128] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025; Emmanuel Macron, "Initiative pour l'Europe—Discours d'Emmanuel Macron pour une Europe souveraine, unie, démocratique" ["Initiative for Europe—Speech by Emmanuel Macron for a Sovereign, United, Democratic Europe"], *Élysée*, September 26, 2017.

[129] French officials and experts, interview with authors, Paris, April 2025. One official interviewed noted that the tone had changed, rather than the substance.

[130] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

[131] Jason Davidson, "No 'Free-Riding' Here: European Defense Spending Defies US Critics," Atlantic Council, March 13, 2023.

[132] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

[133] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

[134] Olivier Schmitt, "La tenaille Trump : l'Europe face à un risque existentiel" ["The Trump Pincers: Europe Faces an Existential Risk"], *Le Grand Continent*, November 18, 2024a.

[135] Secrétariat Général de la Défense et de la Sécurité Nationale (SGDSN), 2025, p. 17.

[136] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

[137] Interviewees identified a variant of this scenario in which the United States progressively reduces rotational and permanent forces but maintains key enablers over the long term and another variant in which Washington eventually removes key enablers, as well.

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Germany

Berlin began taking the possibility of U.S. retrenchment seriously at the start of the second Trump administration, viewing it as deeply unpredictable and even outright hostile to Europe.[138] German observers find the speed of change particularly unsettling. German policymakers, including Chancellor Friedrich Merz, had envisioned a step-by-step adjustment and were shocked by the first months of the second Trump term, which made Merz concerned that the United States would leave NATO.[139] On election night in February 2025, Merz said that his "absolute priority will be to strengthen Europe as quickly as possible so that, step by step, we can really achieve independence from the USA." He said that the Trump administration is "largely indifferent to the fate of Europe" and that Europe should therefore establish "an independent European defense capability much more quickly."[140] Few German interviewees believe that the United States would entirely remove its armed forces from German territory, as this would impede U.S. global power projection. However, interviewees described widespread doubts that the Trump administration would come to the aid of NATO allies in the event of Russian aggression. A few policymakers privately speculated that Russia and the Trump administration are even actively colluding against Europe. Interviewees explained that these concerns had led to discussions within Germany considering how it would work if allies needed to rely on the EU's Article 42.7 for collective responses to lower-threshold conflicts rather than NATO processes in the event of such a crisis. Germany does not think it can wait out Trump's second term in the hope of a restoration of the transatlantic relationship in the next administration.

German policymakers believe that a total U.S. withdrawal is possible but hope that the machinery of government and U.S. interests in power projection will limit the extent of U.S. retrenchment. Berlin believes the United States may leave forces and infrastructure in Germany to facilitate power projection into the Middle East even if Washington decides not to fulfill alliance commitments to NATO allies in Eastern Europe. Ultimately, though, Berlin feels significant uncertainty about the direction of U.S. policy.[141]

Poland

Poland's confidence that U.S. interests in Europe are aligned with its own began to wane in the 2010s. Prior to that, Poland saw the United States as a country that (1) opposed Soviet domination of the Eastern Bloc and supported the Polish Solidarity movement during the Cold War,[142] (2) proved

[138] German experts, interview with authors, via video call, July 2025.

[139] German policymaker and expert, interviews with authors, via video call, July–August 2025.

[140] Tim Ross and Nette Nöstlinger, "Germany's Merz Vows 'Independence' from Trump's America, Warning NATO May Soon Be Dead," *Politico*, February 23, 2025. Merz's impeccable transatlantic credentials could have enabled him to push for a more independent German policy (German expert, interview with author, via video call, July 2025).

[141] German experts, interviews with authors, via video call, July 2025.

[142] Gregory F. Domber, *Empowering Revolution: America, Poland, and the End of the Cold War*, University of North Carolina Press, 2014; Seth G. Jones, *A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA, and the Cold War Struggle in Poland*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.

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pivotal to Poland's democratic transition and its accession to NATO after 1989,[143] and (3) was invested in deterring Russian aggression, preserving regional stability, and preventing any single power from dominating the European continent.[144] In short, Warsaw had a strong belief in the U.S. commitment to Poland's security and the region more broadly.[145] The Obama administration's abrupt cancellation of the Central European missile defense program, pivot to Asia, and perceived lackluster response to Russian aggression in Crimea began to shake Polish confidence in the U.S. commitment.[146] Poland welcomed reassurances, such as Obama's 2014 pledge that "Poland will never stand alone,"[147] and rotational presence of U.S. forces. But the sense of U.S. "reluctant leadership" and a less reliable U.S. security guarantee were further reinforced by rhetoric hostile to NATO allies during Trump's first term.[148] From the Polish perspective, despite Biden's 2021 pledge at the Munich Security Conference that "America is back," a full return to the status quo ante in transatlantic relations was never realistic.[149] Polish leaders, for example, observed Washington's reluctance to establish a permanent base or expand troop levels, despite Polish requests in 2022 and 2024.[150] The chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the continued strategic shift toward the Indo-Pacific deepened Polish convictions that the United States would continue to disengage from Europe.[151] As Prime Minister Donald Tusk declared ahead of the 2024 U.S. presidential election, regardless of the outcome, "the era of geopolitical outsourcing is over."[152]

The second Trump administration's rhetoric, initial policy decisions, and key appointments have intensified Polish anxieties about the durability of the U.S. commitment to European security.[153] Beyond the question of force levels, both interviews and the literature indicate that Poland fears the

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[143] Wojciech Michnik, "How Was NATO Won? Assessing Poland's Record in NATO After 25 Years," *New Eastern Europe*, March 25, 2024; Lugar Center, "Poland: A Soviet State Turned NATO Ally," brief, June 21, 2019; Ryszard Zieba, "Chapter 9: The 20th Anniversary of Poland's Accession to NATO," in Daniel S. Hamilton and Kristina Spohr, eds., *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War*, Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2019.

[144] Polish officials and experts, interviews with the authors, Poland, April 2025.

[145] Bronislaw Geremek, "Address at the Ceremony of Deposition of Protocols of Accession," Independence, Missouri, March 12, 1999.

[146] Alexander Lanoszka, "Poland in a Time of Geopolitical Flux," *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2020.

[147] Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama at 25th Anniversary of Freedom Day—Warsaw, Poland," White House, June 4, 2014.

[148] Polish officials and experts, interviews with the authors, Poland, April 2025.

[149] Polish officials and experts, interviews with the authors, Poland, April 2025.

[150] "Joe Biden w Warszawie. Jasina: kwestia stałych baz wojsk USA w Polsce nie została poruszona" ["Joe Biden in Warsaw. Jasina: The Issue of Permanent US Military Bases in Poland Was Not Raised"], *Polskie Radio 24*, March 27, 2022; "Andrzej Duda chce więcej wojsk USA w Polsce. Joe Biden: Nie ma takiej potrzeby" ["Andrzej Duda Wants More US Troops in Poland. Joe Biden: There Is No Such Need"], *Rzeczpospolita*, March 12, 2024.

[151] Polish officials and experts, interviews with authors, via video call, April and September 2025.

[152] Donald Tusk, "Harris or Trump? Some claim that the future of Europe depends on the American elections, while it depends first and foremost on us. On condition Europe finally grows up and believes in its own strength. Whatever the outcome, the era of geopolitical outsourcing is over," X post, November 2, 2024.

[153] Eugeniusz Smolar, "There Is No Plan B," *National Interest*, June 9, 2025.

erosion of the U.S. commitment to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, shifts in U.S. policy toward Russia, and the U.S. use of tariffs to coerce allies.

United Kingdom

The UK's expectations appear to be more optimistic than those of France, Germany, and Poland. While there are debates in the UK over the pace, scale, and reversibility of any U.S. retrenchment,[154] it is notable that the UK's 2025 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence Review implicitly assume continuity in the U.S. approach (i.e., a pivot to the Indo-Pacific and push for NATO burdensharing consistent since Obama[155]) and that, despite recent threats, there will be no major or sudden changes to U.S. posture in Europe.[156] Echoing this conclusion, most interviewees assessed a formal U.S. withdrawal from NATO, a permanent severing of intelligence cooperation, or sudden and large-scale relocation of U.S. forces out of Europe as unlikely. This was either because interviewees assessed that such steps would not serve U.S. interests, would inspire too much pushback in Congress, or were simply impractical (e.g., given the lack of alternative bases for relocated troops, the costs and lead times for moving, and the absence of a relevant mission in the Indo-Pacific for, say, Army units currently stationed in Europe).[157] Instead, interviewees assumed that U.S. retrenchment would be more narrowly focused on certain allies, capabilities, or time periods. The United States might threaten to withdraw forces from or reduce cooperation with countries falling short on defense spending or refusing to meet other U.S. demands.[158] The United States might draw down capabilities easiest to rotate out of Europe and of greatest use in the Indo-Pacific (e.g., strike, ISR or tanker aircraft, destroyers, specialist personnel headquarters, or combined air operations centers). Or, it might temporarily scale back sharing of government or commercial intelligence feeds to exert influence on target countries' behaviors, as Washington did in an attempt to push Ukraine to the negotiating table with Russia in early 2025.[159] A common theme among UK interviewees was the perception of the threat of U.S. retrenchment being used as an instrument of a transactional, zero-sum approach to alliances,[160] exerting coercive power to pursue a better "deal" for the United States. Interviewees

[154] Ben Coxon, "How Can Britain Work with Trump's America to Secure Strategic Advantage?" *Britain's World*, January 24, 2025.

[155] Richard Fontaine and Robert Blackwill, "Obama Tried to Pivot to Asia in 2011. We Must Succeed This Time," Center for a New American Security, June 10, 2024.

[156] Government of the United Kingdom, *National Security Strategy 2025: Security for the British People in a Dangerous World*, June 24, 2025b; Government of the United Kingdom, 2025c.

[157] UK officials and experts, interviews with authors, in person in London and via video call, June–July 2025.

[158] In addition to the interviews, see Samir Puri, "President Trump's Tariffs Increase Pressure on Allies to Reduce Security Dependence on the US," Chatham House, April 15, 2025.

[159] Dafydd Townley and Matthew Powell, "The US Has Lifted Its Intelligence Sharing Pause with Ukraine. But the Damage May Already Be Done," University of Portsmouth blog, March 12, 2025.

[160] In addition to the interviews, see "Trump's Destruction of Global Alliances," *Financial Times*, April 4, 2025; and Ravi Agrawal, "Trump Is Ushering in a More Transactional World," *Foreign Policy*, January 7, 2025.

believed that such an approach would erode trust and cohesion among U.S. allies, to the ultimate disadvantage of the United States, the UK, and Europe.[161]

In the most radical scenarios, UK interviewees feared the erosion of the U.S. commitment to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty or even a formal U.S. withdrawal from NATO, necessitating a wholesale reimagination of collective security in Europe—though the latter was deemed unlikely given that it would severely harm U.S. interests, as understood from a UK perspective. In thinking about bilateral cooperation, British experts similarly fear a hugely damaging end of deep integration with the United States on military, intelligence, and nuclear issues. This would entail either a severe reduction in the UK's strategic ambitions and/or large-scale, long-term increases in spending (more than 5 percent of GDP) to try to compensate. However, such worst-case scenarios were again deemed less likely than a more gradual reduction in U.S. engagement with the UK, given the United States' own interests.[162]

Other U.S. Policies, Co-Occurring with Retrenchment, Are Driving a Sense of Diverging Interests

The U.S. experience during the Cold War shows that cooperation with allies can thrive even in the face of U.S. retrenchment and pursuit of détente with rivals. But today, the United States is pursuing additional policies that are causing a deeper concern about diverging U.S. and European interests.

All four allies expressed concerns that U.S. and European interests may be diverging in fundamental ways. Political messaging disparaging Europeans—such as that expressed publicly by Vice President J. D. Vance in Munich in February 2025 or privately in Signal messages later made public[163]—has led to a view that some U.S. leaders are hostile to Europe. In interviews, several French experts indicated that efforts to maintain a security relationship with the United States could be altered by a settled U.S. policy of painting Europe as an ideological adversary or attacking European democratic values.[164] German interviewees pointed to the withdrawal of U.S. intelligence support for Ukraine, the confrontation with Zelensky in the Oval Office, and the speech by Secretary of War Pete Hegseth about the deprioritizing of Europe as leaving the sense that the two countries' interests were diverging.[165] In the UK, U.S. critiques of the transfer of sovereignty of the Chagos Islands to

[161] UK officials and experts, interviews with authors, in person in London and via video call, June–July 2025.

[162] UK officials and experts, interviews with authors, in person in London and via video call, June–July 2025.

[163] Katya Adler, "Disdain for Europe in US Signal Chat Horrifies Europeans," *BBC News*, March 25, 2025; German Federal Government, "Speech by the Federal Chancellor at the Munich Security Conference on 13. February 2026 in Munich," February 13, 2026; Christina Lu, "The Speech That Stunned Europe," *Foreign Affairs*, February 18, 2025; Yew Lun Tian, "China Sanctions U.S. Lawmakers in Dispute over Uighur Muslims," Reuters, July 13, 2020.

[164] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025. This expert described the war in Ukraine as a point of no return in the relationship between France and Russia, making accommodation impossible.

[165] German experts, interviews with authors, via video call, July–August 2025.

Mauritius—while retaining a 99-year lease on the Diego Garcia military base—and of the supposedly timid combat involvement of European troops in Afghanistan were particularly poorly received.[166]

Since the interviews, other U.S. policies have reinforced these concerns, such as the White House campaign to gain control of Greenland—which is a territory of Denmark, a NATO ally—and insinuations that the United States might use military force to do so. The four allies we focus on in this report were among those that issued a joint statement that U.S. actions ran counter to UN and NATO principles.[167] The U.S.-Israel war with Iran has hurt European economies by disrupting energy supplies.

Perceptions of Diverging Interests Have, in Turn, Led Allies to Take Steps to Modestly Reduce Security and Economic Cooperation with the United States

Perceptions of diverging interests have led allies to limit—albeit only modestly to date—some aspects of cooperation with Washington. For example, UK concerns about U.S. military operations in the Caribbean and Dutch concerns about U.S. policy toward Russia reportedly led the two allies, who traditionally prioritize transatlantic ties, to reduce some forms of intelligence-sharing with Washington.[168]

Other U.S. policies have affected allies' decisions about economic cooperation with the United States. For example, in June 2026, following the U.S. decision on frontier AI models, former French prime minister and 2027 presidential candidate Gabriel Attal compared Anthropic for the United States to the Strait of Hormuz for Iran, noting how dependency in both cases created vulnerabilities for France.[169] That same month, the French government announced that it would switch data analysis providers for its domestic intelligence services from Palantir to a French company.[170]

There are also ongoing efforts to diversify the UK's trade and investment relationships, including via talks on free trade agreements (e.g., with emerging economies) and accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).[171] These moves are largely a result of a need to forge new trade relations post-Brexit but have been given fresh impetus by U.S. tariffs.

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[166] Mark Landler, "How a Year of Trump Changed Britain," *New York Times*, January 24, 2026.

[167] Mette Frederiksen, "Joint Statement on Greenland," Prime Minister's Office of Denmark, June 1, 2026.

[168] Julian E. Barnes, "Democrats Raise Concerns over Allied Curbs on Intelligence Sharing," *New York Times*, November 20, 2025; "AIVD en MIVD delen minder info met VS en meer met Europa, zeggen directeuren" ["AIVD and MIVD Share Less Info with US and More with Europe, Say Directors"], *NOS Nieuws*, October 18, 2025.

[169] Alexandre Piquard, "'La guerre de l'IA a commencé': Le blocage du dernier modèle d'Anthropic par les Etats-Unis inquiète en France et en Europe" ["'The AI War Has begun': The US Blocking of Anthropic's Latest Model Sparks Concern in France and Europe"], *Le Monde*, June 13, 2026.

[170] "Renseignement: Palantir assure que son contrat avec la France reste 'pleinement en vigueur', malgré l'annonce d'un successeur par le gouvernement" ["Information: Palantir Maintains That Its Contract with France Remains 'Fully in Force', Despite the Government's Announcement of a Successor"], *Le Monde*, June 16, 2026.

[171] Government of the United Kingdom, "The UK's Trade Agreements," March 2, 2020, updated September 22, 2025f.

Allies are also considering measures to limit economic cooperation through the EU, though these measures have not yet been adopted. U.S. tariff threats over Greenland in January 2026 and other U.S. economic policies led European leaders to call for reducing the EU's vulnerability to U.S. economic coercion.[172] Following the U.S. decision to place export controls on frontier AI models in June 2026 (later reversed), EU policymakers called for strengthening legislative proposals to further reduce technology dependence on the United States.[173] This policy reinforces the conclusions from the Draghi Report (2024) that highlighted Europe's strategic dependencies in this domain.[174] The European Commission has since proposed policies that would reduce dependence on non-EU suppliers for goods and services in the technology sector, such as cloud computing, semiconductors, and AI.[175]

How Future U.S. Policies Could Affect Allies' Relations with the United States

France, Germany, Poland, and the UK currently seek to preserve what they can of security cooperation with the United States. And this will likely be true in the face of many U.S. policy changes. However, in this section we discuss two policies that allies see as making them more vulnerable and that could lead allies to reduce security cooperation with Washington: a sudden and uncoordinated withdrawal of U.S. forces from Europe and pursuit of a U.S.-Russia relationship that does not account for European security interests.

Germany, Poland, and the UK Are More Likely Than France to Make Concessions if the United States Uses Commitments and Posture to Reward and Punish Allies

As noted above, all four allies seek to preserve security ties with the United States and, though they see some amount of retrenchment as inevitable, are trying to limit U.S. retrenchment or influence U.S. choices about it. If the United States adopted a settled policy of making posture and

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[172] "How to Make EU Less Dependent on China and US," Reuters, February 11, 2026; European Council, "Statement by President Costa on Greenland," press release, January 18, 2026b; European Council, "Informal EU Leaders' Retreat of 12 February 2026—Invitation Letter by President António Costa to the Members of the European Council," press release, February 2, 2026a.

[173] "EU Commission Looking at Practical Consequences of Anthropic Decision, Spokesperson Says," Reuters, June 14, 2026; Theophane Hartmann, "US AI Shutdown Boosts Calls for Stricter Rules in EU Tech Sovereignty Law," *Euractiv*, June 15, 2026. As of the time of this writing, a European Technology Sovereignty Package aimed at—among other measures—building semiconductor capacity, developing cloud and AI capacity, and strengthening digital autonomy had entered the EU legislative process (Filippo Gualtiero Blancato, "EU Tech Sovereignty Package Policy Brief," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, July 6, 2026; European Commission, "Strengthening Europe's Tech Sovereignty," June 3, 2026b).

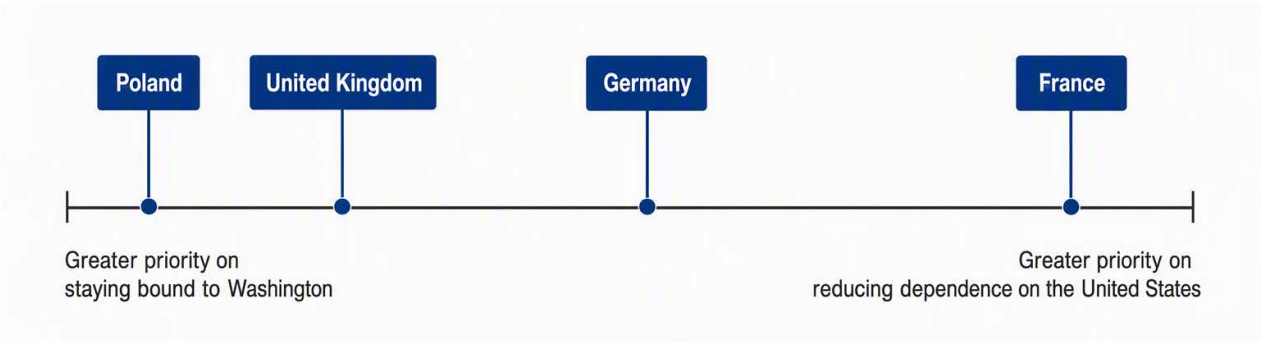
[174] European Union, *The Future of European Competitiveness: Part A, A Competitiveness Strategy for Europe*, September 2024, p. 57.

[175] European Commission, "Commission Proposes Tech Sovereignty Package to Strengthen Europe's Digital Autonomy and Resilience," June 3, 2026a.

commitments conditional, a key question would be what concessions allies are willing to make to be a favored ally.

To assess how allies might respond to increasing U.S. transactionalism, we considered how allies vary on two dimensions: (1) how optimistic they are about their ability to shape U.S. choices about retrenchment and (2) how much they value binding to the United States versus reducing their dependence on it (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2. How Allies Prioritize Reducing Dependence on the United States



SOURCE: Notional spectrum based on authors' analysis.

France is the most skeptical about influencing U.S. policy and values independence highly, so France is the least willing to make costly concessions to try to limit U.S. retrenchment. So, for example, Paris is unlikely to adopt any policy that would slow development of sovereign capabilities or undermine Europe-level defense efforts to win Washington's favor and limit its retrenchment.

The other three allies now also accept that some amount of U.S. retrenchment is inevitable, but they are more optimistic than France that they can influence the extent, pace, and phasing of U.S. retrenchment. Poland, the UK, and Germany also prioritize sustaining U.S. ties more. Therefore, in the short term at least, they are also more willing than France to make concessions to the United States if its commitments or force levels become conditional.

According to Polish interviewees, Warsaw believes that allies that prioritize defense investment, modernization, and procurement of U.S. weapons have the greatest prospect of limiting the extent of reductions in U.S. commitments and presence. A recent episode, involving U.S. force levels instead of commitment, captures Warsaw's logic. In May 2026, the U.S. Department of War abruptly canceled the rotational deployment of roughly 4,000 soldiers to Poland, but Trump subsequently pledged to send 5,000 troops at an undefined later date.[176] Warsaw attributed this reversal partly to its reminding the United States that Poland is a "model ally" that invests heavily in its own defense and buys U.S. systems.[177] The episode illustrates both the payoff Poland expects from its approach and this approach's fragility: U.S. commitments and posture are contingent on abrupt, easily reversible

[176] John Vandiver, "Poland Seeks Up to 15,000 US Troops as It Courts Trump Administration," *Stars and Stripes*, June 16, 2026a.

[177] Polish expert, follow-up interview with author, Warsaw, June 2026. Polish President Karol Nawrocki said that the commitment remained on track after talks in Washington, yet, as of July 2026, the Pentagon had not specified where those forces would come from, when they would arrive, or where they would be based.

decisions. Poland is inclined to try to limit and shape U.S. retrenchment, even though Warsaw knows it may not ultimately work.

Given how central its relationship with the United States is to the UK's strategy, the UK, like Poland, is likely to try to meet Washington's demands in the event of a more conditional approach to U.S. commitments. Many officials and experts are skeptical that the UK can exert meaningful leverage on the United States at the strategic level, given the asymmetry in the special relationship and the UK's isolation from the EU post-Brexit.[178] Still, the literature and interviews suggest that the UK has taken, and will likely continue to take, steps to influence U.S. policy choices. Interviewees expected the UK government, in arguing against reductions in U.S. presence in and security ties with the UK, to point to the way that Anglo-American security, economic, and cultural ties support U.S. interests. Examples cited include the UK's contribution of niche military capabilities, such as intelligence assets, offensive cyber capabilities, and UK Special Forces[179] to U.S.-led operations and access to specialist infrastructure or facilities in Cyprus and Diego Garcia and missile early warning systems at Royal Air Force Fylingdales.[180] However, officials and experts consulted for this study noted that the UK's leverage remains limited. Although the UK believes that the relationship is mutually beneficial, the UK also knows it depends more on the United States than vice versa.[181]

Berlin, which has always prioritized the transatlantic relationship, will likely continue trying to limit U.S. retrenchment with steps such as increasing defense spending, emphasizing the European pillar of NATO, buying U.S. arms, and solidifying NATO nuclear-sharing arrangements.[182]

If these policies prove to be effective over time in sustaining U.S. commitment (and presence), these three allies might continue to prioritize ties with the United States over deepening ties with Europe, to the extent those policies come into conflict. However, too aggressive a use of U.S. leverage or evidence that such policies were failing to limit retrenchment could see these states abandon this approach. Moreover, these allies may become less willing to make concessions to the United States to sustain commitments or presence in the longer term if European strength increases substantially.

Sudden and Uncoordinated U.S. Retrenchment Could Lead Germany, Poland, and the UK to Further Reduce Reliance on U.S. Arms

United Kingdom

The UK would see a rapid U.S. withdrawal as threatening European stability and increasing vulnerability to Russian aggression (as discussed in Chapter 3). UK interviewees explained that, in

[178] Meibauer and Weber, 2025.

[179] Eliot Wilson, "The Tip of the American Spear? How the United Kingdom Could Pursue Military Specialization," *War on the Rocks*, February 2, 2024.

[180] In addition to the interviews, see Alec Smith, "How Should Britain and France Cooperate to Realise the Northwood Declaration?" *Britain's World*, No. 29.2025, July 18, 2025.

[181] UK officials and experts, interviews with authors, in person in London and via video call, June–July 2025.

[182] German policymaker and experts, interviews with authors, via video call, July–August 2025.

turn, a sudden and uncoordinated withdrawal would undermine the United States' reliability as an arms supplier. Interviewees observed that a sudden, uncoordinated U.S. withdrawal would present a dilemma: On the one hand, the allies would not have time for anything other than off-the-shelf procurement (in practice, often from U.S. suppliers) to plug gaps; on the other hand, trust in the United States would be broken by that type of withdrawal, raising concerns about the possibility of disrupted supplies of arms in the future. Therefore, UK interviewees agreed that the long-term impact of a sudden U.S. withdrawal would be to accelerate the UK's reorientation away from U.S. defense equipment toward sovereign or European alternatives.[183]

Germany

Germany would likely have similar concerns. Germany has traditionally been suspicious of the "European strategic autonomy" concept promoted by Paris, which it perceived as dangerously (and, for now, inaccurately) signaling to the United States that Europe does not need its protection anymore.[184] As discussed in Chapter 7, Berlin has softened this stance recently as concerns about U.S. commitment have mounted. A sudden, uncoordinated withdrawal would reinforce these concerns and could lead Berlin to shift further toward France's position. A rapid, uncoordinated U.S. withdrawal would also suggest the failure of Germany's efforts to limit U.S. retrenchment (in part) through arms sales. In this context, it may not see a benefit to continuing to privilege U.S. firms for arms sales or other deals.

Poland

Poland might apply similar logic as the UK and Germany in the face of a rapid, uncoordinated U.S. withdrawal. For example, it could deprioritize U.S. participation in major energy and infrastructure projects by awarding government contracts to European or Asian rather than U.S. firms as it has done recently. These steps would reflect hedging rather than estrangement: reducing dependence on a partner perceived as increasingly unpredictable, aligning with EU-level pressure to favor European suppliers, and preserving Poland's ability to fall back on alternative partners should U.S. reliability continue to erode. The likelihood and scope of such measures would depend heavily on whether Warsaw judged an alternative European security framework to be within reach—for example, through deeper French or British nuclear guarantees, expanded EU defense integration, or a more capable European pillar within NATO.

France

France is already the most committed of the four allies to reducing reliance on the United States, so its policies may not shift further in response to a rapid, uncoordinated withdrawal. Paris sees two

[183] Equally, interviewees were divided on whether the shock of such a withdrawal would catalyze the UK and Europe to rationalize their defense industrial bases (e.g., via the EU SAFE mechanism)—or whether the United States' unreliability would lead the UK to conclude that it similarly could not risk depending on European suppliers.

[184] Ulrike Franke, "What Are We Actually Fighting About? Germany, France, and the Spectre of European Autonomy," European Council on Foreign Relations, November 23, 2020.

kinds of dependencies on the United States: (1) on the U.S. defense industry for some equipment, due to a lack of competitive European options and path dependency because of past purchases, and (2) a dependency on the U.S. military to provide critical warfighting enablers, including ISR, long-range and precision fires, fighter/attack tactical aircraft, integrated air and missile defense, C2 platforms, and logistics.[185] France sees reducing both types of dependence as a priority and is developing its own defense industrial base and producing more equipment.[186] Until those dependencies are addressed, Paris would perceive a sudden and uncoordinated U.S. withdrawal as Washington showing a lack of concern for the security of its European allies, because such a withdrawal would result in capability gaps and make the allies vulnerable to Russian aggression.

But a sense of divergent threat perceptions and unreliability could weaken the relationship. It would make it less likely that the two countries would agree on courses of action in military plans and diplomatic initiatives or that France would want to make plans that rely on U.S. contributions. Therefore, the two countries would be less likely to find ways to work together to address global problems.

Pursuit of Détente with Russia That Does Not Address European Stability Could Lead Allies to Restrict Intelligence-Sharing and Limit Joint Military Planning

A normalization of U.S. relations with Russia while the Ukraine war is still ongoing would be seen as a signal to the allies that their threat perceptions differ radically from the United States' (Chapter 3). Such a development might raise questions about how much the Europeans can trust the United States on security issues and result in a reticence to share intelligence in relation to Russia or the Ukraine war with U.S. officials for fear of leakage to Moscow.[187] U.S. pursuit of détente with Russia that ignores European security might also lead allies to reassess U.S. reliability as an arms supplier, as discussed above.

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[185] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025. See also Ivo Daalder, Camille Grand, and Daniela Schwarzer, *A New Transatlantic Bargain: The Case for Building a Strong European Pillar*, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, February 2025, p. 13; Rudy Ruitenberg, "Mind the Gap: Europe's To-Do List for Defense Without the US," *Defense News*, February 25, 2025; Mila Tanghe, "What European NATO Lacks," Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), February 25, 2025.

[186] Hélène Masson, "Nouvelle donne aux Etats-Unis: Quelles conséquences stratégiques pour l'Europe et pour le monde?" ["New Deal in the United States: What Strategic Consequences for Europe and the World?"], conference organized by the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, April 8, 2025; Raphaël Briant, "La filière munitions française face à la haute intensité: Des équilibres à redéfinir" ["The French Ammunition Industry Facing High Intensity: Balances to Be Redefined"], Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), January 17, 2022; Stephanie Pezard, Michael Shurkin, and David A. Ochmanek, *A Strong Ally Stretched Thin: An Overview of France's Defense Capabilities from a Burdensharing Perspective*, RAND Corporation, RR-A231-1, 2021.

[187] Elise Vincent, "European Intelligence Services Worry About Future of Cooperation with US," *Le Monde*, April 22, 2025.

Economic Policy Toward Allies

All four allies are worried that U.S. tariffs will make their transition toward a more Europe-centered security model more challenging, particularly for those countries—France and the UK—that experience limited growth and high debt. Further tariffs would likely be seen as another signal that U.S. interests are diverging from theirs and could add additional impetus to nascent steps already underway to diversify their economic relations to avoid excessive dependence on a U.S. ally perceived as unpredictable.

Conclusion

All four allies are currently committed to preserving a strong relationship with the United States despite U.S. retrenchment. French interviewees, for instance, expressed the need to preserve intelligence-sharing and the U.S. defense commitment even if there are changes to U.S. forward presence. Poland's "last light" strategy, even though under strain, means that Warsaw will likely keep making concessions in response to U.S. transactionalism. Centrist German governments would likely try to maintain or restore the relationship with the United States to the extent possible. For the UK, which is tightly integrated with the United States across military, nuclear, and intelligence matters, specialization and greater reliance on European allies could be challenging politically, as London needs to navigate complex post-Brexit politics and relations with the EU, substantial economic headwinds and fiscal constraints, and the gap between its strategic ambitions and the realities of its middle-power resources. While all four countries are hedging by spending more on defense and deepening ties with each other, they still see the United States as an irreplaceable ally and will seek to salvage what they can of the relationship as the United States retrenches.

That said, perceptions of diverging interests have already affected allies' relationship with Washington, as in the case of intelligence-sharing between the UK and the United States. These changes have been modest to date. But they raise the possibility that more dramatic U.S. policy changes could provoke more substantial shifts in allies' cooperation with the United States. Although European allies are very unlikely to end cooperation with Washington outright, these early changes demonstrate that certain U.S. policy choices can cause them to place certain limits on cooperation.

Following this logic, allies could be sensitive to the way the United States retrenches. The four allies all believe that a rapid reduction in U.S. forces from the region would leave capability gaps that Russia would be tempted to exploit. The U.S. willingness to put allies in such a situation could lead allies to prioritize local European defense acquisition and reduce their dependence on U.S. arms sales. While allies may still increase purchases of U.S. arms in the short term, out of a necessity to fill gaps, a rapid and uncoordinated U.S. withdrawal would incentivize allies to reduce dependence on Washington and emphasize European systems in the long term. Such a shift would be detrimental to the U.S. defense industrial base, which benefits from exports that help create economies of scale. The main cause of this shift would be perceptions of U.S. reliability as an ally rather than the loss of any specific U.S. military capabilities.

Allies might also be sensitive to the nature of any shift in U.S. ties with Russia. Allies believe that conceding too much to Moscow in Ukraine negotiations could embolden Russia to resume its aggression against Ukraine from a more favorable position after rearming, or to engage in

unconventional and conventional aggression against NATO allies. The United States has pursued détente with rivals in the past without alienating allies. But there are two important differences today. First, such a détente would be taking place during an ongoing major war in Europe. Second, other U.S. policies have created perceptions that interests and values are already starting to diverge more deeply. Given this context, a U.S. pursuit of détente with Moscow that ignores European security could lead allies to fear that the United States views Moscow as more of a partner to cooperate with than a threat to deter. In turn, more allies might restrict intelligence-sharing with Washington and reduce defense policy coordination, fearing leaks of sensitive defense information to Russia.

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Chapter 5

Allies' Ties with Russia and China

A classic concern is that allies will give up on balancing in the face of U.S. retrenchment and even go so far as to align, or *bandwagon*, with their rivals.[188] In this chapter, we consider that possibility along with other ways allies might adapt their policies toward U.S. rivals. Specifically, we consider two areas that affect U.S. interests: whether allies might try to settle differences with Russia and whether allies might increase economic ties with China.

The four European allies view Moscow as a major security threat and have imposed sanctions on Russia as a result. China is seen first as an economic partner and second as a distant security concern. That said, economic reliance on Chinese supply chains is increasingly framed as a vulnerability, though not an acute one. This is different from the U.S. perspective, which tends to view China and Russia through a more security-first lens and lump them together.

Our central finding is that none of the four allies would pursue security alignment with Russia or China under any of the U.S. policy alternatives we examine. Allies see Russia as a threat that needs to be balanced, and none of the four allies exhibits risk factors for bandwagoning. While assessments of China are more nuanced, none of the four allies see China as an alternative security partner, especially because of China's support to Russia's war in Ukraine.

U.S. policy could, however, have a more modest effect. U.S. retrenchment, especially if combined with domestic political change in France and Germany, could make some allies more willing to make concessions to stabilize ties with Russia. Such a policy is distinct from bandwagoning: Moscow would still be seen as a rival, but allies may be willing to do more than they are today to resolve or better manage conflicts of interest with it.

We first explain the drivers of policies toward rivals as discussed in the international relations literature. We then describe where European relations with Russia and China stand today. Finally, we assess how the U.S. policy alternatives discussed in Chapter 2 might affect European relations with Russia and with China in turn.

Drivers of Policies Toward Rivals

Balancing versus bandwagoning. Generally, the international relations literature finds that states do more to balance a rival as their threat perceptions rise. The opposite—aligning *with* a threatening power—occurs only under narrow conditions: when a state is so weak relative to the hostile power

[188] For more on the long-standing debates about allies' responses to retrenchment, see Priebe et al., 2025.

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that resistance seems futile or when the state holds revisionist goals that a partnership with the stronger power can advance. Without those conditions, balancing is the expected response.[189]

Other steps to reduce the risk of conflict. While bandwagoning is rare, states sometimes adjust their policies to reduce the risk of conflict when threat perceptions rise. Even while continuing to balance, a state may seek to manage or resolve tensions through dialogue: For example, the United States pursued détente with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and South Korea sought negotiations with North Korea as the U.S. retrenched from Asia during the 1970s. The available evidence suggests that U.S. retrenchment also led Taiwan to reduce the risk of conflict by reining in its own foreign policy ambitions. Taipei appears to have quietly reduced the resources devoted toward its goal of retaking mainland China when U.S. support declined.[190]

However, we cannot say that the literature decisively predicts one of these two policies as allies' threat perceptions rise. States facing growing threats have often concluded the opposite, believing that a tough stance was needed to deter a rival from exploiting a window of opportunity.[191] The existing international relations literature therefore makes clear predictions on balancing versus bandwagoning, but it does not make clear predictions about when states will take steps to resolve or better manage conflicts of interest with a rival.

Economic ties with rivals. Countries often have extensive trade ties even while balancing against each other militarily, so security and economic postures do not necessarily align.[192] This distinction is central to the analysis that follows because it is what allows the four allies to treat China as a major economic partner and a security concern at the same time. That said, security concerns can lead to restrictions on trade, efforts to develop alternative partners, and, in the extreme, comprehensive sanctions on an adversary, as against Russia today.

Allies' Relations with Russia and China Today

The four allies' relations with Russia and China share a common structure: uniform hostility toward Moscow on security matters and a view of China primarily as an economic partner and only secondarily as a security threat.

All Four Allies Are Committed to Balancing Russia and See Security Alignment with Moscow as Inconceivable

All four allies have moved to a hardline posture toward Moscow since 2022 and treat security alignment with Russia as inconceivable.

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[189] For a summary of the relevant literature, see Priebe et al., 2025, p. 21.

[190] Priebe et al., 2025.

[191] Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton University Press, 1976, pp. 84–89; Glaser, 1997.

[192] Mariya Grinberg, *Trade in War: Economic Cooperation Across Enemy Lines*, Cornell University Press, 2025; Dong Jung Kim, *Compound Containment: A Reigning Power's Military-Economic Countermeasures Against a Challenging Power*, University of Michigan Press, 2022.

The shift was sharpest for Germany, which had long believed that engagement could address security concerns. Its *Zeitenwende*, or "turning point," concept, announced in 2022, reversed decades of engagement dating back to *Ostpolitik* in the 1970s—a policy that had been sustained by the belief that economic interdependence would promote peace; by guilt over Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union[193] and gratitude for Moscow's acquiescence to reunification;[194] and by German industry's appetite for cheap Russian energy exports.[195] After 2022, Germany recast Russia as the principal threat to the European security order and embraced deterrence through stronger military power rather than engagement and assurances as the chief way to ensure peace.[196] Chancellor Olaf Scholz did note the need to maintain German-Russian diplomatic relations in the long term,[197] but Berlin also believes that NATO needs to sustain a hardline policy against Russia as long as the war in Ukraine lasts and Moscow interferes in European domestic politics.

As in Germany, France's policy has shifted. Following the invasion of Crimea in 2014, France sanctioned Russia and, after 2016, deployed forces to Estonia, Lithuania, Romania, and the Black Sea as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence and tailored forward presence.[198] After 2022, France initially tried to maintain an active line of communication—consistent with France's policy of "dialogue and firmness"[199] and acting as a "balancing power" that could avoid binary confrontations and play a mediating role[200]—but quickly abandoned this approach. In 2022–2023, France concluded

[193] German policymaker, interview with author, via video call, July 2025; German policymaker, interview with author, Berlin, August 2025.

[194] German expert, interview with author, via video call, July 2025.

[195] German experts, interviews with authors, via video call, July 2025.

[196] German expert, interview with author, via video call, July 2025; Federal Foreign Office, 2023, pp. 22–23.

[197] Olaf Scholz, "Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin," Federal Government of Germany, February 27, 2022.

[198] France also deployed military instructors to Poland, where they train Ukrainian military personnel (Elise Vincent, "In Poland, Ukrainian Soldiers Are Trained by the French," *Le Monde*, July 12, 2023).

[199] Fabius, 2015.

[200] This doctrine was outlined most clearly in Emmanuel Macron, "Discours du Président de la République à l'occasion de la conférence des ambassadrices et des ambassadeurs" ["Speech by the President of the Republic on the Occasion of the Conference of Ambassadors"], September 1, 2022. See also Ben Hall, "France's Bid to Be 'Balancing Power' Jars with Diplomatic Reality," *Financial Times*, April 22, 2023; and Marc Semo, "La puissance d'équilibre(s) ou l'entre-deux diplomatique à la française" ["The Power of Balance(s) or the Diplomatic In-Between, French Style"], *Le Monde*, January 25, 2023. An earlier example is the role that former French President Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–2012) played in mediating the end of the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia (Ron Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 191–214).

that conciliatory efforts had failed to end the war,[201] stopped pursuing dialogue with Moscow,[202] and ended its opposition to Ukraine's NATO membership.[203]

The UK's policy has also shifted. While in 2010, its Strategic Defence and Security Review made little mention of Russia, except to discuss potential dialogue and cooperation, the March 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy described Russia as the top threat to the UK's security.[204] The war with Ukraine since 2022 has only strengthened Britain's very hardline position toward Russia, which includes strong support for Ukraine and is backed by broad domestic political consensus.[205]

For Poland, 2022 confirmed a long-standing posture toward Russia. Russia's 2014 seizure of Crimea had already led Warsaw to take a harder line toward Moscow. After 2022, relations became openly hostile and limited to essential diplomatic contacts.[206] Poland is opposed to talks with Russia to end the war in Ukraine under current conditions. Warsaw's view is that talks under current conditions would signal waning Western commitment, motivate Russia to keep fighting, and embolden Moscow to continue to use unconventional warfare to further weaken the will of NATO allies. Poland would consider talks only after a period of continued support to Ukraine and European rearmament that allows Kyiv and its European supporters to negotiate from a position of strength.[207] Following this logic, if the war with Ukraine ends in a way that Warsaw deems satisfactory,[208] Poland might also see this as a position of strength from which to negotiate on other conflicts of interest with Russia.

None of the four allies exhibits the conditions for bandwagoning, such as extreme weakness or revisionist ambitions. Even Poland, the most exposed to Russia, has significant military capabilities and the support of regional allies, so it does not see resistance as futile. And none of the four hold revisionist goals that Russia could help advance.

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[201] Minic, 2024, p. 13.

[202] "French Foreign Minister Says Dialogue with Russia No Longer in France's 'Interest'," *Le Monde* and *AFP*, April 8, 2024; Emmanuel Macron, "Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, at the Munich Security Conference," February 17, 2023.

[203] Elie Tenenbaum and Amelie Zima, *Return to the East? The Russian Threat and the French Pivot to Europe's Eastern Flank*, Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), June 13, 2024, pp. 23–24. See also Minic, 2024.

[204] Duncan Allan and Ian Bond, "A New Russia Policy for Post-Brexit Britain: The UK Must Abandon Its Delusions to Deal Effectively with Russia," Chatham House, January 2022, p. 2.

[205] See, for example, Government of the United Kingdom, "UK Support to Ukraine: Factsheet," webpage, updated July 31, 2025d; More in Common, *Ukraine: The Fallout from the Oval Office*, March 9, 2025; and Gideon Skinner, "British Public Opinion About the Conflict in Ukraine, Three Years on," *Ipsos*, February 23, 2025.

[206] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, "Relacje dwustronne" ["Bilateral Relations"], undated; Paulina Siegień, "Polish-Russian Relations: A Cold War of Gestures and New Lows," *New Eastern Europe*, December 20, 2024.

[207] Marek Menkiszak, "Sometimes It Is Better Not to Talk. Pitfalls of Potential Dialogue Between Europe and Russia," Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), February 23, 2026.

[208] Warsaw sees a Ukrainian victory as including the preservation of its independence, limited Russian control over Ukrainian territory, a path toward reunification with areas still occupied at the end of the war, prospects for EU and NATO membership, and a Russian financial contribution to Ukraine's reconstruction (Szeligowski, 2025).

France and Germany Are Open to Participating in Negotiations for a Ceasefire in Ukraine

The United States has not included allies in its negotiations to bring about a ceasefire in Ukraine. But France, Germany, and (more hesitantly) the UK are reportedly laying the groundwork for future participation.[209] Mainstream German parties and France hope for a more stable relationship in the long term despite their current hardline policies. These hopes and a history of outreach to Moscow by both countries suggest that centrist parties could pursue a broader détente with Russia if its war on Ukraine ends or leadership in Moscow changes.

Some Extremist Parties in France and Germany Oppose the Current Hardline Approach Toward Russia

While the war in Ukraine is ongoing, the hardline consensus rests in part on the parties currently in power. As discussed in Chapter 3, far-left and far-right parties in France and Germany—such as the RN and LFI parties in France and the far-right AfD and far-left Die Linke parties in Germany—are fundamentally inward-looking and assess the Russian threat as lower than the mainstream does. For example, RN in France has officially distanced itself from earlier pro-Russian statements, but many in the party still support a more accommodating policy.[210] Similar divisions exist within the AfD in Germany, where a historical pro-Russian current now coexists with a more Atlanticist one.[211] These parties are reluctant to support Ukraine and, in some cases, do not support the military buildup against Russia.[212]

This dynamic is weaker in the United Kingdom. Reform has signaled continuity on the current hardline policy on Russia,[213] though a future Reform government might soften sanctions on Russian oil and gas to lower energy prices. Because the Reform party has not yet published a manifesto, there is some uncertainty about its future policies.

This dynamic does not apply to Poland, where there is a strong domestic consensus that Moscow's ambitions are fundamentally incompatible with Polish interests.[214] Interviewees noted that openly pro-Russian positions are not only politically untenable but also subject to strong public and

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[209] Steven Erlanger, "Wary of Trump, Europe Seeks Role in Any Russia-Ukraine Talks," *New York Times*, August 15, 2026.

[210] Catherine Fieschi, "The French Far Right's Foreign Policy: Big Ambitions, Uncertain Direction," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 19, 2026; Clément Guillou and Corentin Lesueur, "Au Rassemblement national, la ligne 'pacifiste' vis-à-vis de la Russie prend le dessus" ["Within the Rassemblement National, the 'Pacifist' Line Regarding Russia Is Gaining the Upper Hand"], *Le Monde*, November 27, 2025.

[211] Elsa Conesa, "In Germany, the AfD Is Divided over Russia," *Le Monde*, November 21, 2025.

[212] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

[213] For example, Reform pledged to increase defense spending significantly to ensure the UK Armed Forces are "once again . . . feared by adversaries" and "ready to deal with the ever-present threats posed by Russia and China" (Reform UK, "Our Policies," homepage, undated).

[214] Katarzyna Pełczyńska-Nałęcz, *Poland's Approach to Russia: Radicalism Without Policy*, Batory Foundation, 2019.

institutional resistance. Even populist and nationalist parties, while occasionally critical of Western partners, have maintained a hardline posture toward Russia.

China Is a Distant Security Concern and an Economic Partner Requiring Some Caution

The four allies see Beijing as a distant security threat and an economic partner. On security issues, China ranks well below Russia for all four allies, but their assessments vary in intensity. The United Kingdom perceives Beijing as a greater security threat than do most European states, though London still has a less hardline position toward China than does Washington.[215] France views China as a systemic rival and is wary of China's ambitions in the Indo-Pacific near the French territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia and of its influence operations and cyberattacks[216]—even while seeing reasons for engagement.[217] France does not consider security alignment with China as an option.[218] Germany does not see China as a direct threat because of its geographical distance, but it does see indirect threats from Chinese support for Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Germany does not consider China as a potential security partner because of ideological incompatibility, and particularly its support of Russia.[219] Warsaw increasingly views Beijing's close alignment with Moscow, particularly in the context of Ukraine, as a threat to its core security interests.[220]

All four maintain strong economic ties with China, but they still see reason for caution. Germany's relationship with China is primarily economic, and some in Berlin view China as an even more important trading partner now, given U.S. tariffs. But German concerns have grown about China's long-term trajectory and the uneven benefits of trade. China already accounts for a marginally larger share of French imports than the United States does.[221] Several French interviewees noted that EU trade discussions were easier with China than with the United States because Washington has

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[215] Government of the United Kingdom, 2025c; Allegra Mendelson, "Britain 'Ready to Fight' over Taiwan, Defence Secretary Suggests," *The Telegraph*, July 27, 2025. The Labour government has expressed a desire to strike a balance between cooperation with China on trade and a robust stance against Chinese human rights violations and security threats, but future Reform or Conservative electoral victories would bring a more hawkish and confrontational stance toward Beijing (Reform UK, undated).

[216] Paul Charon and Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, *Chinese Influence Operations: A Machiavellian Moment*, Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'Ecole Militaire (IRSEM), October 2021.

[217] Secrétariat Général de la Défense et de la Sécurité Nationale (SGDSN), 2025, p. 6. This view is consistent with the EU position (European Commission, "EU-China—A Strategic Outlook: Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council," *JOIN(2019) 5 Final*, March 12, 2019b). See also Pascal Allizard, Gisele Jourda, Edouard Courtial, Andre Gattolin, and Jean-Noel Guerini, *Sénat, La France peut-elle contribuer au réveil européen dans un XXIe siècle chinois?* [*Can France Contribute to European Awakening in a Chinese 21st Century?*], Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense and the Armed Forces, Information Report No. 846 (2020–2021), September 22, 2021, p. 60; and French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, "Chine: Relations Bilatérales" ["China: Bilateral Relations"], March 31, 2025.

[218] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

[219] German expert, interview with author, via video call, July 2025.

[220] Paulina Ciesielska, "Sikorski wskazał zagrożenie dla całej Europy" ["Sikorski Strikes China. "A Threat to All of Europe"], *WP News*, May 6, 2024; "Bruksela, moja miłość: Trójkąt UE–Chiny–USA i polski dylemat strategiczny" ["Brussels, My Love: The EU–China–US Triangle and Poland's Strategic Dilemma"], *Euro News*, October 11, 2025.

[221] United Nations, "UN Comtrade Database," dashboard, 2026a.

pursued a more volatile trade policy in recent years.[222] However, Paris is also concerned about the trade deficit between China and the European Union, which could make a deepening of exchanges challenging.[223] Poland historically viewed trade with China as a major opportunity,[224] but growing concerns that China could weaponize economic interdependence have prompted measures to regulate, though not end, new deals.[225] Similarly, the United Kingdom's recent "China Audit" calls for a balanced relationship that boosts defenses against Chinese economic coercion through such tools as investment screening while still pursuing selective cooperation.[226] London also views an important alignment of interests with Beijing in other areas, such as climate action and global health, where China is sometimes now closer to the European position than the United States is.[227]

U.S. Tariffs Have Not Driven Allies to Significantly Closer Economic Ties with China

So far, there is little evidence that U.S. tariffs have significantly affected the EU-China economic relationship. Many analysts anticipated that allies might seek closer economic ties with China to make up for decreased trade with the United States.[228] European imports from China did increase on average across the EU in recent years (though, as Figure 5.1 shows, these effects were variable across allies).[229] And some authors attribute the increase, at least in part, to U.S. tariffs driving a diversion in trade.[230] However, several empirical studies have found that other factors, not U.S. tariffs, caused the

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[222] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

[223] "France's Macron Threatens China with Tariffs over Trade Surplus—Les Echos," Reuters, December 7, 2025.

[224] Alicja Bachulska, "Beyond Business as Usual: A China Strategy for Poland," European Council on Foreign Relations, December 4, 2023.

[225] Protections include a port law allowing termination of long-term lease agreements for strategic purposes and energy regulations requiring domestically produced equipment in public procurement ("Chiny biorą port w Gdyni na celownik. Eksperci mają obawy o bezpieczeństwo" ["China Targets the Port of Gdynia. Experts Have Security Concerns"], *Onet Wiadomości*, April 4, 2024; Louise Guillot, "Von der Leyen Touts New Plan to Break Reliance on China Critical Minerals," *Politico*, October 25, 2025).

[226] William Matthews, "Is China Friend or Foe to the UK? A Government Audit Says: 'It's Complicated,'" Chatham House, July 2, 2025.

[227] Chris Aylett and Antony Froggatt, "An Agenda for UK–China Climate Cooperation," Chatham House, January 16, 2025; Government of the United Kingdom, "UK and China Restart Meaningful Climate Change Dialogue," press release, March 14, 2025e.

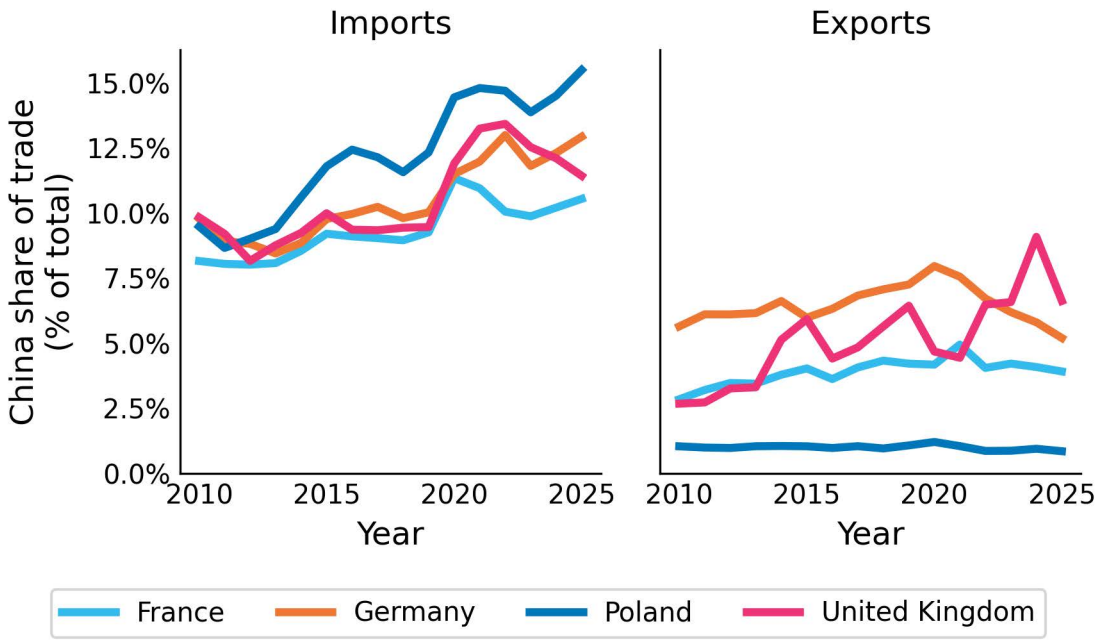
[228] Olivier Schmitt, "Why a Rapid U.S. Withdrawal from Europe Will Reinforce China," Carnegie Europe, December 15, 2024b; French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025. Our preliminary analysis also noted these incentives (Priebe, Burdette, and Behmer, 2025).

[229] Valentina Aprigliano, Lorenzo Bencivelli, Alessandro Borin, Francesco Paolo Conteduca, Francesco Corsello, Stefano Federico, Claire Giordano, Fabrizio Leone, Michele Mancini, Ludovic Panon, Lilia Patrignani, and Stefano Pica, "China Shock 2.0: Structural Drivers and Implications for the Euro Area," Questioni di Economia e Finanza [Occasional Papers] 1025, Bank of Italy, Economic Research and International Relations Area, June 2026.

[230] Yuval Molina Obedman, "EU-China Deficit Jumps 18% in 2025 as US Tariffs Divert Trade to Europe," *Courthouse News*, April 10, 2026; Alice Hancock, "China Reroutes Clothes Exports to Europe After US Tariffs Upset Trade," *Financial Times*, October 6, 2025.

change.[231] In theory, U.S. tariffs on the EU could have increased EU exports to China through trade diversion. In reality, the reverse happened: EU exports to China declined in 2025.[232]

Figure 5.1. Share of Trade with China for France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom



SOURCE: Features data from United Nations, 2026a.
NOTE: China's trade share is calculated as the value of bilateral imports or exports with China as a percentage of each reporter country's total trade in goods, derived from UN Comtrade customs declarations.

How Future U.S. Policies Could Affect Allies' Relations with Russia

No U.S. policy we examine would produce security alignment between any of the four allies and Moscow. The changes instead bear on a narrower question: Would U.S. policy lead allies to soften or further harden their policies toward Russia?

[231] Julien Le Roux and Tajda Spital, "Global Trade Redirection: Tracking the Role of Trade Diversion from US Tariffs in Chinese Export Developments," *ECB Economic Bulletin*, No. 1, 2026; Beatrice Weder di Mauro Hélène Rey and Jeromin Zettelmeyer, eds., *Paris Report 4: The New Global Imbalance*, Centre for Economic Policy Research, 2026; Patrick Schulte, Almira Enders, Andreas Esser, and Felix Strobe, "From Tariffs to Trade Flows: Diversion Effects and China's Exports to the EU," Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR), February 27, 2026; Aprigliano et al., 2026.

[232] Eurostat, "Trade in Goods with China in 2025," April 10, 2026. Many forces other than U.S. tariffs affect trade volumes, so the fact that exports declined is not especially strong evidence for a lack of trade diversion. Unfortunately, no one appears to have done the economic analysis needed to isolate the effect of U.S. tariffs on EU exports to China.

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Changes in Commitments, Posture, or Policy Toward Russia

As discussed in Chapter 3, the following U.S. policies would increase allies' concerns about U.S. commitments and, therefore, threat perceptions:

- a further reduction in commitments in any form
- reduction in peacetime presence, especially a rapid, uncoordinated withdrawal
- deprioritization of Russia
- pursuit of a détente with Russia that does not prioritize European security.

Allies might, in turn, adjust their policies toward Russia to reduce the risk of having a conflict with Russia, which they would face with less U.S. support. The international relations literature, as described above, suggests that allies could take one of two approaches to try to do this, depending on their beliefs about how a NATO-Russia conflict would arise. If allies fear an opportunistic Russian attack against NATO, then they might choose even more-hardline policies to signal resolve (e.g., more-assertive responses to violations of NATO member airspace by Russia, military exercises near Russia's borders[233]) to make up for declining U.S. contributions. If allies worry about a NATO-Russia conflict arising from an escalation of the current war in Ukraine, then they might limit the type of support they provide or step up efforts to negotiate an end to the conflict. Allies might also pursue both paths simultaneously.

As noted above, the general international relations literature does not have a clear prediction about which way allies will go. Allies facing U.S. retrenchment during the Cold War did moderate their policies or pursue negotiation even though they saw their rivals as aggressive, as European allies see Russia today.[234] But we have to consider allies' contemporary outlooks, too.

Of the four allies, Poland seems the most likely to respond aggressively to show Russia that it will stand firm. That's because it has the strongest belief that any sign of weakness would embolden Russia to attack a NATO member. Because Poland wants to negotiate with Russia only from a position of strength, U.S. retrenchment might make Warsaw even less willing to negotiate with Moscow in the near term than it already is.

Unlike Poland, France and Germany have a history of outreach to Moscow to stabilize ties and are even more likely to resume such outreach if extremist parties make electoral gains. These allies might, therefore, take up the mantle of negotiations if the United States gives up on trilateral talks. Such a development, combined with more extensive U.S. retrenchment, could lead these allies to act with greater restraint toward Moscow (e.g., placing more restrictions on long-range fires provided to Ukraine) or put more pressure on Ukraine to accept a deal.

If a U.S.-brokered ceasefire in Ukraine were reached and held, allies might be less concerned about emboldening Moscow than they are today. As a result, allies might be more willing to negotiate with Russia on other conflicts of interest. Poland might still view any détente with the current regime as rewarding expansion, so it might take the longest to observe Russian behavior and decide whether to soften its policies toward Moscow.

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[233] For such a proposal from Poland, see "Sikorski Urges Aggressive NATO Drills Near Kaliningrad," *Kyiv Post*, September 13, 2026.

[234] Priebe et al., 2025.

Economic Policy Toward Allies

U.S. tariff policy is not a driver of allies' ties with Russia. Allies' sanctions against Russia are driven by security concerns. So, additional U.S. tariffs are unlikely to make allies turn to Russia as a trading partner. The economic action might only produce changes with respect to China, to which we now turn.

How Future U.S. Policies Could Affect Allies' Relations with China

The four allies see China as a strategic competitor but a much more distant military threat to their homelands, so the four allies have weaker incentives to balance against China than Russia (though France and the UK have territory and citizens in the Indo-Pacific). Still, Beijing's support of Moscow in the war against Ukraine, among other reasons, means that China is not seen as an alternative security partner even as the U.S. retrenches. Possible electoral changes in allied governments, such as an RN victory in France, are unlikely to change this view.[235] But changes in U.S. policy might also influence allies' economic ties with China.

Changes in Commitments

If the United States makes its commitments to European allies conditional on alignment with U.S. policy, that might prompt some allies to take a harder line on foreign policy toward China to curry favor with Washington. As discussed in Chapter 4, the UK and Poland are the most likely of the four allies to do something like this. For example, Poland might take further steps to reduce its economic dependence on China if Warsaw thought doing so would please Washington.

Posture Changes

If the United Kingdom had to prioritize addressing threats in Europe in the face of U.S. drawdown of forces from the region, especially a rapid or uncoordinated one, that might compel the UK to withdraw the small maritime presence it has in the Pacific. That presence is small enough that it would not materially change the distribution of power in the Pacific, though. France, too, might have to make some hard choices and possibly lessen its military presence in the Pacific to focus on addressing higher threat levels in Europe.

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[235] In France, RN has a critical stance toward China, which it perceives as threatening France's interests in New Caledonia and Polynesia and as being detrimental to France's trade balance (Valérie Niquet, "Parsing Asia Policy for France's Radical Parties," *The Diplomat*, June 28, 2024). LFI on the far left appears to be much more supportive of deeper engagement with China, with its leader, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, having taken pro-China stances on issues ranging from Taiwan to the treatment of the Uyghur minority. However, LFI would be unlikely to win an electoral victory outside a coalition with less radical parties, whose views on China are more cautious and would likely balance LFI's (Pierre Januel, "A l'Assemblée nationale, l'embarrassant rapport de Sophie Chikirou sur la Chine" ["At the National Assembly, Sophie Chikirou's Embarrassing Report on China"], *Le Monde*, July 4, 2025; Niquet, 2024). Other voices—such as Bernard Guetta (from Macron's party)—suggesting that it may be time for France to get politically closer to China are marginal (Anne-Laure Dufeal, "'Europe Must Counter Russia and Trump with China Alliance,' Says Liberal MEP," *Brussels Signal*, April 9, 2025).

Economic Policy Toward Allies

Higher U.S. tariffs on trade with Europe could, in theory, push all four allies toward deeper economic ties with China to offset lost trade with the United States. French experts in particular mentioned this possibility.[236] Some of our interviewees noted that, as of early 2025, EU discussions on tariff issues were easier with China than with the United States—the former being perceived as more agreement-seeking than an aggressive and volatile United States.[237] This warmer economic relationship, however, is unlikely to push France toward greater security alignment with China. And, as described above, there is little evidence that tariffs are having a major impact on trade flows. So, while economic ties might deepen with China to some extent if U.S. tariffs increase further, the effect may not be dramatic.

Conclusion

The clearest finding of this chapter is a negative one: None of the U.S. policy alternatives we examine would lead any of the four allies to pursue security alignment with Russia or China. Allies' threat perceptions of Russia foreclose it, and allies do not face any of the conditions that lead states to bandwagon with a powerful rival. The main mediating factor that might increase the chances of dialogue with Russia would be electoral changes in Paris and Berlin, especially in combination with U.S. retrenchment. Beijing's support for Moscow, as well as the threat from Chinese economic coercion and influence operations, also makes it unlikely that allies would turn to China as an alternative to the United States for security matters.

[236] Schmitt, 2024b; French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

[237] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

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Chapter 6

Defense Spending

In this chapter, we analyze how France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom are changing their defense spending and how the U.S. policy alternatives described in Chapter 2 might affect those trajectories.

To preview, we find that the perception of Russia as a larger and priority threat and increasing doubts about the durability of the U.S. commitment are motivating all four allies to spend more on defense. These allies diverge, however, on the capacity to sustain and further increase spending, as well as the composition of that spending. France and the United Kingdom are fiscally constrained by large debt levels and slow growth, whereas Poland and Germany are comparatively well placed, although both still face fiscal challenges. The four allies also differ in what they spend on—a factor partly shaped by how they prioritize their interests beyond Europe.

On the effects of U.S. policy, we find that the same policies that increase threat perceptions (see Chapter 3) would also strengthen allies' *incentive* to spend on defense. Allies' fiscal position, however, governs their *capacity* to act on those incentives.

Allies also have some differences in how much they resource interests outside of Europe. France and the United Kingdom have global roles and secondary interests in other theaters, such as concerns about instability in the Middle East and North Africa and security interests in the Pacific that they would have to reprioritize if the threat in Europe became more severe. Poland, on the other hand, already focuses almost entirely on Russia, while Germany is adjusting its focus back to Europe and to conventional defense and deterrence rather than peacekeeping and stability operations.

We proceed by identifying the drivers of defense spending and describing where spending stands today. We then assess how the U.S. policy alternatives would affect both the level and the composition of allied spending, including how competing priorities between global interests and European security might shape those choices.

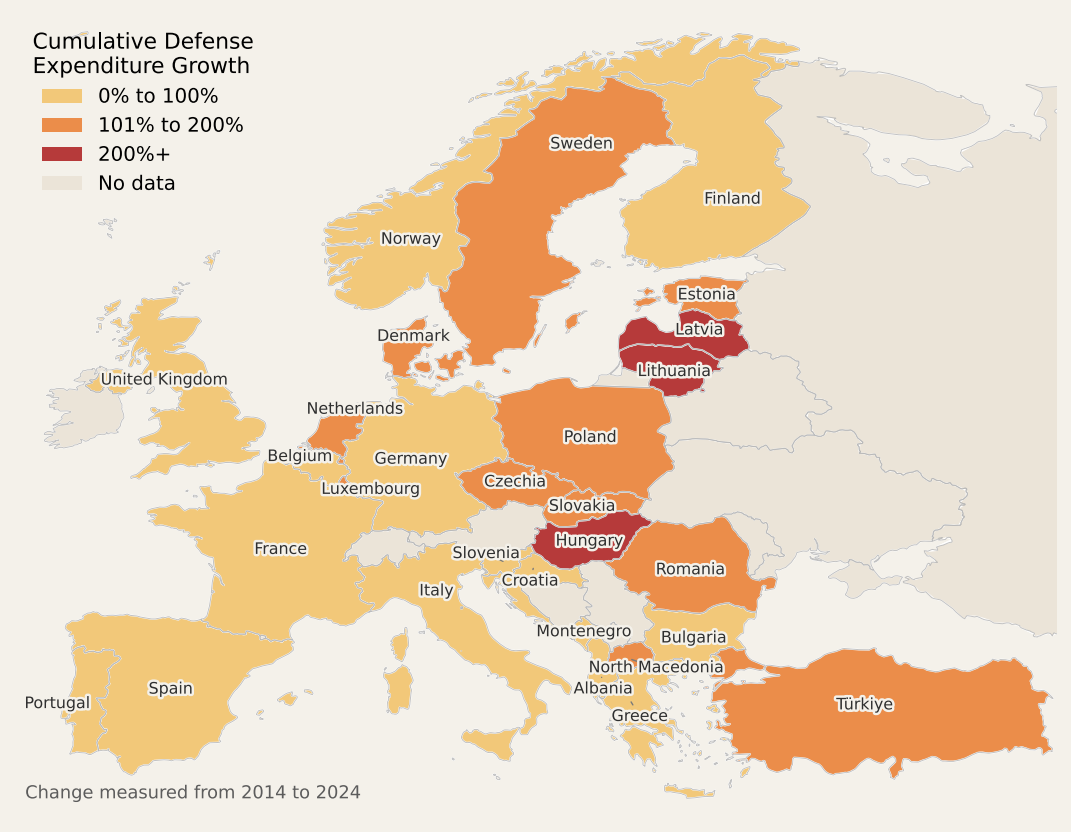
Drivers of Defense Spending

The international relations literature identifies several factors that lead states to spend more on defense: higher threat perceptions, reductions in an ally's will or ability to provide protection, elite consensus that a threat requires balancing, and economic and fiscal factors. The first two supply the motive for higher spending, and the latter two shape a state's constraints on acting on those incentives. In this chapter, the motive is largely shared across the four allies, so the constraints—fiscal capacity and political consensus—do most of the work in explaining why their future trajectories may differ.

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Threat perceptions. Threat perceptions are a key driver of defense spending. All else equal, states facing higher threats spend more on defense to reduce their vulnerability.[238] This pattern is visible across NATO allies: Since Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea, increases in European defense spending have correlated with increases in Russian military spending.[239] Moreover, allies closest to Russia—including Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland—increased their spending more than allies farther west after the 2014 and 2022 invasions (Figure 6.1).[240]

Figure 6.1. Cumulative Growth in Real Defense Expenditure Within NATO Between 2014 and 2024



SOURCES: Features data from "Table 2: Defence Expenditures" in NATO, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2009–2016)," press release, March 13, 2017; and NATO, 2026a.

[238] For a literature review, see Priebe et al., 2025, pp. 19–21.

[239] Prior to 2014, European defense spending did not strongly correlate with Russian military spending, possibly because threat perceptions of Russia were so much lower (Edward Hunter Christie, "The Demand for Military Expenditure in Europe: The Role of Fiscal Space in the Context of a Resurgent Russia," *Defence and Peace Economics*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2019; Ringailė Kuokštytė, Vytautas Kuokštis, and Ieva Miklaševskaja, "External and Domestic Political Determinants of Defence Spending: A Time-Series Cross-Section Analysis of EU Member States," *European Security*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2021; Justin George and Todd Sandler, "Demand for Military Spending in NATO, 1968–2015: A Spatial Panel Approach," *European Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 53, July 2018).

[240] Edward Hunter Christie, Caroline Buts, and Cind Du Bois, "Exploring the Speed of Change: European Defence Budgets in an Age of Danger," *Defence & Security Analysis*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 2024.

NOTE: Several NATO allies farther west substantially increased defense expenditures after 2024. Germany's spending, for example, rose by nearly 30 percent from 2024 to 2025. We exclude 2025 and 2026 data because these increases may be driven by concerns about U.S. commitments (discussed in Chapter 4) in addition to changes in Russia's behaviors and capabilities.

The nature of the threat also shapes what allies buy. Southern European states, including Italy and Spain, see terrorism and migration as major threats, so they invest more in homeland and border security than allies focused more on conventional or nuclear deterrence of Russia.[241] Changing technologies can reshape those choices, with the demonstrated effectiveness of drones and AI driving new European investments in autonomous systems.[242]

Finally, threat perceptions shape how states allocate resources to defending their interests. When the threat in a state's core region rises, it is more likely to concentrate attention and resources closer to vital interests near home and reduce resources devoted to more-peripheral interests and threats.[243]

Other allies' capability and willingness to defend. Confidence in allies affects states' threat perceptions (as described in Chapter 3). This confidence also affects incentives to *free ride*, spending less and letting allies bear more of the burden of collective defense.[244] Conversely, when confidence in U.S. commitments or capabilities declines, allies tend to spend more.[245] Consistent with this finding, in the late 1970s, NATO allies increased defense spending as the Carter administration scaled back U.S. investments, but this trend reversed in the 1980s as U.S. defense expenditures rose under President Ronald Reagan.[246]

Elite consensus. Because defense spending competes with domestic priorities—the classic guns-versus-butter trade-off—large and sustained increases require elite consensus across political parties.[247] Even when leaders agree on the threat, they can disagree on how much to spend, as illustrated by internal divisions that limited British rearmament in the 1930s.[248]

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[241] Kuokštytė, Kuokštis, and Miklaševskaja, 2021; Lucie Béraud-Sudreau and Bastian Giegerich, "NATO Defence Spending and European Threat Perceptions," *Survival,* Vol. 60, No. 4, 2018.

[242] Elsa Ohlen, "Why Europe Is Suddenly Betting Big on Drones," CNBC, July 15, 2026.

[243] Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment," *International Security,* Vol. 35, No. 4, 2011.

[244] Jacques van Ypersele de Strihou, "Sharing the Defense Burden Among Western Allies," *Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 49, No. 4, 1967; Mancur Olson and Richard Zeckhauser, "An Economic Theory of Alliances," *Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 48, No. 3, 1966.

[245] Todd Sandler, "Impurity of Defense: An Application to the Economics of Alliances," *Kyklos*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 1977; Wukki Kim and Todd Sandler, "NATO Security Burden Sharing, 1991–2020," *Defence and Peace Economics*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2023.

[246] Mike Sweeney, "How Would Europe Defend Itself?" Defense Priorities, April 11, 2023.

[247] In reality, the choice is not quite that stark, because defense spending tends to promote economic growth, though (at least in the U.S. context) not as much as other investments (Bryan Rooney, Grant Johnson, and Miranda Priebe, *How Does Defense Spending Affect Economic Growth?* RAND Corporation, RR-A739-2, 2021; Laron K. Williams, "Guns Yield Butter? An Exploration of Defense Spending Preferences," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 63, No. 5, 2019; Guy D. Whitten and Laron K. Williams, "Buttery Guns and Welfare Hawks: The Politics of Defense Spending in Advanced Industrial Democracies," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 55, No. 1, 2011).

[248] Schweller, 2004.

Economic health and fiscal constraints also affect what level of spending is possible. Growing economies have larger tax bases with which to finance spending without painful domestic cuts or taxes,[249] while slower growth and higher levels of debt shrink the resources available and make it harder to borrow.[250] Italy's public debt is already 135 percent of GDP, and seven European NATO states already pay more interest on their debt than they spend on defense.[251] The EU also has specific fiscal rules as part of the Stability and Growth Pact that limit governments' deficit spending, though in 2025 there were 15 countries that received exemptions to enable higher defense spending for four years, so these constraints are real but not immutable.[252]

Allies' Defense Spending Today

Allies have been increasing defense spending because of a higher assessment of the threat posed by Russia since 2022 (Chapter 3) and growing concerns about U.S. commitments (Chapter 4). Germany and Poland—more proximate to Russia and with better fiscal situations—have made larger increases than France and the UK. Allies also differ in the defense investments they prioritize and the durability of the political consensus behind them.

All Four Allies Are Increasing Defense Spending Because of the Growing Threat Russia Poses and Concerns About U.S. Commitments

All four allies are increasing spending on defense in real terms and as a share of GDP (Figures 6.2 and 6.3). The allies have also committed to meet NATO's targets of 3.5 percent for core defense spending and 1.5 percent of GDP for defense-related spending by 2035.[253]

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[249] Paul Poast, "Beyond the 'Sinew of War': The Political Economy of Security as a Subfield," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 22, 2019; Robert Powell, "Guns, Butter, and Anarchy," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87, No. 1, March 1993.

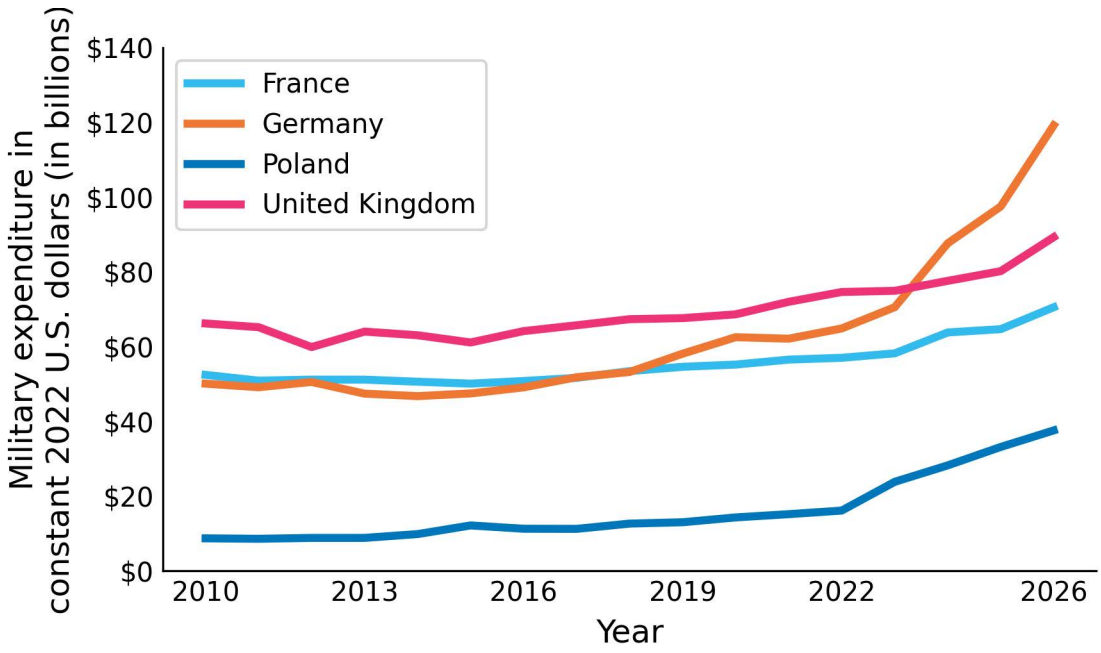
[250] Jordan Becker, "Rusty Guns and Buttery Soldiers: Unemployment and the Domestic Origins of Defense Spending," *European Political Science Review*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2021; Matthew DiGiuseppe, "Guns, Butter, and Debt: Sovereign Creditworthiness and Military Expenditure," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 52, No. 5, 2015; Richard C. Eichenberg and Richard Stoll, "Representing Defense: Democratic Control of the Defense Budget in the United States and Western Europe," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 2003; Poast, 2019; Jakub Odehnal and Jirí Neubauer, "Economic, Security, and Political Determinants of Military Spending in NATO Countries," *Defence and Peace Economics*, Vol. 31, No. 5, 2020; Nick Witney, "Too Much, Too Fast: Europe's Defence-Spending Tsunami Is Coming," European Council on Foreign Relations, June 24, 2025.

[251] Florian Dorn, Niklas Potrafke, and Marcel Schlepper, *European Defence Spending in 2024 and Beyond: How to Provide Security in an Economically Challenging Environment*, CESifo GmbH, Policy Report No. 45, 2024; Niccolò Comini, "NATO's 5% Defense Pledge and Italy: Can It? Will It?" Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), July 9, 2025.

[252] The pact limits each member state's annual government deficit to 3 percent of GDP and total government debt to 60 percent of GDP. These rules were suspended from 2020 to 2023 but reactivated in 2024 (Jordan Becker, "Accidental Rivals? EU Fiscal Rules, NATO, and Transatlantic Burden-Sharing," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 56, No. 5, 2019; Dorn, Potrafke, and Schlepper, 2024, p. 11; European Commission, "Stability and Growth Pact," undated). The countries approved to increase spending beyond allowed limits under the national escape clause are Belgium, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, and Slovenia (European Council, "Council Activates Flexibility in EU Fiscal Rules for 15 Member States to Increase Defence Spending," July 8, 2025).

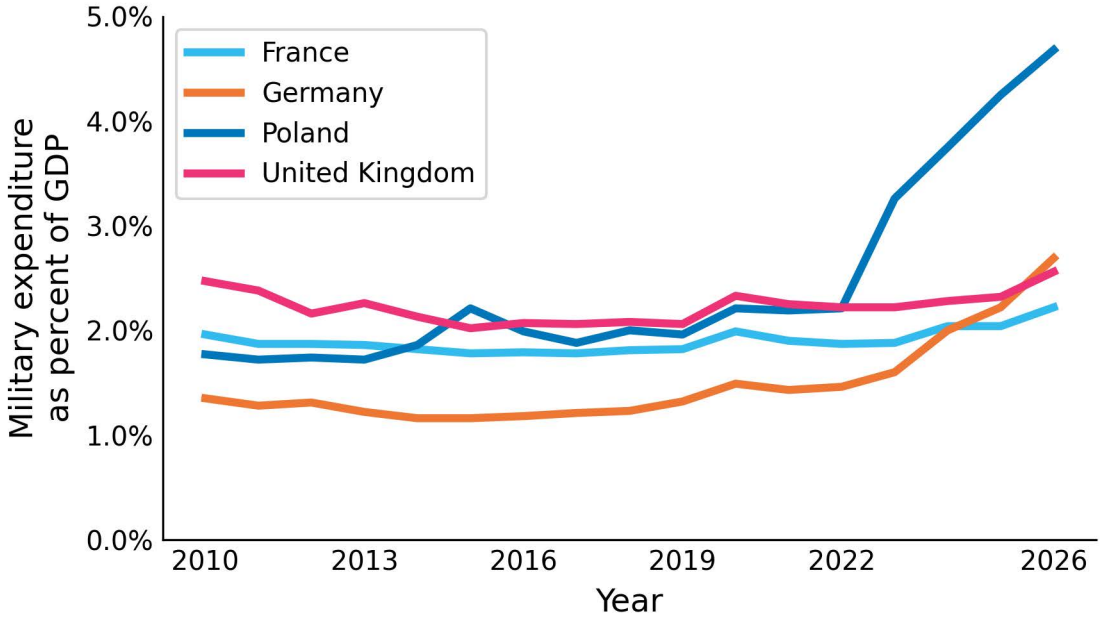
[253] NATO, "The Hague Summit Declaration," press release, June 25, 2025c.

Figure 6.2. Military Expenditure for France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom



SOURCES: Features data from "Table 2: Defence Expenditures" in NATO, 2017; and NATO, 2026a.

Figure 6.3. Military Expenditure as a Percentage of GDP for France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom



SOURCES: Features data from "Table 3: Defence Expenditures as a Percentage of Gross Domestic Product and Annual Real Change" in NATO, 2017; and NATO, 2026a.

France plans to nominally increase funding by 57 percent by 2030 from its 2023 spending levels.[254] So, French leaders have started to prepare the population for sustained higher defense expenditures.[255] Poland has doubled defense spending as a share of GDP, rising from 1.88 percent in 2014 to 4.12 percent in 2024 and headed toward 5 percent in 2026.[256] Poland announced a special, extra-budgetary funding mechanism to supplement the Ministry of National Defence budget and support these increases.[257] The UK's defense spending has increased in real terms, but its share of GDP has held steady, at around 2.23 percent.[258] The UK has said that it will spend 2.7 percent on core defense by 2030 and meet NATO's 2035 targets, though it is unclear whether it will fulfill these commitments.[259]

Germany's increase has been the most significant, via two policy shifts. In June 2022, then-Chancellor Scholz created the Bundeswehr Special Fund through a constitutional amendment that allowed for a debt-financed fund.[260] This finally put Germany on track to meet the 2 percent NATO target set at the 2014 Wales Summit. In 2025, the Merz government used a constitutional amendment to exempt defense spending from the so-called debt brake that limits Germany's government borrowing,[261] adopting a €649 billion five-year plan that would raise defense spending from 2.4 percent of GDP in 2025 to 3.5 percent by 2029.[262] Use of the 2022 special fund got off to a

[254] French Senate, "Project de loi relatif à la programmation militaire pour les années 2024 à 2030 et portant diverses dispositions intéressant la défense" ["Draft Law Relating to Military Programming for the Years 2024 to 2030 and Containing Various Provisions Relating to Defense"], June 13, 2023.

[255] See, for example, Emmanuel Macron, "Adresse aux Français" ["Address to the French"], *Élysée*, March 5, 2025a.

[256] NATO, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2023)," press release, March 14, 2024; NATO, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2025)," press release, August 25, 2025b; NATO, 2026a; TVP World, "Poland Aims to Spend 5% of GDP on Defense in 2026, Says Minister," webpage, March 3, 2025a.

[257] Government of Poland, "More Troops and More Money for Defence—the Council of Ministers Adopted a Draft Homeland Defence Act," February 22, 2022.

[258] Esme Kirk-Wade, "UK Defence Spending," research briefing, House of Commons Library, UK Parliament, May 28, 2025.

[259] Government of the United Kingdom, *The Defence Investment Plan: Equipping Our Forces, Defending Our Future*, June 30, 2026.

[260] Deutscher Bundestag, "Bundestag beschließt das Sondervermögen für die Bundeswehr" ["Bundestag Approves Special Fund for the Bundeswehr"], June 3, 2022. The fund is described as €100 billion, but in practice it would amount to approximately €87 billion (Gerhard Heiming, "Sondervermögen Bundeswehr praktisch vollständig gebunden" ["Special Funds of the Bundeswehr Are Almost Entirely Tied Up"], *Europäische Sicherheit & Technik*, August 19, 2024b; Gerhard Heiming, "The Bundeswehr Special Fund—a Year and a Half Later," *European Security & Defence*, January 19, 2024a).

[261] Frank Gardner and Toby Luckhurst, "Germany Votes for Historic Boost to Defence Spending," *BBC News*, March 18, 2025; David McHugh, "Germany to Ease Government Debt Limits in Major Step Aimed at Boosting Economy, Defense Spending," Associated Press, March 5, 2025. Some of our interviewees described this as a substantial change that will speed up the timeline for strengthening the military (German experts, interview with authors, via video call, July 2025).

[262] Dmytro Hubenko, "Germany: Parties Agree on Historic Debt Deal," *DW*, March 14, 2025; Jeromin Zettelmeyer, "What Does German Debt Brake Reform Mean for Europe?" *Bruegel's Weekly Newsletter*, March 31, 2025; Linus Höller, "Germany Plans to Double its Defense Spending Within Five Years," *Defense News*, June 26, 2025b.

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slow start but has begun to increase,[263] with new parliamentary acquisition reforms aiming to speed up and streamline new spending decisions.[264]

France and the UK Still Devote Resources to Defending Secondary Interests and Upholding Their Identities as Global Powers

The four allies spend on different things, and those choices follow from two features of how each conceives of its interests: how much they focus on global interests versus local interests closer to home and how much they aim to reduce their dependence on others for their defense. Together, these factors put allies on a spectrum, from France and the United Kingdom, which retain global interests and identities as global powers; through Germany, whose interests have broadened but which has still not prioritized its global role to the same extent; to Poland, which defines its interests narrowly around territorial defense in Europe. These differences help explain what each ally spends on today and, as we discuss later in the chapter, what trade-offs it would face in reducing spending on global interests if reduced U.S. support forced it to concentrate on European defense.

France construes its interests globally and treats military self-sufficiency as a matter of sovereignty. Both commitments shape—and strain—its defense spending. This is, in part, because France has territories in the Pacific (e.g., New Caledonia). While never treating China as a conventional military threat to these territories, Paris nevertheless remains wary of Beijing's influence in the region and its growing military power, cyber and other hybrid actions, and cooperation with Russia. France's 2025 defense strategy identifies Russia as its main threat, ranking Iran second and China third.[265] France views Iran's proxies and nuclear program as threatening. These secondary interests draw resources even as Russia dominates French defense planning. France's conception of itself as a global power with global interests is also important to its identity, not just these concrete interests.

France aims for a "quasi-complete model" of military self-sufficiency across all domains.[266] Since the 1990s, the French military has, in practice, been primarily trained and shaped for expeditionary missions rather than large-scale conventional operations in Europe.[267] But, since 2020, and accelerated after 2022, France has placed greater emphasis on conventional defense planning.[268] Paris faces

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[263] Bastian Giegerich and Ben Schreer, "Zeitenwende One Year On," *Survival*, 2023, p. 73; T. Wiegold, "Munition für die Bundeswehr: Es knirscht zwischen Verteidigungs- und Finanzministerium" ["Ammunition for the German Armed Forces: Tensions Are Rising Between the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Finance"], *Augen geradeaus!* [*Eyes Straight Ahead!*], December 12, 2022; Alexandr Burilkov, Katelyn Bushnell, Juan Mejino-Lopez, Thomas Morgan, and Guntram B. Wolff, *Fit for War by 2030? European Rearmament Efforts Vis-à-vis Russia*, Kiel Institute for the World Economy, No. 3, June 2025.

[264] German expert, interview with author, via video call, July 2025.

[265] Secrétariat Général de la Défense et de la Sécurité Nationale (SGDSN), 2025, pp. 1, 11–12, 20.

[266] Guillaume Garnier, *La France dans l'OTAN: de l'Allié Difficile au Contributeur Essentiel* [*France in NATO: From Difficult Ally to Essential Contributor*], Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), June 2023.

[267] Pezard, 2021.

[268] French National Assembly, *Audition, à huis clos, du général Thierry Burkhard, chef d'état-major de l'armée de Terre, portant sur la nouvelle vision stratégique de l'armée de Terre* [*Hearing, Behind Closed Doors, of General Thierry Burkhard, Chief of Staff of the Army, on the New Strategic Vision of the Army*], National Defense and Armed Forces Commission, Report No. 61, June 17, 2020.

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budgetary constraints in making this transition and faces trade-offs between capabilities it prioritizes for sovereignty and status and those best suited to the conventional defense of NATO. The clearest example is a new aircraft carrier to replace the *Charles de Gaulle*, which France views as critical to its autonomy and sovereignty and will cost close to $6 billion.[269] The French government views nuclear modernization as nonnegotiable for the same reason, and this modernization will absorb 13 percent of French spending from 2024 to 2030.[270] France's nuclear deterrent, though, still provides value for deterring Russian aggression, making the trade-off less acute than for its expeditionary conventional capabilities.

The UK likewise retains global interests that exceed its means, and the resulting tension has left its spending priorities unresolved. Its overseas commitments include an obligation to its 14 Overseas Territories and a broadly defined interest in defending the "rules-based international system"; beyond Russia, the UK identifies China, Iran, and North Korea as threats.[271] Since 2025, the UK has made "NATO first" its force design principle, but London's defense strategy emphasizes that this does not mean "NATO only."[272] Part of London's challenge is that it approaches global ambitions with the economic and military means of a regional power. This has caused, as some experts put it, a tendency to "fudge" and do everything rather than prioritize ruthlessly.[273] The broader question of prioritization of spending to address threats to the UK homeland, to NATO, and global threats remains unresolved.

Like France, the UK military aims to maintain a full-spectrum force capable of global deployment and faces questions about whether it can do that while taking greater responsibility in European defense. Interviewees noted debates about whether "NATO first" means investing in more forward-deployed combat forces or in replacing U.S. strategic enablers, such as C2, ISR, and logistics capabilities. The UK and France may be best placed to build European alternatives to U.S. enablers at scale, but relying on other nations for frontline combat forces would raise politically sensitive

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The reasons for the timing of this shift are not clear but could have resulted from a number of factors, such as Russia's continued operations in Eastern Ukraine and militarization and growing concerns about U.S. commitment during the first Trump administration (French Ministry of Armed Forces, "Comment la France se prépare à la haute intensité" ["How France Is Preparing for High Intensity"], May 1, 2025).

[269] "La dissuasion nucléaire, grande gagnante de la loi de programmation militaire" ["Nuclear Deterrence, the Big Winner of the Military Planning Law"]" *L'Express*, May 22, 2023.

[270] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

[271] On Britain's articulation of its threats in 2025, see Government of the United Kingdom, 2025c. The 14 British Overseas Territories are Akrotiri and Dhekelia (the Sovereign Base Areas in Cyprus), Anguilla, Bermuda, the British Antarctic Territory, the British Indian Ocean Territory (including Diego Garcia), the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Montserrat, the Pitcairn Islands, Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, and the Turks and Caicos Islands. On Britain's views of the international order, see Jeffrey Cimmino and Matthew Kroenig, "Strategic Context: The Rules-Based International System," Atlantic Council Strategy Paper Series, December 16, 2020; and Nicholas Wright, "The UK and the International Rules-Based System," Foreign Policy Centre, September 8, 2020.

[272] Malcolm Chalmers, "What Does 'NATO First' Mean for UK Defence?" *RUSI*, October 7, 2024; Lord Robertson, "'NATO First': A New Era for UK Defence," *NATO Review*, July 10, 2025.

[273] UK officials and experts, interview with authors, in person London and via video call, June–July 2025.

questions about burdensharing and specialization among European nations.[274] So far, capital-intensive programs remain focused on more-traditional platforms—such as the Global Combat Air Programme for fighter aircraft and the Dreadnought and SSN-AUKUS program for submarines—which crowd out resources for other investments and reduce funding available for readiness, stockpiles, and training.[275] However, the UK Defence Investment Plan does fund other technologies, such as AI, uncrewed systems, advanced deep-strike capabilities, and lower-cost munitions.[276]

Poland defines its interests most narrowly and locally, with its priorities and spending focused squarely on defending against large-scale Russian aggression targeting Poland and NATO's eastern flank.[277] With few commitments beyond Europe to compete for funds, Warsaw's concentration on European defense faces few trade-offs with global power projection. The Polish Armed Forces have expanded significantly over the past decade, growing from 99,000 personnel in 2010 to an estimated 216,000 today (Figure 6.4). This makes Poland's military the third largest in NATO, following the United States and Turkey.[278] Warsaw's most recent spending prioritizes equipment modernization, which accounts for over 50 percent of its spending in 2025, the highest share among NATO members.[279] This includes investments in capabilities the United States has traditionally provided: air and missile defense, long-range strike, cyber, and ISR. Some of these investments involve domestic sourcing or co-production, strengthening Poland's defense industrial base.[280] This represents a shift from Poland's historical acceptance of extensive dependence on the United States and, in comparison to the UK and France, greater acceptance of specialization in military investments than building a full spectrum of capabilities.

[274] UK officials and experts, interviews with authors, in person in London and via video call, June–July 2025. This type of UK specialization would also sit directly at odds with Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR)'s requirement that the UK and France provide a Strategic Reserve Corps to NATO (UK Prime Minister's Office, "Lancaster House 2.0: Declaration on Modernising UK-French Defence and Security Cooperation," press release, July 10, 2025).

[275] UK officials and experts, interviews with authors, in person in London and via video call, June–July 2025. AUKUS refers to the Australia–United Kingdom–United States trilateral security partnership.

[276] Government of the United Kingdom, 2026.

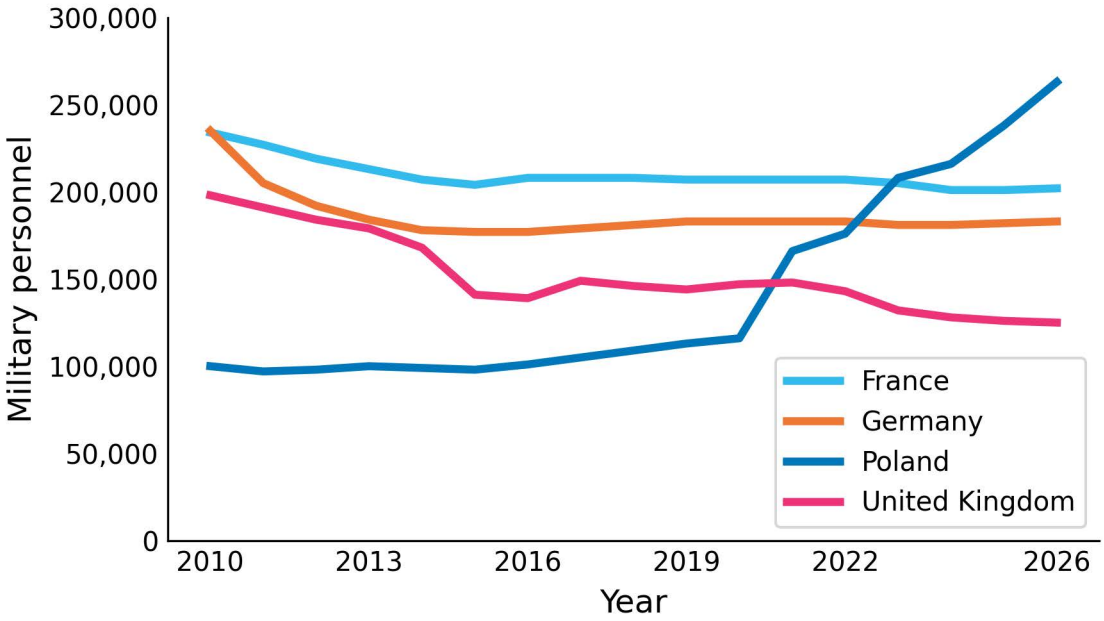
[277] Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego (BBN), 2020; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, 2025; Krystyna Marcinek and Scott Boston, *Polish Armed Forces Modernization*, RAND Corporation, RR-A2971-1, 2025.

[278] TVP World, "Poland Has NATO's Third Largest Armed Force, Says Security Chief," webpage, July 16, 2025b.

[279] NATO, 2025.

[280] Isabel van Brugen, "NATO Ally's Leader Calls to Expand Troop Presence on Russian Border," *Newsweek*, March 6, 2025.

Figure 6.4. Military Personnel for France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom



SOURCES: Features data from "Table 5: Defence Expenditures per Capita and Military Personnel" in NATO, 2017; and NATO, 2026a.

Germany falls between the global orientation of France and the UK and Poland's territorial focus but focuses most of its military resources in Europe. Since the Zeitenwende, Germans have grown more comfortable with a wider definition of their interests, in a marked shift from a decade earlier, when President Horst Köhler's suggestion that German forces abroad protected trade interests drew accusations of "gunboat diplomacy" that pressured him to resign.[281] Germany's interests now include managing instability in the Middle East and North Africa, migration, the return of foreign fighters from overseas conflicts, and disruption to the trade on which German growth depends.[282] Germany does not regard China as a conventional security threat,[283] instead describing it as a "partner, competitor and systemic rival."[284] Berlin does not seek a major role as a global power, framing its long-standing goal of upholding a rules-based order as a way to manage instability rather than to project power. Despite these global concerns, Berlin has reduced resources for military activities outside of Europe, such as peacekeeping.[285]

[281] Kate Connolly, "German President Horst Köhler Quits over Afghanistan Gaffe," *The Guardian*, May 31, 2010; Giegerich and Schreer, 2023, pp. 76–77; P. A. Mello, "Zeitenwende: German Foreign Policy Change in the Wake of Russia's War Against Ukraine," *Politics and Governance*, Vol. 12, 2024.

[282] German expert, interview with author, via video call, July 2025; German policymaker, interview with author, via video call, August 2025; Federal Foreign Office, 2023, p. 19; Federal Ministry of Defence, 2016, p. 24.

[283] German policymakers, interviews with authors, via video call, July–August 2025.

[284] European Commission, "Commission Reviews Relations with China, Proposes 10 Actions," press release, March 11, 2019a.

[285] United Nations, "Troop and Police Contributors," webpage, April 30, 2026, last updated June 11, 2026b.

Allies' Fiscal Capacity to Sustain Spending Increases Varies

While allies' defense spending ambitions are high, they are constrained by fiscal realities. High debt and slow growth (Figures 6.5 and 6.6) make the same targets far harder for some allies than others. France and the UK are the most constrained.[286] France's debt rose from 98 percent of GDP in 2019 to an average of 112 percent over 2020–2024, and one interviewee called the fiscal issue France's "Achilles' heel" in pursuing rearmament.[287] These constraints mean that Paris will struggle to meet current spending targets, let alone much more ambitious spending increases. The UK combines high debt with a defense budget already under strain. The Ministry of Defence recently asked for an additional £28 billion to address an existing shortfall out to 2030 stemming from persistent cost overruns of existing programs, but it received only £15 billion.[288] Parliamentary watchdogs have repeatedly criticized the Ministry of Defence's spending plans as unrealistic and overly optimistic.[289] Given the UK's fiscal conditions, an economic downturn could similarly stall or even reverse the UK's already-planned increases.

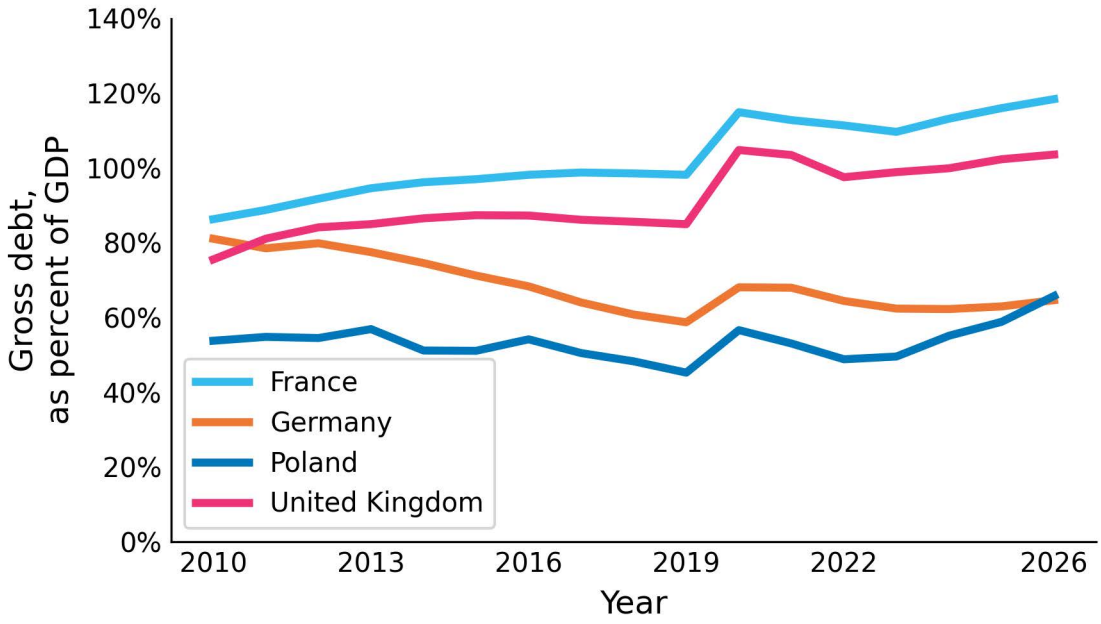
[286] However, Poland's current high deficits may make it more constrained in the future. See the discussion below for details.

[287] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

[288] Richard Barrons, "John Healey's Resignation Highlights Profound Strategic Failure in the UK Government's Approach to Defence," Chatham House, June 11, 2026.

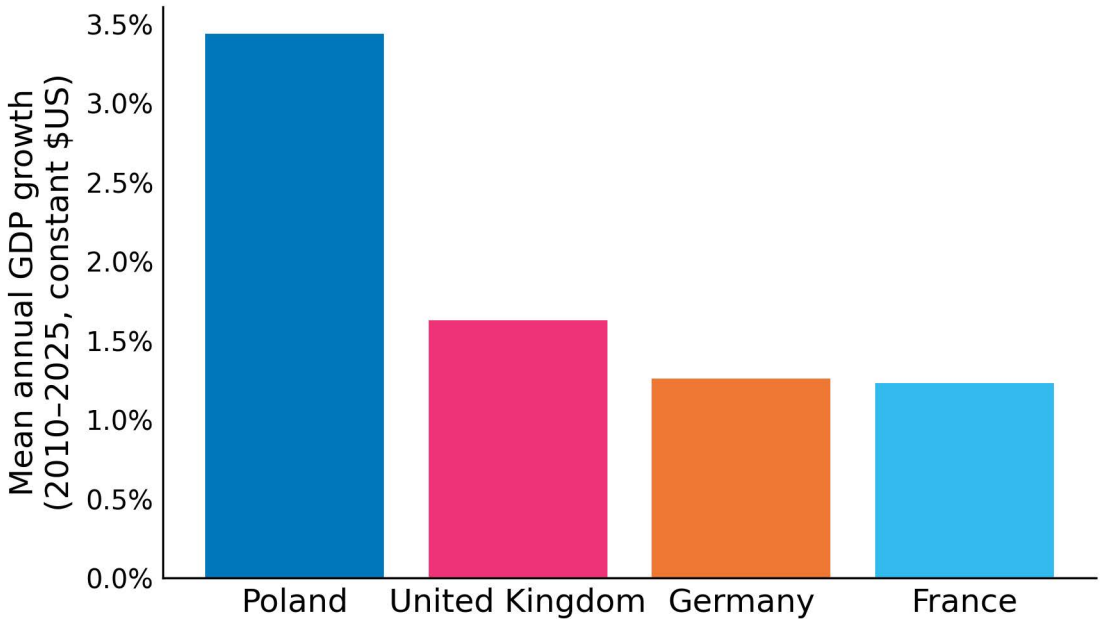
[289] Megan McKernan, Stephanie Young, Andrew Dowse, James Black, Devon Hill, Benjamin J. Sacks, Austin Wyatt, Nicolas Jouan, Yuliya Shokh, and Jade Yeung, *Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution in Comparative Organizations*, RAND Corporation, RR-A2195-2, 2024; National Audit Office, "The Equipment Plan 2023 to 2033," UK Ministry of Defence, December 4, 2023; UK Parliament Committees, "UK Defence: No Credible Government Plan to Deliver Desired Military Capabilities," March 8, 2024.

Figure 6.5. Gross Debt as a Percentage of GDP for France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom



SOURCE: Features data from International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook, database, last updated April 15, 2026b.

Figure 6.6. Average Annual GDP Growth for France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom, 2010–2025



SOURCE: Features data from International Monetary Fund, 2026b.

Germany and Poland are better placed. Germany's debt (about 64 percent of GDP in 2025) has remained relatively consistent since 2020.[290] This created flexibility for the Merz government to raise the debt ceiling in a bid to lift growth, but if higher spending does not, incumbents could face a backlash rooted in deep public aversion to debt, which could also erode public support for higher defense spending.[291] Compared with the other three allies, Poland benefits from higher growth and lower debt. Polish growth averaged 3.4 percent between 2010 and 2024, with roughly comparable growth rates (more than double the EU average) projected through 2027.[292] Poland's debt-to-GDP ratio is currently low but has risen significantly in recent years because of increased social and defense expenditures, and the International Monetary Fund has warned that Poland may need tax increases or spending cuts to achieve a more sustainable fiscal trajectory.[293] So, in the absence of fiscal reforms, Warsaw may face more constraints on defense spending in future years.

Sustaining Higher Spending Depends on Continued Elite and Public Support

All four allies currently enjoy strong public support for higher spending because of the consensus on the Russian threat, but this support thins at the political extremes (both left and right). The support is firmest in Poland, where calls for higher defense spending cross political parties and had public approval rates of 72.9 percent as of 2024.[294] There has been a striking rise in German public support as well,[295] with only 15 percent supporting more than 1.5 percent of GDP on defense in 2018[296] rising to estimates of 57 to 65 percent supporting rises in defense spending in 2025, depending on the poll and question.[297] In France, 68 percent of respondents in a March 2025 poll supported increased defense spending, with 66 percent of (left-wing) LFI voters and a little more than 50 percent of (right-wing) RN voters included in this poll also approving.[298]

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[290] World Bank Group, "World Development Indicators," database, last updated November 5, 2025.

[291] German expert, interview with author, via video call, July 2025.

[292] NATO data on Poland's growth rates differ from the World Bank data used in this report. See the appendix for a discussion of the sources. On future growth, see Matthew A. Winkler, "Poland's Economy Defies Putin's Threats and Keeps Growing," Bloomberg, September 14, 2025.

[293] International Monetary Fund, *Republic of Poland: 2025 Article IV Consultation—Press Release; and Staff Report*, IMF Country Reports 26/025, February 3, 2026a.

[294] "Sondaż Rzeczpospolitej: Na Wojsko Trzeba Wydawać Więcej" ["Survey by Rzeczpospolita: More Spending on the Military Is Necessary"], *Rzeczpospolita*, July 9, 2024.

[295] German policymaker and expert, interview with authors, via video call, July 2025.

[296] "Umfrage: Deutsche sind klar gegen Erhöhung von Militärausgaben" ["Germans Are Clearly Against Increasing Military Spending"], *Welt*, July 11, 2018.

[297] "Die Deutschen setzen auf Sicherheit und befürworten mehr Geld für die Verteidigung" ["The Germans Focus on Security and Support More Money for Defense"], PwC, February 5, 2025. See also "Two-Thirds of Germans Support NATO's Five Percent Target," *ZDF Political Barometer*, June 27, 2025.

[298] Sophia Khatsenkova, "France: Les partis politiques divisés sur l'augmentation du budget de la défense" ["France: Political Parties Divided over Defense Budget Increase"], *Euro News*, March 11, 2025.

But there are electoral shifts that could erode the extent of this support. In Germany, Die Linke and the left wing of the SPD criticize what they perceive as excessive defense spending at the cost of domestic welfare and investments, and they downplay the Russian threat. Similarly, the far-right AfD has more sanguine views of Russia and characterizes defense spending as aiming to please the United States rather than to deter Russia, and the AfD's strong support in East Germany means that it could potentially act as a veto player to shape the behavior of more centrist right-wing parties.[299] In France, there is also broad domestic support for rearming, but unlike Germany this support includes the far-right RN; one interviewee assessed that even a far-right victory in 2027 would not radically alter France's defense strategy.[300] The left-wing French LFI, on the other hand, is more divided, with some within the party calling for smaller budgets.[301] In the UK, there is some uncertainty about how the Reform party would reconcile its calls for a stronger military and higher defense spending with its commitment to reducing taxes.[302] The left-wing Green party has also been polling at record levels—with the traditional Labour and Conservative parties now squeezed from both the left and right—and offers an alternative position in the UK political system that is more skeptical of defense spending.

How Future U.S. Policies Could Affect Allies' Defense Spending

Changes in U.S. Commitments, Posture, and Policy Toward Russia

We group together the first three policies because they all would influence allied defense spending through the same mechanism: aggravating allies' threat perceptions through heightened vulnerability to Russia. These three policies are

- reductions in U.S. commitments, regardless of form
- reduction in U.S. presence, especially a rapid withdrawal
- U.S. pursuit of a détente with Russia not focused on European stability.

In response to any of these three policies (or a combination), allies would have stronger incentives to sustain high defense spending over time, increase defense spending, or reallocate resources devoted to secondary interests toward European defense. Allies' circumstances affect which of these paths they would likely choose.

The UK and France Are Likely to Reduce Resources Devoted to Other Theaters

France's and the UK's fiscal situation, and limits of what is politically acceptable, mean that they are unlikely to spend much beyond current targets. Increasing UK defense spending beyond NATO's 5 percent GDP target would almost certainly require the Labour government to break its manifesto

[299] German policymaker and experts, interviews with authors, via video call, July 2025.

[300] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

[301] "Macron Was Right About Strategic Autonomy," *The Economist*, July 24, 2025.

[302] O'Sullivan, 2025.

pledges around not increasing income tax, national insurance, or value-added tax—and/or to accept even greater austerity elsewhere in government. Both would be highly controversial in the Parliamentary Labour Party and with the public. Given these constraints, both France and the UK are more likely to further reduce spending on defending global interests to divert more resources to Europe than to increase their overall spending. Paris would likely reallocate resources from lower-priority interests in the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Indo-Pacific if its threat perceptions in Europe rose significantly. The UK would be likely to reduce its ambitions for a major role in continuing to defend against or deter Iran in the Gulf or for power projection "east of Suez" to counter Beijing's influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Pulling away from global commitments would involve politically difficult choices that both states have struggled to make in the past. France's ambition to remain a global power is widely shared among all political parties. So, Paris would likely preserve at least a minimal capability to act outside Europe, along with investments deemed essential to doing so, including nuclear modernization and building a new aircraft carrier.[303] Given how entrenched the UK's identity as a global power is, a more gradual U.S. withdrawal may not be enough to pressure the UK to reevaluate its role outside Europe; conversely, a sharp U.S. withdrawal would force ruthless prioritization. Sovereign, NATO, and global tasks require different capabilities, and there are also substantial political, bureaucratic, and industrial equities tied up in retaining a full-spectrum force. So, there is still a risk that either France or the UK or both will continue to muddle through with forces equipped for a wide variety of theaters and missions, but with ever-diminishing depth or resilience in any one area.

Germany and Poland Might Increase Defense Spending Further

Germany is somewhat more likely to further increase spending, especially in the face of U.S. withdrawal, given its more favorable fiscal situation and strong commitment to continental defense. Germany does not spend as much as France and the UK on global interests, so Germany has less room for reallocation. That said, its strong culture of fiscal discipline could limit support for increases beyond current NATO defense spending targets, unless this spending is found to clearly promote growth—for instance, through successful investments in domestic infrastructure.

Of the four allies, Poland is most likely to increase defense spending further in response to U.S. policy changes. Given that it has the highest level of threat perceptions, stronger economic growth, and domestic consensus on defense spending, Warsaw would have a better chance of gaining public support for even further increases. U.S. policies that create acute feelings of vulnerability will generally fuel support for more-autonomous national security policies over the long term, including consideration of independent nuclear capabilities.[304]

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[303] Xavier Vavasseur, "France Orders First Long Lead Items for PANG Aircraft Carrier Program," *Naval News*, April 30, 2024.

[304] Poland has expressed interest in pursuing nuclear weapons, in addition to seeking additional guarantees from European nuclear powers (Jan Cienski and Wojciech Kość, "Poland Seeks Access to Nuclear Arms and Looks to Build Half-Million-Man Army," *Politico*, March 7, 2025).

Changes in U.S. Arms Sales

Although not the focus of our analysis, UK strategists have brought up concerns about the possibility of changes in U.S. arms sales. They noted that a breakdown of bilateral U.S.-UK cooperation in the nuclear realm, specifically withdrawal of access to U.S. stockpiles or maintenance for Trident missiles, would represent a considerable financial and strategic shock for the UK. While the Royal Navy would be able to keep up the UK's Continuous At-Sea Deterrent for a number of years using its existing stock of U.S. missiles (equipped with UK warheads), developing a sovereign delivery system at short notice would be hugely expensive for an already overtaxed UK defense nuclear budget and industrial base. This expense could lead to spending cuts for conventional military capabilities.[305]

Economic Policy Toward Allies

Existing analysis suggests that sustaining current U.S. tariffs is not likely to significantly harm allies' growth in the aggregate.[306] However, if future tariffs had bigger effects on allies' economic growth and fiscal stability, allies would have fewer resources available for defense. Economic hardship could also erode the public support for military spending, leading to defense budget cuts.

Conclusion

Many European allies were already spending more on defense (and strengthening regional cooperation, as Chapter 7 discusses) because of growing concerns about the threat Russia poses, especially after 2022. Doubts about U.S. commitments to allies and the threat of a significant drawdown of U.S. forces in Europe have reinforced those trends. NATO set a target of 3.5 percent of GDP for members' core defense spending. Alongside new cooperative initiatives to make those investments more effective, the resulting increases are real changes that could materially improve allied military strength. Some changes can be self-reinforcing in ways that give them staying power: Higher defense spending, for example, reinforces the influence of the European defense industry, which will advocate for sustaining higher defense budgets.

But many of these changes are financially and politically difficult, so allies could lose momentum over time, particularly if the United States does not follow through on retrenchment. Defense spending crowds out spending for domestic priorities, so as allies increase budgets to meet NATO targets, political resistance may grow, especially in the event of economic shocks, or if future governments include far-right or far-left parties that are less concerned about the Russian threat.

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[305] Marion Messmer and Olivia O'Sullivan, "The UK's Nuclear Deterrent Relies on US Support—but There Are No Other Easy Alternatives," Chatham House, March 24, 2025.

[306] For more details, see Priebe, Burdette, and Behmer, 2025. In spring 2025, many economists predicted that tariffs would cause a global recession, but so far the more modest predictions from economic models have been more accurate (Furman, 2025). It is important to note, however, that some politically sensitive sectors, such as automobile manufacturing, could be more significantly affected (KIEL Institut, 2026.).

Meeting current defense spending targets is already going to be a challenge for France and the UK, given their high public debts. In Germany, the bigger challenge is sustaining domestic support, given Germany's historical political sensitivity to rising debt, though this problem will be less acute if Germany's parallel investments in domestic economic growth bear fruit. Rising prices due to the U.S.-Israel war in Iran will add to economic headwinds, and economists expect that the negative effect of U.S. tariffs, although modest, will be felt by EU economies over time. Relative to the other three allies, Poland is more likely to sustain high spending, given its stronger growth and the highest threat perceptions.

France and the UK, allies with global interests, may scale back spending for missions in other regions in response to large-scale U.S. retrenchment. France and the UK have been reluctant to reduce their wider global role even as the threat posed by Russia has grown. Both have populations, territories, and security obligations to defend outside Europe. Large reductions in U.S. commitment and presence—especially rapid changes—or large shifts in U.S. policy toward Russia that leave allies feeling vulnerable could force these allies to make the hard choice to prioritize Europe over their global commitments. A gradual, coordinated drawdown might not force that choice, whereas a sudden one would.

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Chapter 7

Regional Security Cooperation

In this chapter, we consider the depth of European security cooperation. With deeper cooperation, allies can potentially make defense investments (Chapter 6) more efficient, avoid duplication, offset each other's weaknesses, and make their forces more interoperable. Such developments, in turn, should improve allies' military effectiveness and ability to defend themselves with less U.S. support.

We discuss the views of France, Germany, Poland, and the UK about regional cooperation and the four countries' success in pursuing deeper cooperation. Given that we only focus on four European states, this chapter is not a comprehensive treatment of all types of regional cooperation or impediments to deepening it.

We find that all four allies are pursuing deeper European cooperation because of high threat perceptions and growing doubts about U.S. commitments. Some U.S. policy changes could encourage even stronger regional European cooperation, whereas others might undermine it. A *uniform* reduction in the U.S. commitment could further increase allies' threat perceptions and incentivize deeper cooperation. A *conditional* U.S. approach, by contrast, could split allies who prioritize staying close to Washington from those who prioritize building European alternatives. And a rapid, uncoordinated U.S. drawdown could supply the shock needed to overcome political barriers to deeper European security integration, though a rapid withdrawal would also have significant downsides (see, for example, Chapter 4).

The four allies agree on the need to deepen European cooperation but differ over how aggressively to pursue it. France has championed European strategic autonomy for two decades and sees the present moment as the opportunity to realize it. Poland and the UK cooperate intensively at the bilateral and regional levels but resist European initiatives that might signal to the United States that it could safely disengage. Germany, historically content to let others lead out of fear that it would otherwise antagonize its neighbors, is moving reluctantly toward a leadership role commensurate with its size, while Poland and the UK remain wary that too visible a turn toward European structures could alienate Washington.

We proceed by outlining the drivers of regional security cooperation drawn from the international relations literature. We describe where regional cooperation stands today before assessing how the U.S. policy alternatives would influence the depth and character of cooperation.

Drivers of Security Cooperation

Security cooperation refers to activities that states undertake to achieve their shared strategic objectives through such measures as making mutual defense commitments, aligning military plans, establishing and adhering to interoperability standards, coordinating acquisition decisions, co-

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developing new capabilities, integrating defense industrial bases, sharing intelligence, and participating in military exercises.[307]

Deeper cooperation, in theory, should both help stretch defense dollars further and improve a coalition's military effectiveness in war. For example, coordinating what to buy should help allies reduce redundancies, avoid gaps in their collective capabilities, and enhance interoperability, making it easier to fight together. Joint capability development and procurement should achieve economies of scale. But deeper security cooperation can also come with trade-offs, such as a reduced ability to set national requirements and slower decisionmaking.[308]

There are six main drivers that shape the depth of security cooperation. The first two determine an individual state's interest in closer ties, and the remaining four operate at the regional level and determine how likely it is that many states cooperate at once.

Intensity of threat perceptions. Policymakers are more willing to cooperate—and to overcome the autonomy concerns discussed next—when their threat perceptions are high, because in those situations a state may judge that its security requires the support of allies.[309]

Autonomy concerns. All states value sovereign control over military and domestic policy. Making decisions jointly can be politically unpopular because of concerns that a state's military forces might be used for operations that are not aligned with a state's individual interests.[310] Concerns about harming domestic industries or constraining national decisionmaking have also impeded European security cooperation via EU structures in the past.[311] The intensity of these concerns can vary with the political party in power: Far-right parties, such as Germany's AfD, generally oppose deeper European integration, including on defense, so electoral gains by those parties can inhibit deeper cooperation or even sever existing ties.[312]

Regional alignment in threat assessments. When threat perceptions align at the regional level (e.g., states agree on the source, size, and immediacy of the threat), states are more likely to take the risk of relying on other states. For example, the more aligned two states' threat assessments are, the more each one will feel comfortable in specializing to contribute to collective defense rather than

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[307] Defense Security Cooperation Agency, *Security Cooperation Overview and Relationships*, last updated 2025; Thomas S. Szayna, Adam R. Grissom, Jefferson P. Marquis, Thomas-Durell Young, Brian Rosen, and Yuna Huh, *U.S. Army Security Cooperation: Toward Improved Planning and Management*, RAND Corporation, MG-165-A, 2004; Kristi Raik, Marcin Terlikowski, and Mario Baumann, "Beyond Burden Sharing: Conceptualizing the European Pillar of NATO," German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), June 17, 2025.

[308] As an example of existing redundancy and interoperability challenges in some areas, EU members operate over 178 different major weapon systems, compared with 30 in the United States (Meijer and Brooks, 2021, p. 30; Niall McCarthy, "Europe Has Six Times as Many Weapon Systems as the U.S. [Infographic]," *Forbes*, February 19, 2018).

[309] Walt, 1987.

[310] Dick Zandee, Bob Deen, Kimberley Kruijver, and Adája Stoetman, *European Strategic Autonomy in Security and Defence*, Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2020; Dick Zandee, Margriet Drent, and Rob Hendriks, *Defence Cooperation Models: Lessons Learned and Usability*, Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2016.

[311] Lucia Retter, Stephanie Pezard, Stephen J. Flanagan, Gene Germanovich, Sarah Grand-Clement, and Pauline Paillé, *European Strategic Autonomy in Defence: Transatlantic Visions and Implications for NATO, US and EU Relations*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1319-1, 2021, p. 2; Damen, 2022, p. 8.

[312] Sophia Besch and Tara Varma, "Alliance of Revisionists: A New Era for the Transatlantic Relationship," International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025.

building a full-spectrum force of its own.[313] When allies disagree on the nature or severity of a threat, they are less likely to do this, because that specialization creates military and industrial dependencies on partners who might abandon them.[314] Before 2022, analysts pointed to the divergence in threat perceptions between eastern and central European states and most western and southern states as "Europe's strategic cacophony" and a barrier to deeper European defense integration.[315]

Institutions. Alliance structures, such as NATO, facilitate cooperation by providing mechanisms to share information; set common expectations on threats and capability development requirements; and plan, prepare for, and command multinational operations.[316] Europe's strong network of institutions, including the EU, makes it easier for European allies to deepen cooperation, compared with states in other regions.

Size of the coalition. Cooperation is harder within larger institutions, such as the EU or NATO, than smaller ones because the number of interests to align is greater.[317]

Leadership. Even within an institution, cooperation among states with diverging preferences is challenging. A strong leader can use inducements and pressure to bring allies together.[318] As one French military official described, "The advantage of American leadership is that it was so superior, massive, and benevolent that no one could dispute it: It brought order to the playground, there was no question of who decided."[319] Many analysts therefore expect that reduced U.S. leadership will exacerbate coordination challenges.[320]

The loss of U.S. leadership might make cooperation within NATO harder or less efficient, but research shows that cooperation can persist even without a single, dominant state to manage it.[321] In the past, U.S. leadership has weakened incentives for European states to overcome differences and cooperate with each other outside NATO. Washington has traditionally been suspicious of such initiatives, arguing that there should be "no discrimination against, no diminution of, and no duplication of NATO activities."[322] With a smaller U.S. role, other allies might step up to lead, feel

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[313] Meijer and Brooks, 2021; J. Andrés Gannon, "Complementarity in Alliances: How Strategic Compatibility and Hierarchy Promote Efficient Cooperation in International Security," *American Journal of Political Science*, 2025.

[314] Dick Zandee and Adája Stoetman, *Specialising in European Defence: To Choose or Not to Choose?* Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2022.

[315] Meijer and Brooks, 2021.

[316] David A. Lake, "Beyond Anarchy: The Importance of Security Institutions," *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2001; Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton University Press, 1984, pp. 89–92.

[317] Kenneth A. Oye, "Explaining Cooperation Under Anarchy: Hypotheses and Strategies," *World Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 1985, pp. 19–20.

[318] Keohane, 1984; Gannon, 2025; Stephen D. Krasner, "Global Communications and National Power: Life on the Pareto Frontier," *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 3, 1991; Lake, 2001.

[319] Laura Kayali, Philipp Fritz, Esther Webber, and Chris Lunday, "How Europe Would Fill an America-Shaped Hole in NATO," *Politico*, June 22, 2025.

[320] Hal Brands, "NATO Has Dodged Collapse Before. It's Never Been This Close," Bloomberg, June 24, 2025.

[321] Keohane, 1984.

[322] Rachel Rizzo, *Unleashing US-EU Defense Cooperation*, Atlantic Council, October 7, 2024.

freer to find new ways to cooperate, and feel a stronger incentive to overcome disagreements themselves.

Regional Security Cooperation in Europe Today

Regional security cooperation in Europe has long been robust, with NATO at its core, but progress remains uneven. Deeper cooperation on procurement, which might save money, is still limited by incentives to buy nationally produced equipment that supports domestic jobs, and by autonomy concerns.[323] Differences in threat perceptions with other European allies beyond France, Germany, Poland, and the UK continue to limit the depth of regionwide cooperation.[324]

Still, several conditions for deeper cooperation have improved in recent years:

- The four allies' threat perceptions have increased and converged around a common primary threat: Russia (Chapter 3).
- Allies have used smaller bilateral and minilateral arrangements to deepen cooperation beyond what is possible in larger multilateral institutions.
- Germany and Poland are joining France in leading European security cooperation.

These conditions have produced deeper cooperation among the four allies and many others. Impediments remain, however, and existing cooperation could be undermined by electoral gains by extremist parties that elevate autonomy concerns and promote a vision of sovereignty hostile to European institutions.

Germany and Poland Are Stepping Up as Leaders of European Defense Cooperation

France has historically been very active in promoting European defense cooperation. Germany and Poland are now increasingly supporting that agenda.

Whereas Germany once let France and the UK be the prime military powers in Europe,[325] it has adopted a different posture, with Scholz noting in 2023 that "Germans are intent on becoming the guarantor of European security that our allies expect us to be."[326] Berlin is making investments—including Deep Precision Strike missile capabilities and strategic enablers, such as space-based surveillance—that would allow Germany to take a more central role in collective defense beyond protecting its own territory. Germany has also taken steps to reassure allies in NATO's northeast,[327]

[323] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025; German policymaker, interview with author, via video call, August 2025.

[324] Meijer and Brooks, 2021, pp. 9–10; French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

[325] Federal Ministry of Defence, 2016, p. 25.

[326] Olaf Scholz, "The Global Zeitenwende: How to Avoid a New Cold War in a Multipolar Era," *Foreign Affairs*, 2023, p. 22.

[327] German expert, interview with author, via video call, July 2025.

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which have perceived Berlin as insufficiently concerned about European security in recent decades.[328] Merz's trips to Paris and Warsaw immediately at the start of his government were an explicit signal that Germany is focused on ties in Europe.[329] To reassure allies that threat perceptions are now aligned, Berlin has also acknowledged that it underestimated the Russian threat prior to 2022.[330] That said, Germany's history of militarism still gives some in Poland pause about this growing role.[331]

Poland, too, is increasingly becoming a leader in European security. Other allies sometimes view Poland as "too small to be big"—a strong partner but not a leader.[332] However, this dynamic is shifting as Poland narrows its military capabilities gap with Germany and the UK.[333] Poland increasingly sees itself as "too big to be small" and is determined to position itself alongside major European powers in shaping continental security.[334]

Collective leadership can pave the way for deeper regional cooperation. Poland and Germany joining France in taking greater leadership helps to offset allies' concerns about exclusive French leadership. At the same time, Poland is not influential enough to lead on its own, so France's continued role and Germany's willingness to step up are critical. Leadership by others—especially France's role in extended nuclear deterrence—can also offset, but not entirely eliminate, concerns about Germany's growing military capabilities.

Allies Have Meaningfully Deepened Cooperation, Often Through Flexible Groupings

Not only have conditions for cooperation improved in recent years, but there has also been substantive progress. New initiatives are producing such practical outcomes as closer nuclear planning, joint technology development, and interoperability improvements. In many cases, allies are using smaller groupings—bilateral and minilateral agreements—to cooperate more deeply and quickly than they can through larger multilateral institutions.

For example, the UK-Poland Security and Defence Partnership Treaty (May 2026) commits the two countries to joint missile development, deeper defense-industrial cooperation, and a Strategic Land Partnership to strengthen NATO's eastern flank.[335] The 2025 Nancy Treaty aims to improve

[328] German policymaker and expert, interview with authors, via video call, July 2025.

[329] German expert, interview with author, via video call, July 2025; Benoit Van Overstraeten, Andreas Rinke, and Anna Koper, "Merz Hails Reset in Ties with Neighbours on First Trip as German Chancellor," Reuters, May 7, 2025.

[330] German experts, interview with authors, via video call, July 2025.

[331] Justyna Gotkowska, "Germany Needs to Enhance Its Credibility," *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, July 1, 2026.

[332] Tomas Jermalavičius, Pauli Järvenpää, Tomas Janeliūnas, Nora Vanaga, Justyna Gotkowska, and Piotr Szymański, *NATO's Northeast Quartet: Prospects and Opportunities for Baltic-Polish Defence Cooperation*, International Centre for Defence and Security, November 2018.

[333] "How Poland Emerged as a Leading Defence Power," *The Economist*, January 22, 2025.

[334] Jermalavičius et al., 2018.

[335] UK Prime Minister's Office, "Security and Defence Partnership Treaty: The Projects the UK and Poland Will Deliver Together," press release, May 27, 2026.

Polish and French interoperability. Warsaw recently agreed to joint procurement of naval mine systems with eight regional partners. And, in 2025, Poland also joined the European Sky Shield Initiative to develop advanced air defense systems across Europe.[336]

Germany has strengthened bilateral and minilateral cooperation through agreements, some of which include mutual security guarantees, such as the Aachen Treaty with France (2019) and the Kensington Treaty with the UK (2025). Both treaties involve concrete efforts to strengthen defense industrial integration and procurement coordination, including on such areas as precision strike that could materially add to European military capabilities. NATO already commits the three allies to each other's defense, but the reaffirmation of that commitment and the expanded coordination of these treaties reflect a deepening web of efforts to link these larger European countries outside the NATO framework and without requiring the consensus of NATO's much larger membership on every initiative.

Deeper cooperation has also extended to the nuclear realm. In July 2025, France and the UK signed the Northwood Declaration and established the bilateral Nuclear Steering Group to deepen coordination between their nuclear policies and forces.[337] Although framed as a complement to U.S. extended deterrence, these steps also position Europe's two nuclear powers to mitigate further cracks that might emerge in the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella.[338]

France is concerned that a weaker U.S. commitment to Europe might lead some countries, such as Poland, to acquire nuclear weapons.[339] To forestall such an outcome, Paris has more forcefully emphasized that its nuclear deterrent extends to allies.[340] Poland joined Macron's Forward Deterrence initiative, announced in March 2026, which will include bilateral dialogues and allies providing conventional support during French nuclear exercises.[341] Berlin has also agreed to bilateral nuclear

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[336] Adamowski, 2024.

[337] Government of the United Kingdom, "Northwood Declaration: 10 July 2025 (UK-France Joint Nuclear Statement)," Prime Minister's Office, press release, July 10, 2025a; Linus Höller, "France, UK Join Forces in Step Toward European Nuclear Deterrent," *Defense News*, July 10, 2025a; Léonie Allard, "Reading Between the Lines of the New France-UK Nuclear Entente," Atlantic Council, July 16, 2025; Paul Cormarie, "Can the United Kingdom and France Team Up in the Third Nuclear Age?" *War on the Rocks*, October 31, 2024; Héloïse Fayet, "How Should Britain and France Cooperate to Realise the Northwood Declaration?" Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), July 18, 2025.

[338] Smith, 2025; Paul van Hooft, "European Deterrents Without the United States," Atlantische Commissie, July 16, 2025; Zsofia Wolford, Elizabeth Moisan, Thomas Kenchington, Catherine Galley, and Clara Le Gargasson, *Evolving Russian Perceptions of the British and French Nuclear Deterrents*, RAND Corporation, RR-A3900-1, 2025.

[339] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

[340] Sophia Besch and Anna Bartoux, "Can Europe Build Its Own Nuclear Umbrella?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 3, 2025; French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025; Chancellery of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland, "Poland and France Sign Historic Security and Cooperation Treaty in Nancy," May 9, 2025; Government of Poland, "Przełomowy Traktat Polsko-Francuski Podpisany w Nancy" ["A Groundbreaking Polish-French Treaty Signed in Nancy"], webpage, May 9, 2025; French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025; Emmanuelle Maitre, "La dissuasion nucléaire française et l'enjeu européen" ["French Nuclear Deterrence and the European Challenge"], Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, June 13, 2024, pp. 1–2.

[341] Nicole Czaplinska, "Nancy and the Politics of Deterrence: Reading the French Nuclear Offer to Poland," *New Eastern Europe*, June 18, 2026.

talks with France. This is a shift for Berlin, which traditionally has been reluctant to discuss such issues outside of NATO, fearing that doing so might alienate Washington.[342]

The UK's Labour government since 2024 has made significant efforts to reset relations with the EU post-Brexit, especially on defense and security cooperation.[343]

Still, Allies Differ in How Aggressively to Deepen European Security Cooperation

Although the four allies are all deepening regional cooperation as a hedge against further U.S. retrenchment, they have different views on (1) whether to pursue European cooperation if it comes into conflict with steps perceived as necessary to limit U.S. retrenchment and (2) the risk that developing European alternatives could accelerate a U.S. withdrawal. These differences have limited some European initiatives in the past and could slow down some European cooperation in the future. Additionally, for allies who are particularly reliant on U.S. systems, there is a form of institutional lock-in that makes it costly and time-consuming to move toward European substitutes.

France has long argued for European strategic autonomy and is the most oriented toward reducing dependence on the United States. France's long-standing goal is to deepen European cooperation and achieve European strategic autonomy, which is "the institutional capacity to independently plan and conduct military operations across the full spectrum of conflict . . . and to autonomously develop and produce the related defense capabilities with minimal or no assistance from the United States."[344] To achieve that goal, French officials have sought to develop a common European strategic vision and culture, supported by financial instruments for pooling production and acquisitions. Paris has pursued this approach through three tracks: European defense industrial base and acquisition initiatives,[345] building NATO's European pillar,[346] and building "coalitions of the willing" with minilateral or bilateral agreements to bypass the difficulties of reaching consensus in slower EU-wide processes.[347]

Germany occupies a middle position, historically reliant on the U.S. guarantee but fast rearming and increasingly invested in European defense instruments. The United Kingdom maintains the deepest institutional ties to Washington, spanning intelligence, nuclear, and defense-industrial

[342] Julia Berghofer and Astrid Chevreuil, "Île-Longue Revisited: Charting a Franco-German Nuclear Future Share," European Leadership Network, March 31, 2026.

[343] Stefano Fella, "Resetting the UK's Relationship with the European Union," research briefing, House of Commons Library, March 5, 2025.

[344] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025. This definition is from Meijer and Brooks, 2021, p. 8.

[345] Examples include the European Long-Range Strike Approach (ELSA) initiative for acquiring long-range conventional missiles, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) framework for European defense collaboration, and the European Defence Fund for research.

[346] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025. On NATO's European Pillar and France's role in promoting it, see Thierry Tardy, "Le pilier européen de l'OTAN. Quel leadership français?" ["The European Pillar of NATO. What French Leadership?"], Jacques Delors Institut, January 2025.

[347] French officials and experts, interviews with authors, Paris, April 2025.

cooperation. Poland has the most at stake in the erosion of U.S. commitments, having built its security posture around hosting U.S. forces and procuring U.S. systems.

Law and Justice (PiS), the populist, conservative party that governed Poland from 2015 to 2023, consistently prioritized the bilateral relationship with Washington over ties with European allies that it viewed as insufficiently focused on Eastern European security concerns.[348] Poland's diversification since 2023 marks a departure from that approach, hedging against further U.S. retrenchment even as the relationship with Washington remains highly valued. Warsaw concluded new bilateral defense cooperation agreements with France, the United Kingdom, and Germany and deepened cooperation with Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Türkiye. Still, this diversification has not come at the expense of the U.S. relationship, which both the Nawrocki and Tusk camps continue to treat as the cornerstone of Polish security policy, reflecting a hedging strategy rather than a wholesale pivot away from Washington.

Berlin is hesitant to invest European structures with power, fearing that would further alienate Washington. Taking on a larger role in Europe sits in tension with a NATO-first tendency that one interviewee described as "in Germany's DNA." After World War II, West Germany sought close ties with both Europe and the United States—the so-called *Westbindung* (binding to the West)—through the European Union's predecessor organizations and through NATO.[349] But because U.S. involvement was seen as essential to security, Germany talked about NATO as the "indispensable guarantor" of its security.[350] German leaders feared that the French version of "strategic autonomy," as advocated by Macron during the first Trump administration, would hasten a U.S. departure by suggesting that Europe would already appear self-sufficient and perhaps even hostile to the United States.[351] Instead, Germany's first response to the prospect of U.S. retrenchment was to try to address U.S. burdensharing concerns to keep the United States engaged in NATO.[352] Much of the 2022 spending associated with the Zeitenwende went to buying U.S. equipment rather than long-term European solutions.[353]

The UK likewise looks to maximize its influence within NATO while avoiding EU duplication of the alliance. It tries to play a "bridging" role by quietly lobbying on European allies' behalf with what limited leverage its special relationship with the United States provides. UK leaders will likely continue to resist calls to choose between the United States and European allies—for example, when it comes to intelligence-sharing, participation in joint defense programs, or any establishment of new initiatives that exclude the United States or duplicate NATO (e.g., a hypothetical future European Defense Council).

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[348] Végh, 2021.

[349] Federal Ministry of Defence, 2016, pp. 22, 25; Federal Foreign Office, 2023, p. 19.

[350] Federal Ministry of Defence, 2016, pp. 49, 64–65.

[351] German expert, interview with author, via video call, July 2025; German expert, interview with author, Berlin, August 2025.

[352] German experts, interviews with authors, via video call, July 2025; Federal Foreign Office, 2023, pp. 23–32; John Helferich, "The (False) Promise of Germany's Zeitenwende," *European View*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2023, p. 91.

[353] Guntram B. Wolff, Alexandr Burilkov, Katelyn Bushnell, and Ivan Kharitonov, *Fit for War in Decades: Europe's and Germany's Slow Rearmament Vis-à-vis Russia*, Kiel Institute for the World Economy, September 2024; Burilkov et al., 2025. The F-35 acquisition represented 16 percent of the new expenditures (Wolff et al., 2024).

This hedging is also visible in the UK's nuclear policies in 2025. Even as it deepens bilateral nuclear coordination with France, the UK announced it would acquire dual-capable F-35A aircraft so that it could join in U.S.-led NATO Nuclear Sharing Arrangements (having retired its own sovereign tactical nuclear weapons in 1998).[354]

Future Electoral Gains by Extremist Parties Could Elevate Autonomy Concerns, Creating More Obstacles

If far-left or far-right parties gain power in future elections, that could undermine regional cooperation independent of changes in U.S. policy. The French far-left and far-right parties oppose the EU's role in security issues.[355] For instance, mainstream French political parties strongly supported the European Commission's "Rearm Europe" plan in March 2025, while the RN and LFI opposed it.[356] Electoral gains by those parties in the future might complicate efforts to increase European military capabilities through EU political, industrial, and financial mechanisms.

Similarly, a more far-right, nationalist-populist government in Germany would likely resist deepening European integration. French electoral outcomes can also influence German decisionmaking: Berlin will be asking whether it can rely on France as a military partner, and possibly even as a patron for nuclear deterrence, or whether Berlin needs to look for other European partners or else focus on restoring the transatlantic relationship with the United States.

In the UK, a Reform or Conservative victory would likely reverse Labour's post-Brexit reset of cooperation with the EU and European states in ways that could impede trade and security cooperation.[357]

In Poland, the PiS skepticism about European solutions recently took concrete form: President Karol Nawrocki vetoed legislation implementing the EU's roughly €44 billion SAFE (Security Action for Europe) loan program, of which Poland was set to be the largest beneficiary, arguing that Polish rearmament should rest on domestic resources rather than EU borrowing.[358]

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[354] Lee Pilgrim, "The UK's F-35 Procurement Strategy: A Balancing Act," *Wavell Room*, July 4, 2025.

[355] See Clément Guillou, "Elections européennes: la difficile union des candidats au 'Frexit'" ["European Elections: The Difficult Union of the 'Frexit' Candidates"], *Le Monde*, March 22, 2024. See also Romain Imbach and Manon Romain, "Derrière le programme européen de Marine Le Pen, de lourdes sanctions financières ou un Frexit déguisé" ["Behind Marine Le Pen's European Program, Heavy Financial Sanctions or a Disguised 'Frexit'"], *Le Monde*, April 18, last updated April 19, 2022.

[356] Cassini, 2025; Sonia Ghobri, "Réarmer l'Europe': La classe politique française divisée sur le plan de défense annoncé par la Commission européenne" ["'Rearming Europe': The French Political Class Divided over Defense Plan Announced by the European Commission"], *France Info*, March 4, 2025.

[357] For example, this could include the UK leaving the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and diverging further from EU standards in various markets.

[358] Jaroslaw Adamowski, "Polish President Rejects $50 Billion in European Military Loans," *Defense News*, March 13, 2026.

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How Future U.S. Policies Could Affect Allies' Regional Security Cooperation

To assess how the U.S. policy alternatives from Chapter 2 would affect regional cooperation, we draw on the sources introduced in Chapter 1: international relations scholarship, evidence from past cases of U.S. retrenchment, extrapolations from allies' current regional cooperation activities, and interviews with experts and officials from each allied country.

We find that U.S. policy could affect regional cooperation, even if it is not the main driver. A uniform reduction in U.S. commitment would incentivize allies to deepen cooperation to fill in gaps. A conditional and uneven approach to retrenchment could fragment cooperation by incentivizing allies to prioritize their ties with Washington over each other. Additionally, the magnitude of change matters: A rapid withdrawal, especially if uncoordinated, could catalyze deeper European integration by creating a stronger shock to the system.

Changes in Commitment

Interviewees indicated that a uniform reduction in the U.S. commitment would prompt their countries to feel more vulnerable and further deepen regional cooperation, an expectation consistent with the international relations literature.

However, a conditional approach that makes commitments uneven and conditional could fragment European cooperation rather than deepen it, as favored allies sustain close ties with Washington while others move toward greater independence. Polish interviewees warned that a conditional U.S. approach could polarize European allies, dividing those prioritizing transatlantic ties from those emphasizing strategic autonomy. In that environment, Poland would likely try first to remain aligned with Washington as a "last light" partner, viewing U.S. support as indispensable even if it created trade-offs, such as slower progress toward European defense-industrial integration. The UK, deeply integrated with and dependent on the United States, would likely make the same choice. Meanwhile, France would be the least likely to limit European initiatives to gain favored status in the face of conditional U.S. commitments. Germany, which is less reliant than Poland and the UK, would likely sit between the two extremes. The result would be that some European initiatives may not gain the support of these four key countries, preventing their adoption or weakening their impact.

UK interviewees assessed that conditional U.S. commitments were likely to have mixed effects on procurement behaviors across Europe at large, making it hard to organize a coherent response across the continent—with some countries likely to prioritize buying arms through U.S. foreign military sales to curry favor and others likely to prioritize strategic autonomy and an overdue consolidation of the European defense industrial base (supply) and defense market (demand).[359]

[359] UK officials and experts, interviews with authors, in person in London and via video call, June–July 2025.

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Changes in Posture

The effect of a change in U.S. posture on regional cooperation would depend on its speed and coordination. A gradual, coordinated drawdown would likely produce similar effects to a uniform reduction in commitment: It would incentivize deeper regional cooperation.

A rapid, uncoordinated withdrawal—the worst case from an allied perspective—would create the sharpest sense of vulnerability but could also supply the shock needed to overcome enduring barriers to deeper cooperation. For example, it could push allies to come together to fund the replacement of U.S. combat enablers, such as C2 and ISR, and it might also provoke a stronger EU-UK partnership.[360]

Changes in Policy Toward Russia

Two of the options for U.S. policy toward Russia—deprioritization of Russia and pursuit of a détente that does not prioritize European stability—would push allies to work harder to overcome barriers to regional cooperation in response to a perceived divergence in U.S. and European interests.

For Poland, either option could lead it to abandon its "last light" policy and emphasize ties with European partners even at the expense of ties with Washington. The same divergence would increase Germany's sense of vulnerability and lead it to prioritize regional ties, including bilateral or minilateral arrangements, strengthening the EU's ability to coordinate industrial and foreign policy, and consolidating the European Pillar of NATO.

For the UK, a widening U.S.-Europe gap on Russia would strain its "strategic bridge" role, forcing it to choose. Simple U.S. deprioritization of Russia would be uncomfortable but tolerable, with the UK offsetting it by working more closely with European allies and Ukraine. But if the UK perceived a deeper, more damaging U.S. alignment with Russia at Europe's expense, it might feel forced to choose European allies over the United States, to the extent those paths came into conflict.

U.S. pursuit of a détente with Russia that does prioritize European security would ease this pressure and more likely keep all four allies committed to a transatlantic framework.

Economic Policy Toward Allies

An aggressive U.S. economic policy toward allies would likely incentivize cooperation further. A further deterioration in U.S.-EU economic relations would see Poland expand economic cooperation with European and non-European partners. If the United States reduced Poland's access to foreign military sales or suspended Foreign Military Financing, mirroring the recent decision to halt financing for the Baltic Security Initiative, Warsaw might rely more heavily on European or South Korean suppliers or accelerate domestic production.

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[360] Stefan Lehne, "Time for an EU Security Council?" Carnegie Endowment of Europe, November 19, 2024; Retter et al., 2021; Richard G. Whitman, "Time for a European Security Council?" *RUSI*, April 22, 2025; Jan Philipp Albrecht, "In Favour of a Multi-Speed Europe," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, July 7, 2025; Clea Caulcutt, "Macron: EU Should Consider 'Multi-Speed Europe' to Cope with Enlargement," *Politico*, August 28, 2023.

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U.S. tariffs could also influence decisions on buying American versus European defense equipment. If UK-EU economic ties increase in response to U.S. tariffs, this could accelerate UK purchases of European arms—for instance, through greater participation of UK firms in SAFE and European Defense Fund (EDF) projects. U.S. economic policy, however, is unlikely to prompt more-radical moves on the part of the UK, such as rejoining the customs market or single market (or even the EU itself), given domestic politics around the legacy of Brexit and the specter of Reform polling ahead of the Labour government.

Conclusion

The four allies' substantial convergence in threat perceptions and existing institutional ties make them likely to continue deepening regional cooperation in response to U.S. retrenchment, building on Europe's extensive network of bilateral and minilateral forums and the EU. A uniform, coordinated reduction in U.S. commitment would reinforce this trend, as allies move to fill the gaps in capabilities.

But other U.S. policies could also undermine cooperation. Using U.S. presence and commitments to reward and punish individual allies could lead to diverse responses from allies, fragmenting regional cooperation rather than deepening it.

The Trump administration has already leveraged allies' security dependence to make economic deals and gain support for other U.S. priorities. For example, the administration has threatened to shift U.S. military personnel or trade from countries that do not show sufficient support for the U.S. war against Iran to those allies that do.[361]

A settled policy of this type going forward could undercut regional cooperation. That's because the responses would continue to vary by ally, with some allies more willing than others to meet U.S. demands, even at some cost to European cooperation. Warsaw's acute threat perceptions and its belief that only the United States can truly protect it make Poland among the most inclined to meet U.S. demands, such as purchasing U.S. equipment, even if it creates trade-offs for European cooperation. The UK might have a similar instinct to meet U.S. expectations because of a long-standing commitment to Atlanticism and deep nuclear and intelligence integration with the United States. Both allies are nevertheless hedging by building up domestic and European alternatives to reduce reliance on U.S. arms sales and will likely continue to do so if they are not forced to choose. But Poland and the UK might be more reluctant than other allies to support European initiatives outside NATO structures, if the United States opposed them. France, by contrast, with its history of investing in sovereign solutions, is more likely to resist U.S. pressure and pursue deeper European security cooperation regardless of U.S. policy. These divergent responses would, in turn, impede deeper regional cooperation.

[361] Linskey and Gramer, 2026.

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Chapter 8

Recommendations

Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby presented a new vision for the transatlantic alliance, NATO 3.0, in February 2026. Under this concept, the United States would reduce its military role in NATO both by starting to withdraw U.S. forces from Europe and decreasing its expected contributions in the event of conflict. Washington would adjust force structure to reflect a growing focus on the Western Hemisphere and the Pacific. The United States would encourage Europe to strengthen its collective capabilities so that it can deter Russia with less U.S. support. NATO 3.0 also includes the U.S. effort to promote a Ukraine-Russia ceasefire and, more generally, diplomatic outreach to Moscow to address NATO-Russia conflicts of interest. In this chapter, we make recommendations to advance this vision and, more generally, any future plan that calls for a reduced U.S. military role in Europe and burdenshifting toward allies while maintaining a continued transatlantic partnership.

Many factors other than U.S. policy will affect allies' choices about defense policies in the years ahead, including their economic and fiscal conditions, domestic politics, and Russia's behavior. But U.S. policy can have meaningful effects on allies' incentives and is therefore one element that will help shape those policy choices.

Despite differences in their circumstances, there is a striking degree of similarity in how France, Germany, Poland, and the UK view U.S. policy and in many of their likely reactions. Most of our observations apply to all four allies, including a sense of diverging values between the United States and Europe and a desire to salvage what they can of the relationship. They also all see a stark difference between a coordinated, orderly U.S. withdrawal, which they feel they could handle, and a rapid, uncoordinated one, which they see as creating major capability gaps and potentially emboldening Russia to attack a NATO member.

There are some real differences among the four allies. For instance, Paris is less likely than the others to buy U.S. defense equipment to gain Washington's favor and more likely than the others to continue investing heavily in European collective defense regardless of U.S. policy. But, overall, we see a convergence of perceptions and anticipated responses across the four allies.

Our analysis only focused on four key NATO allies, so the findings in the preceding chapters only apply to them. But the recommendations in this chapter, we believe, are general enough to apply to the U.S. approach to NATO allies generally. Future analyses that consider additional allies in depth as we did here might generate additional recommendations.

Develop and Coordinate with Allies on Long-Term Plans for Reductions in Peacetime Presence and Crisis Contributions, as Well as Force Structure Changes

NATO 3.0 is a vision for a reduced U.S. role and reallocation of resources. But there is no concrete, long-term plan. Implementation to date has involved short-notice changes. For example, in June 2026, the United States announced immediate reductions in the forces it will make available to NATO in a crisis.[362] And there have been episodic announcements, sometimes overturned or clarified shortly after, about reductions in peacetime presence.[363] A long-term plan for achieving NATO 3.0's vision would include concrete targets for U.S. wartime commitments and peacetime presence, a plan for getting there over time, and a description of force structure changes that will reallocate those resources to other priorities. It is not clear whether the review of U.S. posture in Europe will produce such a plan.[364] If not, the administration should consider a follow-on process to do so that includes a mechanism for gaining input on and sharing information with allies.[365]

Developing a long-term plan in close coordination with allies would be in the interest of the United States and support NATO 3.0 for three reasons:

- **Enable better allied planning.** With clarity about longer-term U.S. intentions, allies would know where to focus their defense spending to replace U.S. capabilities and could avoid inefficient, rushed investments.
- **Signal shared interests.** Transparency and predictability would also show allies that a different yet productive relationship is still possible with Washington. Developing a long-term plan would also signal an intention to stop using presence and commitments transactionally. This would help to rebuild a sense of shared interest in European stability, the fundamental basis for the kind of enduring partnership that NATO 3.0 envisions. These perceptions could help support future transatlantic cooperation, such as on new defense technologies, that the United States may want to promote in an uncertain future.
- **Address congressional concerns.** A long-term, coordinated plan could also address some congressional concerns about retrenchment. Many in Congress fear that a U.S. withdrawal would embolden Russia to attack a NATO ally. Therefore, existing U.S. law requires that the administration provide Congress with advance warning, analysis, and certifications of allied coordination before substantially reducing U.S. presence in Europe.[366] This provision gives Congress time to oppose plans for retrenchment it considers irresponsible. Coordinating with

[362] U.S. European Command Public Affairs, 2026.

[363] Aaron Pellish and Paul McLeary, "Hegseth Orders Withdrawal of 5,000 US Troops from Germany," *Politico*, May 1, 2026.

[364] Pete Hegseth, "Remarks by Secretary of War Pete Hegseth at the 2026 NATO Defense Ministerial in Brussels (as Delivered)," U.S. Department of War, June 18, 2026.

[365] This would be a policy shift since the department announced it would not share its global posture review with allies (Paul McLeary, Leo Shane III, and Chris Lunday, "Allies and Congress Are About to Lose a Key Window into US Military Plans," *Politico*, March 25, 2026).

[366] Public Law 119-60, 2025.

allies not only fulfills legal requirements but demonstrates a willingness to give allies the best chance to prepare for U.S. withdrawals. Therefore, developing and sticking to a long-term plan and keeping allies informed could allay these concerns and reduce opposition to U.S. retrenchment in Congress.[367]

Take Tangible Steps to Implement This Long-Term Plan

Initiating this long-term plan (e.g., further reductions in planned crisis contributions, larger-scale reductions in peacetime presence)—and continuing to carry out the plan over time as conditions allow—can help allies maintain momentum toward meeting NATO defense spending targets over the longer term despite the difficult domestic trade-offs they may require. Sustaining higher spending may be more difficult if time passes without the United States acting on its plans to retrench. In deciding on the size of such changes and which forces to remove, U.S. policymakers should keep in mind that some allies, including France and the UK, already have significant fiscal challenges and may not quickly increase spending further. Alternatively, such allies may increase short-term defense spending, but at greater risk of social unrest and domestic opposition to longer-term spending.

Encourage Deeper Regional Cooperation

NATO 3.0 envisions a self-sufficient Europe that reduces the burden on U.S. forces. Because no one ally is prepared to fill the U.S. role, allies will need to work together to increase their collective strength.

However, allies face impediments to deeper regional cooperation. For example, countries have incentives to prioritize their own industries that can undermine efforts at efficiently generating collective capabilities. The failure of the ambitious Future Combat Air System project, which had been carried by France and Germany with Spain, illustrates some of the main challenges of multinational defense capability and industrial development. Almost a decade in the making, the project fell apart because of the inability of the firms involved to come to an agreement and the different needs and requirements of the participating countries.[368] Additionally, in the context of U.S. retrenchment, Germany may become more wary of France seizing the predominant role that the United States has traditionally held in European security, and France may dread a Germany with a defense budget twice its own with conventional forces to match. For its part, the UK is constrained by no longer participating in EU defense cooperation initiatives.

If the U.S. goal is to promote European self-sufficiency, U.S. policy should help allies overcome these impediments to working together, not add to them.

[367] Priebe, 2026.

[368] Andreas Rinke and Tim Hepher, "Germany and France Drop Joint Fighter Jet Project," Reuters, June 8, 2026.

Avoid Leveraging U.S. Presence and Commitments for Secondary U.S. Priorities

Using presence and commitments to reward and punish individual allies would impede regional cooperation (Chapter 4). Therefore, the United States should avoid using presence or commitments as leverage to promote interests that are less important than NATO 3.0.

In addition to limiting such threats, the United States may need to actively reinforce the change in outlook. For example, the questionnaires reportedly sent to allies by the U.S. Department of War as part of the European posture review asked about allies' policies on such issues as defense spending and support for U.S. foreign policy priorities, which some allies interpreted as a signal that the United States is going to base posture decisions on policy alignment.[369] If the review itself takes a different approach, such as prioritizing military need, U.S. leaders would need to message the shift and reinforce it with subsequent behavior to change allies' perceptions.

Accept That Promoting Europe's Capacity for Self-Defense Could Mean That Allies Have Fewer Capabilities for Missions in Other Regions

The United States will need to be more selective in its requests for contributions to U.S. operations in other theaters, as heavy investments in European security will likely stretch allies' capabilities elsewhere in the world. The more quickly the United States retrenches, the more acute this trade-off will be.

Support Allies' Economic Growth

Allies are reckoning with the need to spend more on their defense as the United States retrenches. As discussed in Chapter 2, economists anticipate that existing U.S. tariffs will only modestly hurt European economies. But any further tariffs would create more headwinds at a time when allies need an economic boost to support higher defense spending. This is particularly true for the economies of France, Germany, and the UK, which are already struggling. Finding a sustainable resolution to the ongoing war with Iran will also reduce economic costs and spikes in energy prices, which have undermined allied efforts to rearm as NATO 3.0 envisions.

[369] Lili Bayer, Humeyra Pamuk, and Sabine Siebold, "Pentagon Official to Brief NATO Allies as Review Fuels Questions," Reuters, August 26, 2026.

Work with Allies to Promote a Durable Ceasefire in Ukraine

A stabilization of ties with Russia, as NATO 3.0 envisions, is a good way of addressing one of the threats allies face: risk of escalation of the conflict in Ukraine into a wider war.[370] Some U.S. options for outreach to Moscow, however, could lead allies to weaken ties with the United States. Allies would perceive a one-sided ceasefire deal favoring Russia over Ukraine, negotiated over their heads, as signaling a fundamental divergence of interests between the United States and Europeans. The United States does not necessarily need to shift from trilateral talks to direct European participation. But Washington should at least have a process to gain European input, especially because their contributions—such as security guarantees and financial support to Ukraine—will likely be needed for Kyiv to accept a deal.

Such a deal would include (1) provisions known to prevent conflict recurrence, such as demilitarized zones and monitoring; (2) a plan for sustaining Ukraine's capabilities to defend itself over the long term; (3) robust security guarantees and financial support for Ukraine from outside parties; and (4) Ukraine retaining the option to pursue accession to the EU.[371] Even after a ceasefire is achieved, NATO-Russia tensions will remain, so talks should continue on other stabilizing measures, such as sanctions relief, a resuscitation of arms control negotiations, and transparency and confidence-building measures to avoid inadvertent escalation.[372]

Closing Thoughts

For years, debates about U.S. grand strategy centered on *whether* the United States should retrench from Europe. Our findings speak directly to that debate. Some strategists' fears about allies aligning with Russia as the United States draws down are overblown. Limited U.S. retrenchment from Europe will more likely spur allies to keep raising defense spending and to deepen regional security cooperation to deter Russia from attacking a NATO member. Yet these responses are not guaranteed over the long term, constrained as they are by domestic political and fiscal pressures and by persistent disagreements among the allies themselves. So, U.S. policy should aim to reduce, not exacerbate, these impediments.

With the administration's adoption of NATO 3.0, the essential question is no longer *whether* the United States retrenches but *how* and over what time frame. Implementation, including the pace of any drawdown and the degree of coordination with allies, will shape whether retrenchment advances or undermines the very goals that NATO 3.0 prioritizes—and thus whether it ultimately supports or undermines U.S. interests. Taking a transactional approach to U.S. presence and commitments, for example, could undercut regional cooperation and, in turn, NATO 3.0's goal of European strength. Other choices, such as developing and sticking to predictable long-term plans and giving allies a voice in shaping them, could sustain a continued, if reimagined, transatlantic partnership. Furthermore, the

[370] Bryan Frederick, Samuel Charap, Scott Boston, Stephen J. Flanagan, Michael J. Mazarr, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, and Karl P. Mueller, *Pathways to Russian Escalation Against NATO from the Ukraine War*, RAND Corporation, PE-A1971-1, 2022.

[371] For a summary of the literature on terms that promote a durable end to fighting, see Charap and Priebe, 2024.

[372] For more detailed recommendations, see Charap and Haukkala, 2026.

U.S. policies in nonmilitary domains that accompany retrenchment also matter. U.S. tariffs, for example, erode trust and encourage allies to reduce security and economic cooperation with the United States. A negotiated end to the Ukraine war, by contrast, if made favorable to Ukraine and European security interests, could set conditions for greater regional stability and prosperity, on which any durable transatlantic partnership and security order will ultimately rest.

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Appendix

Additional Details on Select Data Sources

This appendix provides additional details on select data sources featured in the figures throughout the report.

U.S. Military Personnel

Data on U.S. military personnel in each country are from Allen, Flynn, and Machain's expansion of Tim Kane's "Global U.S. Troop Deployment, 1950–2003" dataset through 2024.[373] Allen, Flynn, and Machain's data come largely from the DMDC's quarterly "Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency by State/Country" reports. We added data for 2025 directly from the September 2025 DMDC report.[374]

Annual values indicate the number of active duty, guard, and reserve personnel assigned to duty in each country during the third quarter (September). There is no publicly available official source for the number of personnel on temporary duty or those deployed in support of military operations over time. The data thus underestimate the number of U.S. military personnel in a given location. For instance, there were between 67,000 and 69,000 troops assigned to duty in Europe from 2022 to 2025, but the total U.S. presence including non-assigned personnel fluctuated between 75,000 and 100,000 over the same period.[375] Still, assigned personnel make up the majority of U.S. forces in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, so the available data still provide insight into meaningful changes over time.

However, these data are not useful for understanding U.S. presence in Poland. Almost all U.S. personnel in Poland since 2017 have been non-assigned, rotational forces. Therefore, we used open-source news reporting to estimate the approximate number of U.S. personnel deployed to Poland each year. Deployments are not always in yearlong increments, complicating our accounting. For years in which the troop level changed during the year, we used the highest common value.

[373] Allen, Flynn, and Machain discuss their method for expanding the Kane (2004) dataset in Allen, Flynn, and Machain (2022). The data file we used is Flynn (2026).

[374] DMDC, 2025.

[375] Molly Carlough, Benjamin Harris, and Abi McGowan, "Where Are U.S. Military Forces Deployed in Europe?" Council on Foreign Relations, May 6, 2026.

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Rotational presence of U.S. troops in Poland began in 2010 with the establishment of the Patriot garrison.[376] Approximately 150 members of the 10th Army Air and Missile Defense Command based in Germany rotated into Poland quarterly to train soldiers from 2010 through their final mission in 2013.[377] We add these 150 personnel to the number of assigned troops in Poland between 2010 and 2013, which numbered fewer than 50 each year.

In 2014, a different rotation began. As part of Operation Atlantic Resolve, company detachments of approximately 150 personnel rotated through Poland.[378] These rotations continued through 2015 and 2016.[379] We added these troops to those permanently assigned, which numbered slightly over 50 between 2014 and 2016.

A more robust rotational presence began in 2017. This posture was anchored by the arrival of the 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division in January,[380] forward deployment of 10th Combat Aviation Brigade elements in Poland in March,[381] integration of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment into the NATO Enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group in Orzysz in March,[382] and relocation of the Division Mission Command Element headquarters to Poznań in May 2017.[383] Beyond these elements, other units, such as Army logistics task forces and U.S. Navy and Air Force detachments, also operated in Poland at this time.[384] This rotational baseline was listed at 4,500 troops under the June 2019 Joint Declaration on Defense Cooperation.[385] Given that most force elements arrived in 2017, we assume that 4,500 U.S. troops were based in Poland from 2017 through 2019.

This 2019 agreement planned a near-term increase of an additional 1,000 personnel. Despite the formal establishment of the V Corps Headquarters Forward in November 2020,[386] there was no definitive reporting of an increase in overall U.S. troop presence in Poland through 2020 or 2021. In

[376] "Patriot Missile Battery Arrives in Poland," Reuters, May 24, 2010.

[377] John Zumer, "10th AAMDC Soldiers Earn Deployment Excellence Awards," DVIDS, October 29, 2013.

[378] Nancy Montgomery, "US Paratroops Arrive in Poland Amid Tensions with Russia," *Stars and Stripes*, April 23, 2014.

[379] "US General: Troops Staying in Baltics Through 2015," Associated Press, November 24, 2014; William Tanner, "173rd Airborne Brigade Leads Bi-Lateral Urban Operations Training," *Army News*, November 23, 2016.

[380] Damien Pearse, "Poland Welcomes 3,500 US Troops Amid Fears over Russia Aggression," *Sky News*, January 14, 2017.

[381] Thomas Scaggs, "10th Combat Aviation Brigade Assumes Atlantic Resolve Mission in Europe," *Army News*, March 17, 2017.

[382] "2nd Cavalry Regiment Arrived in Orzysz, Poland, on March 30, 2017," DVIDS, March 30, 2017.

[383] Diandra Harrell, "LTG Hodges Visits New MCE Headquarters, Signs PAF NCO Corps Assessment," *Army News*, May 14, 2017.

[384] Andrew Feickert, Kathleen J. McInnis, and Derek E. Mix, "U.S. Military Presence in Poland," *In Focus*, Congressional Research Service, No. IF11280, August 1, 2019, updated July 2, 2020.

[385] White House, "Joint Declaration on Defense Cooperation Regarding United States Force Posture in the Republic of Poland," June 12, 2019.

[386] "V Corps Establishes Its Forward Headquarters in Poland," DVIDS, November 20, 2020.

fact, public sources reported that between 4,000 and 4,500 U.S. troops were present in Poland in early 2022.[387] Accordingly, we maintain a U.S. troop level of 4,500 through 2021.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the United States surged forces to approximately 10,000 troops. While within-year fluctuations and rotational schedules have led to deviations,[388] reporting lists 10,000 U.S. troops in Poland through 2025.[389] In 2026, the United States canceled a deployment of 4,000 troops that were intended to replace a unit returning home. This would have reduced U.S. presence in Poland. But the President subsequently announced that the United States would send an additional 5,000 personnel, which would have left U.S. presence around 10,000 if implemented.[390] As of July 2026, it is unclear how exactly the United States will carry out these plans. Consistent with our method of reporting the maximum observed presence, we report 10,000 personnel for 2026.

Defense Expenditure and Allies' Military Personnel

The figures for "Defense Expenditure," "Military Expenditure as a Share of GDP," "Domestic Military Personnel," and "Defense Expenditure Distribution by Category" are all derived from NATO's annual "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries." We used the 2017 document for 2010 data and the 2018 document for 2011–2013 data.[391] We used Annex III: Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries from the 2025 Secretary General's annual report for 2014–2025 data.[392] NATO released the annual report in April 2026 with data through March 16, 2026, updating the previous, separate "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries" document released in August 2025.[393]

Defense Expenditure

The data for the defense expenditure figures in the report are derived from "Table 2: Defence Expenditure" in the "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries" documents. We adjusted these figures to make them comparable over time. The 2017 and 2018 NATO reports present expenditures

[387] Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Army Troops Arrive in Poland to Reassure Allies," *New York Times*, February 17, 2022; Monika Scislowska and Czarek Sokolowski, "U.S. Airborne Infantry Troops Arrive in Poland Amid Tensions," *AP News*, February 6, 2022.

[388] For example, *Stars and Stripes* reported 8,725 troops in 2022, while a U.S. European Command response to a Heritage Foundation request in July reported 10,500. We choose 10,000 as it appeared more consistently. For 10,500 troop level, see Daniel Kochis, "Europe," in Dakota L. Wood, ed., *2023 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, Heritage Foundation, 2023, Chart 2, p. 71. For 8,725, see Caitlin Doornbos, "Poland Despite Russian Missile Strikes Near Ukraine-Polish Border," *Stars and Stripes*, March 14, 2022.

[389] Derek E. Mix, *Poland: Background and U.S. Relations*, Congressional Research Service, R45784, March 6, 2023; Mix, 2023.

[390] John Vandiver, "Poland Troop Boost Adds New Twist to Pentagon's Europe Plans," *Stars and Stripes*, May 22, 2026b.

[391] NATO, 2017; NATO, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2010–2017)," press release, March 15, 2018.

[392] NATO, *The Secretary General's Annual Report*, 2025a.

[393] NATO "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries" documents sometimes retroactively update figures from previous years. Accordingly, we used the latest releases that contain a given year to report that year's values. For example, the 2018 document was the latest one to include 2011–2013 data, and the 2017 document was the latest one to include 2010 data.

in 2010 constant dollars, whereas the 2025 NATO report presents them in 2021 constant dollars. To standardize the series, we used the years that appear in both the 2018 and 2025 reports—2014 through 2017—to bridge the older series onto the newer one. For each country, we calculated the ratio between the value reported in 2021 constant dollars and the value reported in 2010 constant dollars in each overlap year. We then used the median of those yearly ratios as the conversion factor. We applied that country-specific conversion factor to the pre-2018 values from the older reports so they would be expressed in 2021 constant dollars and could be combined with the newer series. We then used the 2025 report as the authoritative source for the overlapping years, replacing the earlier values with the 2025 report's figures where both sources covered the same year. Defense expenditure figures in the 2025 report only provide estimates for 2025.

Note that NATO's definition of *defence expenditure* differs from national definitions. Formally, it is defined as "payments made by a national government specifically to meet the needs of its armed forces, those of Allies or of the Alliance."[394] Armed forces include those forces trained in military tactics, that have military equipment, and that can be deployed outside the country under military authority. Military pensions, peacekeeping operations, and research and development are also included. These expenditures are counted as defense expenditures even if they fall under the budgets of ministries or departments other than defense (e.g., a Ministry of Interior controlling military-trained and equipped police forces).[395]

Defense Expenditure as a Share of GDP

We used NATO's data on defense expenditure as a share of GDP. To make this calculation, NATO uses economic data from the Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs of the European Commission (DG ECFIN) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

[394] NATO, 2025b.

[395] NATO, 2025b.

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Abbreviations

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland (Germany)
AUKUS	Australia–United Kingdom–United States (trilateral security partnership)
C2	command and control
CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (Germany)
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
CSU	Christlich-Soziale Union (Germany)
DMDC	Defense Manpower Data Center
EU	European Union
FDP	Freie Demokratische Partei (Germany)
GDP	gross domestic product
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
KO	Civic Coalition (Poland)
LFI	La France Insoumise (France)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PiS	Law and Justice (Poland)
RN	National Rally (France)
SAFE	Security Action for Europe
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

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