

# A NATO Sans USA

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*The newly elected American President's constant threat on pulling America out of NATO labelling them as potential liabilities has not gone well with its European partners. His far from charitable description that he would cease defending allies that spend less than the stipulated percentage on defence has got the nations thinking on an alternate arrangement if the USA chooses to abandon the alliance. The Europeans should quit underestimating themselves and brace up for joint efforts to ward off American bullying. The Europeans are undoubtedly technological powerhouses and all have standing armies which cross-exercise at regular intervals and keep themselves battle-ready. It is necessary for NATO to step out on its own and create its own individuality sans the USA.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The 4 April 2025 marked the 76<sup>th</sup> anniversary of signing of the treaty at Washington DC that brought the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) into being. It was also referred to as the Washington Treaty. The NATO was primarily created to be a counter-weight to the large Soviet army stationed in the Central and Eastern Europe post the Second World War to

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create a geopolitical buffer zone. The Soviet military presence was also aimed to create a 'sphere of influence' in eastern Europe to protect the Soviet Union from potential western attacks especially by a resurgent West Germany. The UK and France, the pre-war 'great powers' in Europe, were on their knees after their battering during the Second World War. The European nations were struggling to rebuild their countries after the war devastation heaped on them by Germany and had a fragile security in place with limited or nil capabilities to defend themselves against any external aggression. There were certain Western European countries which were willing to consider a collective security solution which would provide them a security umbrella to counter any military threats from a strong adversary, the USSR, and managing the expectations of their people. It was basically a roll call of the hurt. The Americans were more than willing to exploit this fear among the European nations to set up an alliance to defend the Western world and aptly termed it as the antidote to fear. Peacetime is okay, but it is wars that test friendships.

The USA, triumphant in victory in the Second World War and solidifying its position as a global superpower against a resurgent USSR, took on the mantle of protector to its European allies, extending its military might across the Atlantic and halfway across Europe. The formation of NATO in 1949 was a direct response to the growing tensions and geopolitical rivalry between the Western democracies bound by capitalism and the Eastern Bloc led by the Soviet Union practising communism. The West was against the USSR and its Marxist allies, and against a single ideology domination. The NATO was primarily designed to bestow an architecture for collective security, signifying that an attack on one member would be considered an attack on all, thereby deterring potential aggressors. The alliance also served to ensure a strong American military presence in Europe, which was seen as crucial for European security. It is also pertinent to mention that the European nations and the USA have had warm relations all these years barring a few incidents, the most prominent one involving the USA and France.

This has however got upended with the election of Donald Trump as president who made no bones of walking out of NATO as it has been perceived in certain quarters of his administration that the European countries allied to NATO are not spending adequately on defence and the onus to bear the extra burden of security expenditure falls on the shoulders of the USA. The US President cites the recent Ukraine war, where bulk of the costs towards arms and ammunition are borne by the USA and not the countries in the immediate periphery of Ukraine which are all members of the NATO.

Although Europe faces several internal security problems due to growing right-wing sentiments and Islamophobia, the only threat envisaged to the continent for which the American military power might be relevant is a direct military clash with Russia, which appears to be a distant possibility. However, there are some who believe that Russia's offensive military actions in recent years, particularly its attack on Georgia and Ukraine, are harbingers of a resurgent Russian threat, echoing the Cold War narratives of the past. Hence the USA's continued presence in the NATO to ward off any additional territorial ambitions by the Russians, seems justified. But in the above cases, the attack was precipitated against both Georgia and Ukraine when they expressed their desire to join the NATO thus tempting fate and the Russians felt rightly threatened of having an inimical security alliance in its immediate periphery. The general feeling seeping through the minds of European leaders is that the USA is largely indifferent to the fate of Europe and it would be prudent for them to work post haste to address their security vulnerabilities independently.

This article examines the possibility of the USA taking exit from the NATO, the causes therein and the after-effects of managing a military alliance and the role of the European nations thereafter.

### PRECURSOR TO NATO

The Brussels Treaty of 1948 is considered as the precursor to the Atlantic Defence System or the NATO, and was the first to forge a military alliance between the UK, France and the Benelux countries of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. The name 'Benelux' is derived from the first letters of each country's name, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. The process to the Brussels Treaty was preceded by the signing of the Treaty of Dunkirk between Britain and France in March 1947. This was a bilateral agreement designed to prevent a resurgence of German militarism; it established a new, Anglo-French military alliance to last for 50 years. The negotiations between the five nations resulted in the signing of the Brussels Treaty on 17 March 1948.

The Brussels Treaty was to afford assistance to each other, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, in maintaining international peace and security and in resisting any policy of aggression especially by Germany, and was a precursor to NATO. The Article V of the Brussels Treaty stipulated that if one party was attacked, the others would assist in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, binding others

to help defend the attacked country. This treaty provided collective defence and also established a Consultative Council to address any situation that could threaten peace.<sup>1</sup> NATO which was formed in 1949, was developed out of this framework.

### THE DAWN OF WARSAW PACT

In 1955, West Germany was invited to join the NATO, which the Soviet Union viewed as a significant escalation of the Cold War. In the strategic geometry of the NATO nations, it was felt important to anchor West Germany in the Western alliance, as West German re-armament, in spite of the fact that it was prohibited after the war, seemed to be the only obvious solution to counterbalance the Soviet military build-up in East Germany. The invitation to West Germany was met with profuse opposition externally as well as within West Germany itself.<sup>2</sup> But strategic considerations in the calculus of the NATO eventually prevailed as the allies knew that they needed additional troops to deter the USSR, and West Germany knew it needed protection from expanding communist influence. Through its membership of the alliance, a controlled and integrated re-armament was possible and West Germany transitioned to the path of regaining national sovereignty that was badly impaired.

The Soviets complained bitterly about the integration of West Germany into the alliance citing it dangerous, but they were powerless to prevent it. The Soviet leaders spoke of a united but neutral Germany, on the model of Austria.<sup>3</sup> However tempted, the Western powers resisted the proposal. For the Alliance, parallels between North and South Korea, and East and West Germany were too obvious to ignore without a strong military presence in West Germany. West Germany joining NATO now meant that Germany once again had military power and may nurse ambitions which it had displayed in the two world wars. For the Soviets, who had suffered greatly at the hands of the Germans, this was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

The USSR did not form any formal military alliance till then and it was six years after the birth of NATO that the Soviets decided to form the Warsaw Pact, a counter-alliance to NATO, primarily because it was reacting to West Germany's entry into NATO in 1955, fearing a strengthened Western bloc and re-armed West Germany. Fearing the consequences, USSR responded by forming the Warsaw Pact on 14 May 1955, as a counter-alliance. The Warsaw Pact, composed of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European

satellite states of East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Albania, became the ideological and political counterpart to NATO, representing the Eastern bloc against the Western bloc of NATO countries. By 1955, the NATO membership had grown to 15 nations. The formation of the Warsaw Pact and NATO led to an arms race between the two blocs, which lasted throughout the Cold War.

### THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

The North Atlantic Treaty was signed by the Foreign Ministers of the 12 signatory states on 4 April 1949. The NATO was formed on the principle of collective defence and to provide a comprehensive vision of security maintaining the trans-Atlantic link and also to ensure that adequate military capabilities are maintained by its member nations. What makes NATO unique is the fact that despite many dismissing it as a non-entity post the Soviet collapse in 1991, it has managed to survive into the new millennium and has survived for 25 years after that. In stark contrast, some of the parallel treaties like the South East Treaty Organization (SEATO) was dissolved after the Vietnam War in 1977, the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) was dissolved in 1979 post the Iranian revolution that saw the Shah of Iran dethroned, and the Australia, New Zealand and USA (ANZUS) treaty was scaled down in 1986 when the USA suspended its commitments towards New Zealand.

In a quote largely attributed to Lord Lionel Hastings, NATO's first Secretary General who quipped that NATO was primarily to 'keep the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down'.<sup>4</sup> It is pertinent that there was not a single military entanglement involving the NATO forces during the entire Cold War phase from 1947 to 1991, though it conducted numerous joint military exercises during this period. Was this due to the strong coalition which was firmly in place or were the Soviets just uninterested in provoking the alliance towards open hostilities? However, there were certain incidents which brought the world to the brink of yet another round of conflict which included the Korean war, U-2 incident of 1960, the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and the Vietnamese war. Fortunately, these events did not spiral into full-grown conflict as both the alliances had built up massive military forces, including a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons, creating a 'mutually assured destruction' (MAD) scenario where a full-scale war would be catastrophic for all involved. This made a direct attack too risky for either side.

There was no direct confrontation between the two opposing blocs during the entire period of the Cold War, despite the minefield of misinformation sowed by both sides. There were however, proxy wars and dogmatic competition. The USA and the Soviet Union supported opposing sides in conflicts around the world, such as the Korean and Vietnam wars, in Angola, Nicaragua and Afghanistan without directly engaging in open warfare with each other.

Another part of the emerging Trump game-plan is a two-tier NATO system. That idea, first proposed by another senior former Trump administration official, retired Army Lt Gen. Keith Kellogg, means that member countries that have not yet met the target of spending two per cent of GDP on defence would cease to enjoy the defence largess and security guarantee of the United States. This unfortunately sounds more like a mercenary way of fighting and not the support of an iron-clad alliance partner.<sup>5</sup>

### EUROPE'S ACCEPTANCE OF DEPENDANCE

The statements of Donald Trump leaving the alliance have unnerved the European nations who see Russia as an existential threat, but have what some analysts call 'Bonsai Armies', as they have traditionally banked on the US for security under the NATO framework and it was a one-sided dependency.<sup>6</sup>

The domination of USA over the original members of the Brussels Treaty started as early as 1949 when the USA was insisting on the size and geographical coverage of the proposed NATO alliance. The United States wanted to extend the alliance beyond the Brussels Treaty states and include all nations bordering the Atlantic. They proposed that Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, Ireland and Portugal be included. Britain, with the other Brussels Treaty members, felt that any extension of the proposed alliance would weaken it and diminish its effectiveness but had to bow to the American dictums. The original members were also concerned about the credentials of Portugal which was ruled by a Dictator Salazar who enforced a brutal censorship on opponents. But the reservations were not heeded by the USA which ensured that Portugal became one of the founding members of the NATO. But Sweden and Ireland were unwilling to join the coalition. Sweden chose a policy of non-alignment in peacetime and neutrality in wartime, trusting that this path would best protect its interests and avoid being drawn into a potential conflict.<sup>7</sup> While Ireland voiced backing for the proposed alliance goals, it opted not to join, primarily to maintain its neutrality and thwart being pulled into alliances that could complicate its

relationship with the United Kingdom, with whom it had ongoing disputes over Northern Ireland. It was a dominant submissive relationship. Norway's membership in NATO, along with Denmark, created a 'Nordic balance' in the Cold War era, where NATO was not allowed to establish military bases or stockpile nuclear weapons on their territories, as Sweden and Finland remained neutral. The United States believed that membership of the Alliance would strengthen their ties with the West and protect them from communist subversion.

Further the USA proposed the inclusion of Italy, and other nations such as Greece and Turkey that did not border the North Atlantic. The European powers were very much against the inclusion of Italy as they felt that she would be a military liability for some time to come. However, the American strategic establishment felt that Italy's vantage location in the Mediterranean region rendered it as an invaluable strategic ally that could help secure the defence of NATO's Southern flank.

The American sentiment prevailed and outweighed any such military reservations of the founding members against Italy and she became the twelfth nation to sign the original Treaty. The USA was finally able to achieve its vision of an alliance that linked America to the defence of Western Europe, as well as ensuring a special relationship of Europe with the United States and Canada. The European nations fully understand that for the US military, NATO acts as a force multiplier, providing legitimacy to American power projection. The European allies at America's behest have participated in multiple missions in countries that include Afghanistan, Libya, Bosnia, Iraq, Somalia and Yemen while the United States mostly calls the shots. The US bases in Europe meant to protect its European allies, also serve as logistics hubs to project power into the Middle East.

The US nuclear umbrella is the core of NATO, which was deliberately designed that way and the Europeans accept it to preserve the alliance solidarity. The European nations are fully aware that throughout the alliance's history, USA had been both its leading member and principal security provider. The USA is not only the alliance's biggest driving force and most significant military contributor, but has always insisted that the other members agree to integrate their defence capabilities within this US-led structure, thus ensuring that Washington controls their employment in major military operations. This understanding took a major hit in February 2025 when the United States took a hard stance against every other NATO member by joining hands with Russia and voting against a United Nations resolution denouncing Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

## USA SHIFTING ALLEGIANCE

The recent statements by the current US president and his trusted advisors are signalling a sharp shift from the USA's historical obligation towards Europe and is challenging long-held assumptions of an iron-clad support envisaged by the NATO nations. The NATO was continuing despite the demise of Soviet Union, to threaten Russia with a punitive deterrence and assured retribution in case of unwanton aggression against its members. Donald Trump's multiple statements on clearing Gaza of Palestinians, re-taking Panama Canal, annexing Greenland and Canada have all sent shockwaves across allies and associates. This bellicosity is tantamount to verbal terrorism. Trump does not circumscribe to globalisation and the prevailing American consensus on economic and foreign issues followed hitherto. He has also been generally unconvinced of American coalitions and military commitments overseas, espousing a rather isolationist approach.<sup>8</sup>

There are certain issues perceived by Trump as not benefitting American interests and this may have prompted him to display such outbursts threatening to walk out of NATO. During the Cold War era, the USA faced the USSR which was a formidable enemy and an empire of analogous strength. The then Soviet Union's military and economic superiority constituted a genuine threat to both Western Europe and the American interests. However, the present-day Russia after the disintegration of the erstwhile Soviet Union, is a pale shadow of its former self and does not pose serious challenges to the NATO nations. With Russia's diminished power and Europe's increased economic capacity, Trump strongly feels that it is time for the USA to withdraw from NATO.

The USA has already said that it is re-focusing its attention on China and has put its forces on an accelerated path towards military superiority in the Indo-Pacific region. Concerns about China's military capabilities being at par with USA are being debated seriously and an emerging fact is that China is genuinely the only country today with the potential to threaten the status of the United States.<sup>9</sup> The USA could afford to fight a two-front war in 1941, but building a military sufficient to simultaneously defend Taiwan and Europe today would be ruinous. Hence USA would like to give NATO a pass as Trump cannot expect his NATO allies to support Taiwan if they are attacked by China. The issue at hand is global power equilibria between the USA and China and their status within the international system. There are grounds to believe that US President Donald Trump regards superiority and military dominance as seen in his offensive utterances against



Greenland, Panama Canal and the bombing of Yemen as an end in itself, rather than simply a means to promote particular interests and values. The USA witnesses with concern the growing military capabilities of China as a threat not only to its own military bases in the Pacific, but also to its system of forged partnerships and alliances in the Asia-Pacific region. Three of America's closest Asian allies—Japan, Taiwan and South Korea—are all threatened by Chinese belligerence and its catspaw North Korea. The present US administration wants to concentrate its full military might against a dangerous adversary and hence would like to get its military assets released from various bases in Europe. The USA and China view each other as prospective military adversaries and marshal their planning accordingly, so the security dilemma shapes the structure of the relationship. Hence Trump would like to concentrate more on China and may like to relieve his offensive assets from a lesser sensitive Europe.

Further, the Trump administration is of the strong opinion that their European allies have underfunded their own militaries, as they lie secure in the credibility of America's commitment to protect them. The most martial among the European powers, France and Britain, also do not spend adequately to fund their truncated post-Cold War force structures. They barely reach the alliance's obligation to spend two per cent of GDP on defence. France and Germany spend roughly half, and Britain two-thirds, which causes heartburns for the American financial establishment.<sup>10</sup>

NATO's expansion now to 32 members necessitate the USA to defend all the member states, including the new entrants from both conventional and nuclear threats, which turns out to be a daunting order given the proximity of these nations to Russia. Further, it is felt that it is a strategically unnecessary project since the Europeans cannot contribute anything to American national security. From an organisation that could succeed deterring a major military threat, NATO has turned into an expansive project to make all of Europe safe that has become much more burdensome and complicated for the USA.

Hence, Donald Trump's utterances on walking out of NATO needs to be given a serious thought by Europe, despite checks and balances in place to avoid such a situation. The US President has no deep commitment towards NATO and may resort to massive downscaling of deployments, taking out men and material which could weaken the alliance substantially. These actions may be a serious complicating factor for the European allies which have been long-reliant on American security guarantees.

It is difficult to predict Trump's actions following his remarks. He has been known to both follow through and roll-back on his threats. Trump

could use the threat of abandonment as a bargaining chip to force allies to spend more on US weapons, or to gain concessions in other areas such as trade and technology standards. The US withdrew its military support for Ukraine including sharing of intelligence, and was also serious about introducing whipsaw trade tariffs on China, the European Union, Mexico and Canada and he was remarkably consistent with his threats. Europe can navigate through the known knowns, the known unknowns, but will find it increasingly difficult to negotiate the unknown unknowns.

### TRUMP DOUBTS ALLIANCE UTILITY

A meeting was convened by the European Union in Brussels on 19 December 2024, to discuss Ukraine and other global events as the change of regime in the USA was round the corner.<sup>11</sup> Donald Trump, who had won the American presidential elections and was due to assume office in January 2025, had signalled his intentions of quitting NATO as the American involvement in NATO was a huge strain on the US financial exchequer and was primarily a sum of unequal parts.<sup>12</sup> He opined that NATO members should be able to stand up and protect themselves from any external aggression as their expenditure pales in comparison with that of the USA, and that he has been advocating and pushing for a disengagement. In addition to this ongoing predicament, the European partners in NATO and the USA are having highly divergent views over the key issue of the war in Ukraine. While Trump is of the view that Ukraine should take a reconciliatory view which might include foregoing territory lost to Russia, the NATO members contrary to American views re-affirm their solidarity with Ukraine.

The next summit held in Brussels on 6 March 2025, discussed Ukraine and a probable US security dis-engagement as the issue is acute for the Central and East European (CEE) countries due to their proximity to Russia and most reliant on American support at present. The summit proposed security guarantees towards the European Union and confirmed that it is committed to strengthen its own defence and become better equipped to act and deal autonomously with immediate and future challenges and threats, including Russia which constitutes an existential challenge for the European Union.<sup>13</sup>

There were talks on the US approach to Ukraine by the NATO members in Paris between 11 March and 13 March 2025, and the meeting was attended by more than 30 members with the USA being a notable absentee.<sup>14</sup> This emergency meeting was in response as the members of the European Union

were excluded ahead of the meeting between the US and Russian representatives in Saudi Arabia. This probably was the indicator that Trump is going ahead with negotiations without European representatives and he is serious about exiting NATO.<sup>15</sup> The meeting probably sent a message that the European members would be able to effectively execute actions pertaining to Ukraine. A European diplomat had said post meeting that the gathering of leaders was pre-planning to define credible security guarantees to make lasting peace in Ukraine a reality, and the possibility of a 'Amexit' from the NATO, and a NATO without the USA would have also been discussed though the reports did not elaborate on this issue.

The defence ministers from Europe's five main military powers—France, Britain, Germany, Italy and Poland—met on 12 March 2025 in the French capital with talks centered on the 'necessary rearmament of Europe' and the possible extending France's nuclear deterrent to European partners. The EU Chief Ursula von der Leyen unveiled a plan to mobilise around 800 billion euros (US\$ 843 billion) for Europe's defence.<sup>16</sup> The leaders asserted that peace in Ukraine and the defence of Europe are the most urgent necessities. The meeting gave the impression that Europe was probably preparing for an American exit from NATO and trying to make alternate arrangements to keep the alliance intact.<sup>17</sup>

### THE PERILS OF FORGETTING

The USA should not forget that allies and partners are at the core of integrated deterrence, fostering effectiveness across domains, theaters and spectrums of conflict. Through NATO, the USA has 31 allies which are predisposed to working with the US thus providing the US with more militarily capable, interoperable and willing to share risks and burdens, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the Americans. Europe will embrace the fact that the key to long-term security in the trans-Atlantic region is to maintain a strong military and a global alliance system.

The US trying to wind down the alliance or even reduction in the military forces deployed in NATO would open a power vacuum for rogue nations to exploit and expand their power. The global challenges are multiplying in all corners and the rising threats are not being fully addressed by the global community. The US through NATO presents a formidable military alliance to address issues that has a direct bearing on its security and power projection. Though the USA provides NATO a nuclear umbrella and specialised skills, the European members greatly multiply America's overall contributions

through their collective presence. Europe, an industrial powerhouse, is also an essential asset for hedging against China in an economic war. The Americans are bound to be all at sea facing multiple enemies singularly.

Though the USA is both militarily and economically formidable with the possession of the largest nuclear arsenal, but without the support of its European allies in NATO, it would be a much diminished superpower. It is the NATO that provides the USA with a leadership position in one of the strongest military alliance networks in the world. It is also true that the NATO has invoked Article 5 only once in its history, immediately after the USA was attacked on 11 September 2001. America's NATO allies were ready to come to the aid of the attacked Americans and subsequently participated in the United States' war in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup>

The United States' current presence in Europe has not been imposed or thrust upon by force. To the contrary, the American troops and influence in Europe are generally welcomed by its allies and give the Americans unprecedented influence and power. The Americans in all probability would lose the use of key installations such as Ramstein in Germany along with many other bases and installations in place in Europe. The strong likelihood of cancellation of orders for American weaponry is likely to hit the American arms-making industry hard. The US stations permanent and rotational military forces in strategic locations including Poland, Romania, the Baltic region, Spain and the UK, and carries out joint military exercises thus enhancing defensive capabilities. Additionally, the US has invested billions into storage facilities, airfield upgrades, training complexes, equipment, and other defence infrastructure to discourage potential threats. The Americans are likely to face a herculean task of dismantling these assets and repositioning them either in the USA or in the countries of new allies, which would be a difficult task.

The United States Navy also will be severely hamstrung as it needs friendly ports to refuel, resupply, rearm the ships and restock food supplies and the absence of friendly ports would deny the facility for shore leave for the American naval crews. Though it is not an unsurmountable problem, but the necessity of an entire fleet of oilers and dry supply ships shuttling back and forward to the USA to restock, which necessitates a fleet of frigates and submarines to escort them, but would fall short of addressing the lack of shore leave for the naval crew. Further, all military personnel living in Europe which is in excess of over 100,000 would be expected to return to America and their postings both within and outside America would pose administrative problems.

**Figure 1** US Bases and Forces in Europe

Source: European Commission, GISCO, 2025; US Army, 2025; IISS, The Military Balance, 2025.

The USA might end up on a war with China. Once the USA is out of the NATO, the European members may be unwilling to take America's side and may prefer to remain neutral. If USA is attacked across the pole by Russia, there will be no EU members attacking Russia in Europe.

There have been instances of the Americans being denied facilities even though they were part of the NATO due to serious ideological differences with certain member nations. At the outbreak of the 1973 Arab–Israeli War, both Greece and Cyprus refused to allow US ships and planes helping Israel to refuel, forcing them to rely on British assistance. Days before then-President George W Bush's invasion of Iraq in 2003, Turkey refused to allow US planes to use its air force base at Incirlik or to cross Turkish airspace. In the interests of the USA, Trump may adopt a business over bluster posture. If the present Trump administration decides to sharply revise the United States' security presence in Europe, decades of military integration would need to be disentangled, which would be an immense task.

Europe is already developing through joint ventures a sixth-generation fighter aircraft, the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) involving the UK, Italy and Japan, and the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) involving France, Germany and Spain.<sup>19</sup> It may not be long before the F-35 stealth aircraft ordered by some nations in NATO may be cancelled to patronise

own production. The same goes for many of the land-based systems. In 2024, France, Germany, Italy and Poland launched the European Long-Range Strike Approach to develop a European-made land-based cruise missile with an alleged range between 1,000 and 2,000 kilometers. Further long-range strike systems, which includes the sea and air-launched versions of the Anglo-French Future Cruise/Anti-Ship Weapon, are also on the cards providing these two countries the capability to hit targets at distances over 1,600 kilometers. Meanwhile, the German government is looking into the development of a next-generation Taurus Neo missile with enhanced range, accuracy and explosive power. With all this induction by the Europeans, the US will lose a substantial share of the defence market, which can dent the defence industry and can cause huge unemployment.<sup>20</sup>

### US–NATO SPENDING–USER ASSESSMENT

The USA's financial commitment to NATO is nearly identical to most other members' financial obligation, but certain members exceed the commitment and some fall short. NATO contributions are calculated based on each country's GDP. Countries like Iceland do not have a standing army, while Poland, Estonia and Greece outspend the USA. The NATO members are obligated to spend 2 per cent of their GDP on their own defence forces as the target contribution towards NATO. It is just eight members which fail to achieve the stipulated target, including economically powerful nations like Canada, Italy, Spain and Portugal, which under-subscribe to accepted commitment thus irking the USA. The commitment by Germany was quite low at about 1.8 per cent, but saw a rise with the war between Russia and Ukraine. It was not merely the pressure for fairer 'burden-sharing' to boost European military spending that came from across the Atlantic, but the invasion of Ukraine saw many European leaders giving clarion calls for spending increases in their countries.

It is misleadingly suggested that the entire US defence budget is spent on NATO. The United States is tied with Germany as the biggest net contributor to the NATO common budget, yet the cost is a drop in the ocean in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the USA, compared to other countries.<sup>21</sup> Trump is calling for NATO countries to increase defence spending to 5 per cent of their GDP, a figure that even the US itself does not reach. The USA spends about 3.4 per cent of its GDP on defence.<sup>22</sup> It is also a fact that not all of this is dedicated to NATO, but also for its own military commitments and interests in overseas theatres of conflict that have

nothing to do with the defence of Europe. With the possible exception of the UK, all the money spent by the other members is dedicated to NATO. If it is established that the USA dedicates only half of its defence spending on NATO and the rest elsewhere, then the USA too greatly underachieves on the 2 per cent commitment, probably less than Germany. While European armaments are well-identified and bought by many countries, it is interesting that an estimated 64 per cent of the equipment used by European military forces is American-made.<sup>23</sup> This structural asymmetry in the trans-Atlantic defence market sees US manufacturers benefit from European governments reaching that stated goal of 2 per cent of GDP spending target.

### IS DETERRENCE DISPLACING DIPLOMACY

Militarily, Trump could draw down the large presence of the American military that is based in multiple NATO bases all over the Europe without making formal pronouncements about NATO, just to send a clear message to Europe. The reluctance of Washington to directly confront Russia over Ukraine has the NATO allies worried about the threatening future. Europe is worried that the growing threat China poses may distract the US from Europe. In response to the rising security concerns in the Nordic region, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden are working towards a unified air defence, aiming to operate their air forces as a single entity, based on a joint Nordic air operations concept, similar to NATO's methodology. The four Nordic countries signed a joint declaration, the 'Nordic Air Commanders' Intent' (NACI) in March 2023, aiming for seamless cooperation and joint air operations. The initiative is driven by the need to counter the perceived threat from Russia, particularly after its invasion of Ukraine. The goal is to enable the four countries to operate their air forces as a single entity, based on already known NATO methodology. It may not be long before some other NATO allies also form their own alliances to counter external threats.<sup>24</sup>

### RESURGENT NATO SANS USA

Technological advances are driving changes in the nature of warfare, however old threats have not disappeared and new ones have emerged. Alliances like NATO sans USA must be able to deal with all of them despite the direction they originate from and whatever form it may take. Europe should therefore consider other options to secure itself if the USA decided to either walk out

or draw down its commitment, as it has more than adequate latent power to deal with that problem. Complex problems always lead to creative solutions. The present-day Europe has been rebuilt and is prosperous. Most of its members have decades of peaceful cooperation behind them. The Soviet Union has disintegrated and is replaced by a Russia which pales in might compared to its erstwhile original avatar. The European Union, along with the United Kingdom, boasts a combined economy nearly ten times the size of Russia's. France and the UK possess their own nuclear deterrents. With a GDP of about US\$ 2 trillion, Russia pales in comparison to the combined economic might of the EU and the UK, which totals more than US\$ 22 trillion.<sup>25</sup>

The NATO's member countries in Europe boast of a population numbering more than 500 million people against Russia's population of only 145 million, and the Europeans are also much healthier with an average life expectancy of roughly 82 years, in comparison to Russia's 72 (and even lower for men).<sup>26</sup> The European members also grossly outspend on defence in comparison to Russian defence expenditure. It is also no secret that Germany and France together spend more than Russia does on defence. Russia has the unenviable task of funding many overseas operations including Syria and maintains its large nuclear arsenal to the required standards which is not in the case of the NATO countries. To add up to Europe's benefit, both Britain and France possess their own nuclear deterrents, and Europe's defence industries produce some of the world's best conventional arms, tanks and artillery, air-to-air missiles, advanced surface ships and submarines, and sophisticated fighter aircraft.<sup>27</sup> The Scandinavian countries have set up a common command for their air forces and the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and Poland are building a fortified line against Russia. All the above-mentioned projects are not part of NATO, but are independently designed to protect against any Russian aggression.

The Europeans are severely underestimating their own defence capacity and have convinced themselves of some sort of intrinsic inferiority despite having far larger defence spending and having world-class arms industries. They have an advanced space launch and satellite capability, considerable military expertise having partaken in multiple operations and have honed their fighting skills through regular military exercises. They also possess the financial viability to purchase advanced weaponry from the best manufacturer. In line with the factors mentioned above, it would not take long for European countries to develop conventional forces that could defend against a Russian attack, especially when one considers that Russia's forces



have limited offensive capabilities and remain a pale shadow of the Soviet divisions located in Eastern Europe during the Cold War.<sup>28</sup>

The NATO countries would also have the advantage of fighting a defensive battle and are better suited for it. On similar grounds, Europe's highly educated workforce can be trained for military missions including cyber warfare skills and to wage information warfare. NATO should wholeheartedly support member states immaterial of their size in enhancing defence spending, by the best available means through collective borrowing. The NATO nations should formulate plans to fund their defence purchases through an amalgamation of national budget allocations, joint procurement initiatives with allies, and potentially leveraging EU-level funding, alongside exploring mechanisms to boost domestic defence industry production.

Militarily, the NATO should defy historical echoes and start supporting the development of collective capabilities at European level without the non-European partners. These range of capabilities should include strategic enablers like the strategic airlift, air-to-air refuelling, operational intelligence and air defences that are extremely essential to transform capabilities into an active fighting power. So far, the bulk of these capabilities has been provided by the USA.

Leaving aside the questions of why Russia would risk a major war to reincorporate countries containing some of the most anti-Russian populations in the world, Europeans should welcome a more equal partnership with the United States. It cannot be comfortable to be so dependent on a power whose judgement often leaves much to be desired.

### **TROOPS OVER TECHNOLOGY-SCARCITY ADDRESSAL**

Before the all-out war in Ukraine, future conflicts were envisioned as a high-tech struggle that would require smaller, highly capable units. However, since Russia's full-scale invasion, the continued need for ground troops became inevitable and the harsh reality is staring right in the face of the European nations. The European Union is facing significant challenges in expanding their armed forces due to a shortage of manpower, particularly in skilled and specialised roles and hence, there is an urgent need to manpower channelling. Young Europeans long accustomed to a life of relative comfort with few wars on its borders perceive military service as excessively hazardous due to its deployment to high-risk locations worldwide and the potential for death or injury. Many European countries have moved away from conscription, making it harder to recruit and retain a sufficient number of troops.

Germany, one of the biggest nations in the EU, is an industrial powerhouse and is struggling to meet its goal of expanding its army despite its best efforts to increase recruitment. This is aggravated by factors like the scrapping of conscription, rapid technological advancements in the defence sector, and a growing demand for skilled labour across various industries.<sup>29</sup> Germany is not alone in floundering to find personnel, as countries like the UK, Denmark, Ireland, among others face similar predicaments, with a steady outflow of military personnel creating dangerous capability gaps. Economic concerns, shifting expectations of work–life balance, inadequate military housing and negative perceptions of military service are perceived among the top reasons. The decline in Europe’s armed forces presents a significant challenge and concern for nations bordering Russia. Demographic shifts, including an aging population and declining birth rates, are also contributing to labour shortages, making it harder to find enough personnel to fill military ranks. Some measures that could alleviate the European manpower shortage are listed below:

### **Mandatory Conscription**

Re-instating conscription could effectively address Europe’s military personnel crisis. President Donald Tusk of Poland has already issued a quasi-mandatory conscription in Poland.<sup>30</sup> Finland and Sweden are increasingly relying on conscription, demonstrating that it remains viable in modern times.<sup>31</sup> Compulsory military service, however, is hugely unpopular among the younger generation and a push to draft people would lead to an electoral backlash that few politicians in Europe want to face and may lead to draft dodging measures.

### **Recruiting non-Citizens**

The national armies of the EU may consider recruiting non-citizens as a viable option to offset the chronic shortage. Countries like Germany, Italy, Portugal, Hungary, Greece and Sweden recruit only their own citizens in the armed forces. However, countries like Belgium, Ireland and Slovakia allow the recruitment of non-citizens if they come from other EU countries or the European Economic Area (Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein). Spain also recruits foreign nationals, but only if they come from EU member states or from Latin American countries, with certain restrictions.<sup>32</sup> The US experience in recruiting immigrants for military service, in return for which they receive concessions in acquiring citizenship and other privileges that would otherwise take a long time to obtain, is emerging as a model that could solve the problems of manpower shortages in European armies.<sup>33</sup>

### **Added Incentives**

The European nations facing shortages may consider providing additional incentives like enlistment bonuses, student loan repayment, voluntary education programmes and accelerated promotion. In addition, reservation systems for military service like the ones India has in place giving priority to its retiring defence personnel for lateral entry into paramilitary or public sector undertakings could also be considered.

### **Optimising the 'Teeth-to-Tail' Ratio**

A concentrated focus on balancing the number of combat troops with support personnel to create a leaner, more efficient force. Additionally, countries can explore strategies like extending service periods. Further offering competitive salaries, benefits and opportunities for career advancement can attract and retain personnel. By streamlining administrative and logistical functions, countries can free up resources for more combat-focussed roles. The non-deployable forces should be reduced and focus to remain on deployable forces.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

An inconsistent stance of US foreign policy under President Trump with its rather disagreeable outlook towards NATO and the new confrontation with Russia since the Ukrainian crisis have all accentuated worries in the EU. Therefore, a common security architecture can be created through certain initiatives already in place. The European Union currently has a number of initiatives in place to safeguard its strategic autonomy which includes the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB), the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and undertaken initiative of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Security Action for Europe (SAFE), the European Defence Fund and Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD). All the above-mentioned initiatives lay emphasis on the defence-related aspects of the EU and thus can set joint priorities and these can ensure determined efforts to tackle the capability gap of the European armed forces. This would ultimately lead to strengthening of Europe's defence and can provide solid stability in unprecedented circumstances without American support. EU should seamlessly be able to carry out its border control and conduct military operations in its direct neighbourhood independently from the US, particularly in areas of hybrid threats and challenges. It is a fact that the EU member states consider the US nuclear umbrella as essential for the security of Europe. An exploration of possibilities to develop a second

tier of European nuclear deterrence with France and UK pitching in, if an eventuality of the failing of the trans-Atlantic relationship in the future.

The Trump administration has openly been critical of the NATO and the alliance can see headwinds in the days to come, and the United States' future relationship with its European allies will remain unclear in the foreseeable future. One cannot wish away that after the present tenure of Trump the new incumbent may once again be favourably allied towards NATO. It is in the best interests of the NATO that they plan for a contingency taking into consideration that the present animosity would continue. To make things difficult, the possibility of the current Vice President J.D. Vance, a known hardliner who has been insisting that the European continent should be militarily independent, assuming the role of the President of the US will always be against NATO with the US playing a major role. There also exists the possibility of Trump securing yet another term which also cannot be disregarded as the legalities are being worked out. During this time of transition and uncertainty, the best way for NATO is to shore up its defences accordingly and prioritise areas like air defence through the European Sky Shield Initiative, cyber security and developing its own technology.

## CONCLUSION

The confusing signals coming out of the Trump administration are particularly worrying for NATO countries, as the uncertainty of the American President's track record have built immense pressure on the European NATO nations. This is due to the fact that they have all built their collective security architecture around their close ties with the USA. The NATO countries should significantly increase defence spending, enhance collaboration and focus on developing new defence capabilities. They need to manage expectations through collective defence as well as understanding that there are global actors who seek to destroy the Alliance. To prepare for all contingencies, the NATO should develop a more balanced strategy. At its core, this strategy would entail the creation of a strong European deterrent force that could make up for US retrenchment.

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