

Drift or Abandonment?

Exploring How US Domestic Politics and External Realities may affect US Security Engagement in Europe 2025–2029

Albin Aronsson and Björn Ottosson

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Summary

This report presents four plausible and relevant scenarios for the United States' engagement and military presence in Europe during Donald Trump's current second presidential term (2025–2029). The aim is to outline a range of analytically grounded possibilities to help policymakers—primarily in European NATO countries—rise above the noise and make better-informed decisions in times of uncertainty.

The scenarios are derived from the authors' understanding of the current political realities, observable trends, stated policy positions, and past behaviour by the Trump administration(s). They are informed by previous studies of US foreign policy, including its underlying drivers and institutional constraints.

The four scenarios are: i) "Policy drift," where the US largely maintains its security and defence engagement in Europe near 2025 levels; ii) "Bilateralisation of US Engagement," where the US adjusts its military posture according to its bilateral relationships with European countries; iii) "Asia First," where the US tailors a military drawdown in Europe to enable a prioritisation of the Indo-Pacific; and iv) "Abandonment and regionalisation," where the US pursues a politically driven and disorderly retrenchment. All scenario descriptions finish by presenting indicators that may be used to assess whether a particular scenario is becoming more or less likely.

The final chapter summarises the scenarios, identifies strategic consequences, and suggests tentative policy responses for Europe.

Keywords: abandonment, Asia, bilateralisation, China, defence, deterrence, drift, Europe, factions, Indo-Pacific, inertia, institutions, NATO, Russia, scenario, Trump, United States.

Sammanfattning

Den här rapporten presenterar fyra plausibla och relevanta scenarier för USA:s engagemang och militära närvaro i Europa under Donald Trumps andra mandatperiod, 2025–2029. Syftet är att identifiera utfallsrummet och därigenom hjälpa beslutsfattare i primärt europeiska Natoländer att bättre urskilja signaler från bruset och fatta mer informerade beslut, i osäkra tider.

Rapportförfattarna härleder scenarierna från den samtida politiska utvecklingen, observerbara trender, samt Trumpadministrationens deklarerade policypositioner och tidigare beteende. Scenarierna baseras också på tidigare studier av amerikansk utrikespolitik, inklusive dess drivkrafter och institutionella begränsningar.

De fyra scenarierna är: i) ”Policyglidning”, där USA i stort behåller sitt säkerhets- och försvarspolitiska engagemang i Europa på eller nära 2025-års nivåer; ii) ”Bilateralisering av USA:s engagemang”, där USA justerar sin militära närvaro i Europa utifrån bilaterala relationer med europeiska stater; iii) ”Asien först”, där USA skräddarsyr en neddragning av militära styrkor i Europa för att möjliggöra en prioritering av den indopacifiska regionen; och iv) ”Övergivande och regionalisering”, där USA genomför en politiskt driven och oordnad neddragning i Europa och andra regioner. Alla scenariobeskrivningar avslutas med en presentation av indikatorer som kan användas för att bedöma huruvida ett scenario håller på att bli mer eller mindre sannolikt.

Det sista kapitlet sammanfattar scenarierna, identifierar strategiska konsekvenser och möjliga policyåtgärder för Europa.

Nyckelord: Asien, avskräckning, bilateralisering, Europa, försvar, glidning, Indopacifiska regionen, institutioner, Kina, läger, Nato, Ryssland, scenario, Trump, tröghet, USA, övergivande.

Preface

Commissioned by the Swedish Ministry of Defence, the Swedish Defence Research Agency's (FOI) programme on Northern European and Transatlantic Security (NOTS) analyses security and defence developments in Western countries and organisations that influence Swedish security.

The United States has long been central to European security, which recent world events have underscored. What the US does and how presidential administrations pursue their agendas naturally affect Sweden's security, perhaps even more so after its decision to become a NATO member.

This study offers four plausible and relevant scenarios that the authors hope can help policymakers navigate uncertainty by helping them assess where US foreign, security, and defence policy may be headed under the second Trump administration.

The authors are grateful to colleagues at FOI, and especially their friends in the NOTS programme, who contributed generously with their knowledge and analytical precision during the workshops and reviews that were part of producing this report. We thank our Head of Department, Mike Winnerstig, who reviewed the report. Richard Langlais and Karin Blext provided excellent support in the language review and layout of the report.

The report is dedicated to Björn Ottosson's young son Aron, who decided it was a good idea to be born in the very final stage of the report's completion.

Stockholm, August 2025

Eva Hagström Frisell

Deputy Research Director and Deputy Head of the Department for International Security Policy

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1 Introduction

For many Europeans, the term “shock and awe” aptly describes the first 100 days of the current, second, Trump administration (hereafter the Trump administration, unless otherwise specified). Although many of President Trump’s preferences and priorities were known, few people were truly prepared for the tidal wave of presidential directives and announcements issued by a clearly less constrained Trump compared to his first term.

Officials in the Trump administration have strongly criticised several European NATO countries for their domestic political choices, positions on various key issues, and, in particular, the imbalance between the United States (US) and Europe in terms of defence spending and capabilities within the Alliance. While successive US administrations, dating back to the early days of the Cold War, have expressed frustration over Europe’s reluctance to shoulder more responsibility for its own security, the manner in which the Trump administration has done so has shocked, angered, and disheartened many Europeans, both within governments and among the general public.

The issue of tariffs on European products, the administration’s approach to bringing Ukraine and Russia to the negotiating table, and a perception that the Trump administration’s and Europeans’ views of values are diverging, have pushed transatlantic relations to a low point. There is growing uncertainty about the direction of the relationship and widespread doubts about its long-term durability. In many European capitals, concerns are mounting over the extent to which the United States might reduce its engagement on the continent. At the same time, understanding of the Trump administration’s motives, and how far it is willing to go on a range of issues to achieve what it deems a satisfactory outcome, remains limited. This includes a willingness to challenge or even dismantle institutions that many regard as pillars of the rules-based international order. Predictability is low, and the trajectory of the international system is increasingly unclear. Expert and pundit assessments range from cautiously optimistic to cataclysmic.

In this context, European NATO countries face difficult and consequential choices. If policymakers choose poorly, they risk accelerating troubling trends and leading their countries into significantly more precarious territory. If they choose wisely, however, they may ultimately strengthen their strategic positions. In times of deep uncertainty, scenario-based thinking can help leaders rise above the noise, recognise broader patterns, organise and systematise complex information, think more strategically, and make better-informed decisions despite the ambiguity they face.

1.1 Aim

The aim of this report is to support policymakers, primarily in European NATO countries, in thinking more clearly about what a reduced US engagement and military presence in Europe might look like, and how such a scenario could unfold during President Trump’s second term. One central question has guided the analysis:

- *What plausible and relevant scenarios exist for the United States’ security and defence engagement in Europe during the second Trump administration’s tenure, 2025–2029?*

To derive plausible and relevant scenarios, it is crucial to understand and consider US domestic politics. Therefore, the report first seeks to give an overview of, and analyse the Trump administration’s policy process, the policy factions within it that shape the administration’s policy direction, and constraining factors in the US system. “Factions” in this report refers to various groups within the administration that share some central beliefs, advocate policies aligned with those beliefs, and manoeuvre to shape its initiatives, decisions, and trajectory.

We use the terms *relevant* and *plausible* to guide the selection and development of scenarios concerning US security and defence engagement in Europe during President Trump’s

second term. Plausible scenarios are those that are grounded in current political realities, observable trends, stated policy positions, and past behaviour. They do not aim to predict the future but rather to explore outcomes that could credibly occur based on available evidence and informed judgment. Relevant scenarios are those that matter strategically to European NATO countries. These are situations that could significantly affect their security environment, decision-making processes, or transatlantic cooperation, regardless of how likely they are to materialise.

Deliberately focusing on scenarios that are both plausible and relevant serves to narrow the scope of this study in a methodologically sound way. This constraint serves to ensure analytical clarity and practical utility.

Given the report's objective, to provide a structured foundation for policymakers to assess potential developments, challenges, and responses, restricting the number of scenarios allows for deeper analysis and facilitates more focused, strategic thinking. A limited set of well-defined scenarios helps to avoid speculative abstraction and supports decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. This also supports the report in outlining the possible implications for Europe if any of the scenarios materialise, a topic discussed in the final chapter.

1.2 Analytical approach and scope conditions

This study presents four scenarios assessed as both plausible and relevant for understanding potential trajectories of US security and defence engagement in Europe during President Trump's second term. Importantly, the report does not assign probabilities or offer predict-tions regarding which scenario is most likely to occur. Rather, the aim is to outline a range of analytically grounded possibilities, informed by historical and empirical studies of US foreign policy, including its underlying drivers and institutional constraints.

The scenarios also draw on extensive research into presidential politics across the past several election cycles, capturing both enduring patterns and evolving dynamics in US strategic behaviour. The scenarios are intentionally abstract, focusing on broad strategic directions rather than detailed or speculative sequences of events. They are designed to illustrate potential *directions of travel* rather than fixed or fully elaborated outcomes.

The four scenarios should not be interpreted as analytically isolated or mutually exclusive. In practice, elements from two or more scenarios may emerge in combination, reflecting the dynamic and interconnected nature of both US domestic politics and international relations. Each scenario can be understood as representing a continuum rather than a fixed or static outcome. This means that within each scenario, developments may unfold with varying scope (how wide-ranging the effects are), intensity (how strong or pronounced the changes are), and pace (how quickly events or shifts occur).

Moreover, each scenario also reflects a continuum of US engagement and military presence in Europe, ranging from sustained involvement to significant retrenchment. The specific point along that continuum may shift over time, depending on political decisions, external events, or evolving strategic priorities. This approach allows for a more nuanced under-standing of the future, acknowledging that real-world developments often defy clear-cut categories and can evolve incrementally or unpredictably.

Given the complexity of the subject, maintaining concise scenario descriptions presents certain challenges. However, by grounding them in a limited set of well-founded assump-tions about the Trump administration and applying established analytical frameworks for US foreign and security policy, it is possible to preserve both clarity and analytical depth.

Each scenario is derived from what the authors assess as different but plausible interplays between internal and external factors. The internal factors are the administration's policy process, the policy factions within it that shape its behaviour and actions, and the institu-tional and constraining factors in the US governmental system. The selection of these internal factors is based on the authors' knowledge and understanding of the Trump administration, US presidential politics, and historical and contemporary studies of US

foreign and security policy. The external factors refer to three selected geopolitical centres of gravity: Russia, China, and Europe. The result of these complex interplays is four plausible scenarios for the Trump administration's foreign, security, and defence policy during 2025–2029, particularly relevant for Europe.

The scenarios presented in this study are centred on US security and defence engagement in Europe. However, as a global superpower with worldwide commitments and finite resources, the United States cannot shape its European posture in isolation from developments in other strategic theatres. The current era of great power competition requires attention to geopolitical dynamics that extend beyond the European continent.

To maintain analytical focus and coherence, the scenarios are structured around the United States, China, Russia, and Europe. The selection is based on an assessment of the distribution of power in the international system: those actors holding the most power are the most consequential.[1] This framework provides a clear and relevant starting point for assessing future trajectories of US engagement. Accordingly, developments in regions such as the Middle East, Africa, and South America have been excluded from the scenario design. That said, a major contingency in the Middle East, or in any other strategically significant region, might, at least temporarily, divert US attention, resources, and engagement. This was demonstrated by the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the Israeli and subsequent US strikes on Iran in June 2025.

In terms of the overall direction of US foreign and security policy, it is expected to largely resemble that of Trump's first term. However, this time Trump has centralised decision-making within the White House and surrounded himself with advisers who either share his views or have adapted to them. At the time, the number of moderating voices has diminished. Consequently, several of the administration's defining characteristics, such as the personalisation of politics, radical statements, threats and flattery, high-stakes bargaining, scepticism towards multilateralism and a preference for bilateralism, diplomacy conducted via social media such as X (formerly Twitter) or Truth Social, and a transactional approach to international relations, are likely to become even more pronounced.

Great power competition is expected to remain a central driver of US foreign and security policy, with particular emphasis on the strategic rivalry with China. However, there is uncertainty regarding the extent to which competition with China will be prioritised relative to other issues, as well as how forcefully the administration intends to respond to China across different domains.[2]

It is evident that US relations with Russia, particularly the trajectory and potential outcome of the war in Ukraine, will strongly influence the level and character of US engagement and military presence in Europe in the years ahead. Developments in this area are likely to shape Washington's threat perceptions, strategic priorities, and resource allocations, making it a key variable in any assessment of transatlantic security dynamics.

Similarly, the broader trajectory of US–Europe relations will be a critical factor shaping US engagement on the continent. The quality of political alignment, levels of trust between leaders, and the ability to manage disagreements, whether on defence spending, trade, or broader geopolitical priorities, will all influence the scope and sustainability of US military and strategic presence in Europe. As such, transatlantic relations represent a key lens through which to understand potential shifts in US policy towards the region.

Finally, US domestic politics will play a pivotal role in shaping the level and character of American engagement and military presence in Europe in the coming years. Key factors include the political orientation of the administration, the balance of power in Congress, and prevailing public attitudes towards international commitments. Ongoing debates,

[1] This is a central starting point for Realist-inspired foreign policy analysis.

[2] It also remains unclear whether the administration will pursue a coherent, integrated strategy to address the challenges posed by China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, or approach them as separate, distinct issues.

concerning defence spending, alliance obligations, and the broader direction of US foreign policy, will significantly influence strategic priorities and resource allocation. Whether US policy gravitates towards inward-looking nationalism, strategic restraint, regionalism, unilateral or bilateral engagement, remains committed to multilateralism and a US-led rules-based international order, or even pursues a strategy of primacy, will directly shape the scope and durability of the US role in European security.

The use of ideal types as an analytical tool for examining foreign and security policy positions offers a valuable method for identifying the overarching orientation of a given policy approach. This study adopts such a framework to support its scenario development.

Although both the Trump administration and the US Armed Forces clearly regard China as the United States' primary strategic competitor, this report structures each scenario in the following order: US–Russia relations, US–China relations, US–Europe relations, and the broader role of the US in the world. This sequence reflects the pivotal role of US–Russia dynamics in shaping European security and is designed to offer a coherent analytical progression, from immediate regional challenges to the wider contours of US global strategy.

With regard to plausibility and relevance, one central starting point for the report is that the Trump administration has repeatedly signalled that it wishes to reduce the US's engagement with and military footprint in Europe, but that the scope, intensity, and pace of such a drawdown are in question. Consequently, the report does not envisage any scenario in which US engagement in Europe significantly increases during President Trump's second term, nor, relatedly, does it anticipate a substantial rise in the US defence budget benefiting US European Command (EUCOM). While unforeseen developments or contingencies could conceivably lead to a renewed US focus on European security, such possibilities fall outside the scope of this report. Other scenarios, also deemed implausible, such as the US using military force to annex Greenland, are excluded from the report.[3] The central aim here is to support policymakers in thinking more clearly and strategically about the implications of a reduced US presence and engagement on the European continent.

We have, to the extent possible, incorporated potential catalytic events into the scenario descriptions to illustrate how such developments (for example, a Chinese military build-up around Taiwan) might influence US policy and engagement in Europe. However, we consciously avoid pure speculation regarding possible future events. While we acknowledge the existence of "black swan" events, "pink flamingos," and "unknown unknowns," any major unforeseen occurrence would necessitate at least a reconfiguration of these scenarios.[4]

1.3 Sources

The sources underpinning this report are wide-ranging and include media coverage, academic literature, analytical reports, and FOI's previous assessments of recent US presidential administrations. The study also draws on earlier research related to NATO and transatlantic relations, as well as congressional hearings, expert testimonies, and official documents released by the US government. Taken together, this material provides a robust empirical foundation for the scenarios presented in the report.

In addition to the authors' desk research and earlier visits to Washington, a series of internal FOI workshops were used to test the scenarios and discuss their potential implications for Europe. These workshops helped refine the scenarios and added nuance to the analysis of their consequences.

[3] The second chapter elaborates on the factors that make the authors believe such scenarios are implausible.

[4] Frank Hoffman, Black Swans and Pink Flamingos: Five Principles for Force Design, War on the Rocks, August 19, 2015, https://warontherocks.com/2015/08/black-swans-and-pink-flamingos-five-principles-for-force-design/.

1.4 Structure of the report

The next chapter provides a background on the current, second Trump administration, including its policy orientation and decision-making processes. The chapter starts by describing the President's factional policy process. It continues by exploring three important and relevant strategic factions (the Primacists, Prioritisers, and Restrainers) for the administration's foreign, security, and defence policy trajectory, and briefly describes the relevant economic and ideological factions that influence the administration. The chapter then describes institutional constraints and bureaucratic resistance, viewed as important factors shaping any presidential administration's policy.

The core chapter presents the four scenarios. All scenarios follow a consistent structure. After a brief overview, each scenario is explored in greater depth, organised around the four key thematic areas identified earlier. For each scenario, we also assess how developments related to external and internal factors might serve as potential indicators that the scenario is materialising.

The final chapter summarises the scenarios, discusses the possible implications for European NATO countries, highlighting key dilemmas, outlines potential areas for common policy responses across scenarios, and concludes with brief reflections on the path ahead.

2 Trump Administration 2.0

President Trump's actions and their consequences continue to dominate international headlines and have been analysed extensively. This brief chapter seeks to provide a contextual backdrop for the scenarios presented in this report, not a comprehensive account or detailed explanation of President Trump or his administration. It provides a framework for thinking about the potential trajectories of this second Trump administration, and supports more comprehensive reflections on the future course of US engagement and military presence in Europe.

2.1 President Trump's factional policy process

Several scholars have observed that President Trump tends to make policy decisions through a factional and competitive process, a dynamic that may become even more pronounced in a second administration.[5] Within this environment, various coalitions, typically represented by cabinet secretaries, senior advisers, and trusted confidants, compete for the President's attention. Trump ultimately serves as the "decider-in-chief," selecting the proposals he finds most appealing or politically advantageous and advancing those initiatives.

While internal rivalry is not unique to the Trump administration and shares similarities with decision-making dynamics in previous US governments, the competition under Trump is more intense and less structured. Evidence from both his first term and the early months of his second term suggests a heightened level of factionalism, which unfolds not only behind closed doors but also in public view. This dynamic has already contributed to inconsistencies in policy signals, as senior officials often deliver divergent messages to different audiences. The resulting ambiguity has sown confusion among domestic stakeholders and international allies alike, complicating efforts to project a coherent strategic posture.

A further challenge to predictability lies in the President's pragmatic and often improvisational approach. Aside from a few recurring themes, Trump appears to hold relatively few fixed ideological convictions. He has shown a willingness to adopt and reverse policy positions within short timeframes. Moreover, he occasionally introduces surprising ideas that have not been vetted, such as proposing US acquisition or annexation of Greenland, the Panama Canal, or even Canada, that were not part of his campaign platform. These tendencies reinforce the difficulty of identifying a consistent trajectory for US security and defence policy under his leadership.

Adding to this uncertainty is the administration's pronounced reliance on executive orders rather than pursuing legislation through Congress.[6] This partly reflects the high degree of political polarisation and narrow majority margins that complicate the legislative process. While executive orders allow for swift, unilateral action, they lack the institutional permanence of legislation and can be reversed with the stroke of a pen by a succeeding administration. By contrast, legislation, particularly budgetary decisions, tends to stabilise policy trajectories by embedding them within broader institutional frameworks. This reliance on executive action thus adds another layer of uncertainty, making it more difficult to gauge the durability and long-term implications of specific policy moves.

For example, President Trump's tariff policies, which are disrupting global markets, have featured inconsistent messaging and internal conflict. It remains unclear whether these measures are primarily intended as a means to secure more reciprocal trade deals or reflect

[5] Jeremy Shapiro, "How the Trump administration makes foreign policy decisions," Blue Blaze blog, Substack, February 23, 2025; 2025, Tanner Greer, *Obscurity By Design: Competing Priorities for America's China Policy*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 27, 2025; Albin Aronsson, Björn Ottosson and Mike Winnerstig, *Trumpadministrationen 2.0: Perspektiv, personal och politikens riktning*, FOI Memo 8779 (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency – FOI – January, 2025).

[6] Prinz Magtulis, "How Trump unleashed executive power," Reuters, May 7, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/graphics/usa-trump/executive-orders/gdpznealwpw/.

a broader long-term shift towards a mercantilist order. This ambiguity mirrors the competing factions within Trump's coalition and underscores the broader unpredictability of his administration's policy direction.

This raises a key question: Which factions are shaping the Trump administration's foreign and security policy, including its military posture and global role, and which among them may wield the greatest influence?

The answer is neither static nor uniform. Different factions may wield greater influence over specific issue areas, depending on the topic's salience, the preferences of key personnel, and President Trump's evolving priorities. Influence can also shift over time as particular crises emerge, external pressures intensify, or internal power dynamics change, such as with the upcoming midterm elections in 2026. Consequently, the administration's foreign and security policy is more likely to reflect a blend of competing impulses rather than a single, coherent doctrine. That said, certain factions within the realm of security and defence policy merit particular attention.

2.2 Strategic factions

This section begins by outlining three ideal types of foreign policy thinking that reflect established strategic perspectives on US security and defence policy and the nation's broader role in the world: Primacists, Prioritisers, and Restrainers.[7] It then briefly examines other key factions and institutional actors that may influence the administration's policies, both in terms of decision-making and implementation, factors likely to shape the level and nature of US engagement and military presence in Europe.

Primacists

Primacists advocate that the US should maintain and strengthen its position as the world's most powerful state, emphasising the country's unique role in shaping the international order. The primacist stance is based on the conviction that American values, such as democracy, liberal capitalism, and human rights, are universal and should serve as global guiding principles. Accordingly, the US holds both a moral and strategic responsibility to assume a leading role on the world stage.

This perspective prioritises military strength, economic influence, and diplomatic engagement to prevent revisionist powers from challenging the US's dominant position. Primacists tend to support an interventionist policy, arguing that American influence is indispensable for promoting global stability, security, and the protection of democratic values, which they also view as aligned with US national interests.

According to primacists, the US should actively lead, unilaterally if necessary, and participate in alliances, security pacts, and international organisations to counter the rise of challengers, especially in regions of strategic importance for American power and global stability. They strongly advocate for the continued enlargement of NATO and support the hubs-and-spokes system in the Indo-Pacific as critical mechanisms for augmenting US influence. Primacists also emphasise the importance of maintaining a reputation for resolve, warning that any reduction in US ambition or willingness to compete globally would come at significant cost to US leadership.[8]

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[7] These three ideal types have long existed in scholarship on US foreign and security policy. Their names occasionally change, but their meaning and central beliefs more or less remain. "Primacists" are sometimes called "Deep engagers," "Prioritisers" are similar to "Selective engagers," and "Restrainers" are often conflated with "isolationism." "Neoconservatives" are often conflated with "Primacists", but the former advocates more for values such as democracy, and the latter more values power, particularly military power. For an overview: Sapolsky, Harvey M. & Gholz, Eugene & Talmadge, Caitlin, *US Defense Politics: The Origins of Security Policy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 23.

[8] Hal Brands, "Putting 'Asia First' Could Cost America the World," Bloomberg Opinion, August 25, 2024, https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/features/2024-08-25/putting-asia-first-could-cost-america-the-world. This is a representative example of this argument.

Primacists believe that the US possesses the resources necessary to prolong the unipolar moment. While they acknowledge that American commitments worldwide may not currently match allocated resources, they argue that the solution lies primarily in increasing funding for the government's various instruments, particularly the Department of Defense (DoD) and associated agencies, rather than scaling back aims and commitments. Prolonging the US position of power is therefore seen as a question of political will, not of resources.

This outlook is shared by a significant number of Republicans in Congress who support NATO enlargement, including to Ukraine, and advocate for strong and consistent US support for Ukraine in its conflict with Russia. Prominent figures such as Marco Rubio and Mike Waltz, as well as Roger Wicker and Mike Rogers, the chairs of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, respectively, can be characterised as primacists. The view is also shared by many senior military leaders, although they generally adopt a more restrained stance on military interventions than many Republican politicians and civil servants.[9]

It is evident, however, that traditional primacist positions centred on comprehensive US international leadership have been steadily losing influence, a shift reflected in how many politicians are recalibrating their stances. Marco Rubio is among the latter, exemplified by his actions as Secretary of State.

Prioritisers

Prioritisers emphasise the US's limited resources over abstract principles, arguing that the country should concentrate on clearly defined strategic interests rather than seeking to maintain broad global influence. They contend that the US should focus on its most pressing national security, geopolitical, and, to some extent, economic priorities and avoid ambitions that risk overextension, commonly referred to as "imperial overstretch."

This approach entails a focus on regions and challenges that directly impact core US interests, such as maintaining the stability of key allies, preventing hostile powers from expanding their influence, and addressing urgent global threats. Compared to primacists, prioritisers generally advocate for a more selective form of engagement, placing greater emphasis on diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, and strategic partnerships rather than relying on unilateral action and military force. Prioritisers frequently oppose interventionist policies that could entangle the United States in conflicts or regions of marginal strategic value. From this perspective, US support for Ukraine is not self-evident. Even if such support is considered justified, its scope and scale must be carefully calibrated to not distract from greater challenges.

The majority of senior officials and advisors in the Trump administration's foreign and security policy apparatus can be described as prioritisers. This includes Vice President JD Vance, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, CIA Director John Ratcliffe, the president's son and special advisor Donald Trump Jr., and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby.[10] However, what precisely constitutes a core national interest, and how such interests should be prioritised, remains a subject of internal debate. How Iran's nuclear ambitions should be handled is one example. As a result, prioritisers' positions on specific issues are not always consistent or predictable, particularly in times of crisis.[11]

Nonetheless, it is clear that the administration identifies China as the foremost strategic challenge. Achieving and maintaining a favourable military balance in the Indo-Pacific is considered paramount, even if this requires accepting heightened risks in other theatres.

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[9] Military commanders often have a more restrained stance on decisions to intervene militarily, but once the decision has been made, they often argue for using overwhelming force.

[10] Jeremy Shapiro & Majda Ruge, "Polarized power: The three Republican 'tribes' that could define America's relationship with the world," European Council on Foreign Relations, November 17, 2022. https://ecfr.eu/article/polarised-power-the-three-republican-tribes-that-could-define-americas-relationship-with-the-world/.

[11] Aronsson, Ottosson and Winnerstig, *Trumpadministrationen 2.0: Perspektiv, personal och politikens riktning*, FOI Memo 8779 (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency – FOI – January, 2025).

Administration officials tend to downplay the strategic value of reputation and demonstrated resolve in regions such as Ukraine, rejecting the otherwise commonly held view in US policy circles that such displays are essential for effective deterrence.

Given their emphasis on the limits of US power and their strategic focus on China, they argue that Europe must assume significantly greater responsibility for security in its own region. Several senior administration officials have been sceptical of continued US support for Ukraine and have argued against admitting it to NATO.

Restrainers

Restrainers advocate for a more limited and judicious US role in the world, emphasising the need to avoid unnecessary military interventions and excessive global entanglements. They argue that the US should concentrate on safeguarding narrowly defined vital national interests and prioritise diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, and economic influence over the use of military force. Deeply critical of the interventionist trajectory that has shaped US foreign policy in recent decades, restrainers view such approaches as costly, corrosive to American democracy, and ultimately detrimental to both US global standing and international peace and stability. From this perspective, the US should not function as the world's policeman.

Restrainers endorse a strategy of substantially more discriminatory engagement, wherein US intervention is justified only when vital interests are directly at stake, and advocate disengagement from conflicts or regions that do not pose an immediate threat to national security. In their view, the spectrum of genuine threats to the US is relatively narrow. Russia, for example, is no longer seen as presenting the kind of existential danger once posed by the Soviet Union. Accordingly, proposals to provide extensive support to or militarily defend countries in distant regions, such as Ukraine or Taiwan, are typically met with scepticism. Many restrainers further contend that US allies, particularly in Europe, have long benefited from American security guarantees while contributing insufficiently to collective defence. The restrainers' influence can partly be seen in the priority given to protecting the US's southern border and investments in the so-called Golden Dome missile defence system.

Tulsi Gabbard is frequently cited as a prominent advocate of the Restraint position, though similar perspectives can be found among other members of the administration. President Trump's longstanding critique of the US's protracted and costly military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan is broadly shared within his political circle, including among senior officials. Nonetheless, the Restraint perspective continues to enjoy substantially greater traction within academic and intellectual circles than within the mainstream US foreign policy establishment.[12]

Over the last decade, a clear shift has occurred within the Republican Party, with many moving from the Primacist camp towards the Prioritiser camp, and to a lesser extent, the Restrainer camp. The centre of gravity, particularly within the Trump administration, has increasingly favoured a foreign policy that concentrates US engagement on what are perceived to be the most urgent strategic challenges, while reducing attention and resources devoted to lower-priority regions and issues. Yet beyond the broad consensus that China represents the foremost threat and the need to reduce US dependencies, there is significant internal disagreement about which other challenges merit attention and, more importantly, what specific policies should be adopted to address them. This lack of consensus has contributed to the difficulty of formulating coherent national security policy, a challenge

[12] Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Justin Logan, *Restoring Realism and Restraint in U.S. Foreign Policy*, CATO Institute, 2022.

especially evident during the early months of Trump's tenure.[13] Table 1 summarises the views of the strategic factions.

Furthermore, a range of actors outside the traditional foreign and security policy establishment, many of whom lack a coherent or consistent vision for America's role in the world, nonetheless exert significant influence over US foreign and defence policy through their priorities and proposals. Their impact adds another layer of complexity, making it even more difficult to assess the overall direction of US strategy and global engagement.

Table 1: Strategic factions[14]

Faction	Core Philosophy	Key Foreign Policy Orientation	Foreign & Defence Policy Effects	Alignment with Economic & Ideological Camps[15]
Primacists	Advocate for robust US global leadership based on American values and power as a moral and strategic imperative.	Support broad, interventionist engagement to maintain unipolarity; emphasise military strength, economic influence, and diplomatic leadership; champion NATO enlargement and Indo-Pacific presence.	Favour large defence budgets, sustained global commitments, active leadership—even unilateral; promote alliance enlargement and deterrence.	Market Liberals & Techno-Nationalists.
Prioritisers	Emphasise US resource limits; focus on defined strategic interests, avoiding overextension; prefer selective engagement and partnerships.	Prioritise the Indo-Pacific; scale back less critical regional commitments; extend cautious support for Ukraine; stress Europe's increased defence responsibility.	Push for focused defence spending on primary threats; accept risks in secondary theatres; promote European burden-sharing and autonomy.	Market Liberals & Techno-Nationalists, Fiscal Conservatives/Deficit Hawks.
Restrainers	Advocate for limited US global role, focusing narrowly on vital interests; are critical of costly interventions; emphasise diplomacy and economic influence over military.	Support selective, discriminatory engagement; sceptical of defending distant allies; see Russia and other similar threats as diminished; prioritise homeland defence and border security.	Favour substantial reduction in overseas commitments; push for lower defence budgets and disengagement from conflicts; encourage allies to increase self-reliance.	Economic Nationalists and Economic Populists (MAGA-leaning), Post-Liberals, MAGA Populists.

[13] Christopher Preble, Zack Cooper and Melanie Marlow, "Why the Trump Administration Will Struggle to Make National Security Policy," Net Assessment podcast, Stimson Center, April 17, 2025, https://www.stimson.org/2025/why-the-trump-administration-will-struggle-to-make-national-security-policy/.

[14] Majda Ruge and Jeremy Shapiro, "Polarized power: The three Republican 'tribes' that could define America's relationship with the world," November 17, 2022, https://ecfr.eu/article/polarised-power-the-three-republican-tribes-that-could-define-americas-relationship-with-the-world/.

[15] The alignment with economic and ideological camps is the authors' own work, inspired by Tanner Greer, *Obscurity By Design: Competing Priorities for America's China Policy*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 27, 2025.

2.3 Economic and ideological factions

This report proceeds from the notion that the *Primacist, Prioritiser,* and *Restrainer* debate is the most important for the determination of the administration's foreign, security, and defence policy. However, it is possible that other factions and their considerations may gain considerable influence in steering the Trump administration's policy trajectory. These other relevant factions can be categorised mainly according to economic and ideological considerations.

Economic factions and their strategic implications[16]

On economic policy, the Trump administration encompasses several ideologically distinct factions, each of which wields varying degrees of influence that could, directly or indirectly, shape US foreign and defence policy.[17]

One prominent faction advocates for a strategy of *reindustrialisation*, centred on the belief that the United States must rebuild its domestic manufacturing base to restore economic sovereignty and renew the social contract with working-class Americans. Proponents of this view favour an active role for the federal government, including strategic subsidies, protective tariffs, restrictive immigration policies, and selective deregulation, particularly in sectors such as energy, defence, and heavy industry. They argue that global free trade has hollowed out the American heartland and that reversing this trend is not only an economic imperative but also a political and moral one. Politically, this message has the potential to unite a formidable coalition of voters across party lines. For this faction, the administration's foremost duty is to redirect a greater share of national wealth, including through attracting foreign investment, towards the domestic economy, especially to regions and workers perceived to have been left behind. This economic nationalism often overlaps with a more inward-looking and restrained foreign policy, translating into scepticism towards international institutions, trade alliances, and overseas military commitments deemed unrelated to core US interests.

A second faction consists of *market liberals* and *techno-nationalists*, who are more critical of large-scale industrial policy. They view reindustrialisation as both fiscally unrealistic and economically misguided, arguing that the US should instead focus on maintaining a competitive edge through innovation, technological leadership, and a streamlined federal government. In their view, long-term US prosperity and strategic advantage over rivals such as China lies in reinforcing the private sector, fostering entrepreneurship, and securing dominance in fields such as AI, biotech, and digital infrastructure. While less committed to globalist multilateralism than earlier generations of conservatives, they are also wary of excessive government interference. Their approach often supports targeted decoupling from China in key sectors, but generally favours stable relationships with allies and predictable rules-based frameworks that protect intellectual property and market access.

A third, often overlapping group comprises *fiscal conservatives* and *deficit hawks*, who are focused primarily on limiting federal spending and reducing the national debt. They are generally opposed to industrial policy, trade protectionism, and large-scale subsidy programmes, viewing them as distortive and fiscally irresponsible. While their influence may ebb and flow, particularly in a populist-dominated environment, they remain vocal opponents of expansive federal economic intervention. Their preferences often align with a restrained foreign policy that avoids costly military engagements or foreign aid commitments, especially when such expenditures are seen as burdensome to taxpayers. Senator Rand Paul is one example in this category.

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[16] This section is inspired by Tanner Greer, *Obscurity By Design: Competing Priorities for America's China Policy*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 27, 2025

[17] This distinction is, of course, a high-level generalisation. In practice, there are more than two economic factions, and views within the administration tend to be fluid, with significant overlap, internal tensions, and case-by-case divergence across individuals and policy areas.

A fourth and influential current, less ideologically coherent but politically powerful, is the *economic populist* or *MAGA faction*. This group emphasises a rhetoric of economic grievance and national rebirth, often blending protectionist instincts with transactional deal-making and cultural appeals to the working class. Their agenda may at times echo that of economic nationalists, particularly on tariffs and trade, but tends to be more reactive, personality-driven, and less tied to a consistent economic framework. In foreign policy, their outlook often appears unpredictable or contradictory, sceptical of international elites and global institutions, yet occasionally supportive of military posturing or economic coercion when it aligns with nationalist sentiment.

The connection between these competing economic worldviews and US foreign and defence policy is neither explicit nor consistently coherent. At times, their goals align; in other cases, they are in direct conflict, for example over the use of H-1B visas for highly skilled foreign workers or the merits of long-term alliance commitments. Another notable point of tension is trade policy, where some factions prioritise punitive tariffs to protect domestic industries, while others warn that such measures risk damaging critical supply chains and alienating key allies and trading partners. There is no straightforward alignment between these economic factions and the foreign policy camps of Primacists, Prioritisers, and Restrainers. When economic priorities dominate, the administration's foreign and security policy may appear inconsistent or even contradictory. One illustrative case is the imposition of high tariffs on US allies in the Indo-Pacific while simultaneously identifying China as the central long-term threat in the security and defence realm.

Moreover, internal divisions between economic factions complicate any attempt to draw a clear line from the administration's economic agenda to its foreign policy orientation. Still, the prevailing economic outlook, whichever faction ultimately shapes it, will inevitably influence the fiscal resources, political priorities, and strategic logic guiding US engagement with the world. Table 2 summarises the economic factions' views and their alignment with the strategic camps.

Table 2: Economic factions and their strategic implications[18]

Faction	Economic Philosophy	Key Policy Tools	Foreign & Defence Policy Effects	Alignment with Strategic Camps
Economic Nationalists/ Reindustrialisers	National economic renewal through domestic production and labour empowerment	Tariffs, industrial policy, "Buy American," immigration limits, energy dominance	Reduces support for global trade pacts; cautious on alliances unless economically advantageous; sceptical of extended military engagements	Often Restrainers; sometimes Prioritisers, when foreign threats align with industrial goals (e.g., China)
Market Liberals & Techno-Nationalists	Tech innovation and global competitiveness via private sector and deregulation	R&D investment, tax incentives, digital infrastructure, light-touch industrial policy	Selective decoupling from China; favours maintaining alliances that support high-tech ecosystems; less confrontational trade policy with allies	Tends towards Primacists or Prioritisers; values US dominance in key tech sectors as a strategic asset
Fiscal Conservatives/ Deficit Hawks	Minimise federal spending, reduce deficits, limit government intervention	Spending cuts, opposition to tariffs/subsidies, tax reform	Less inclined to fund global military presence or foreign aid; may conflict with defence hawks or reindustrialisers	Typically Restrainers in fiscal terms; conflict with Primacists on defence budgets
Economic Populists (MAGA-leaning)	Restore fairness for the "forgotten worker"; fight elite capture of trade/globalisation	Tariffs, anti-China rhetoric, anti-WTO sentiment, restrict foreign ownership	Transactionalism in trade and security; suspicious of global elites and multinational institutions	Incoherent across camps; rhetoric leans towards Restrainers, but actions may align with any camp depending on the populist mood

Ideological factions and their strategic implications

Alongside the administration's economic orientation, several ideological currents, broadly associated with the MAGA movement, are emerging as influential forces that could shape US foreign and defence policy. While their intellectual roots lie in domestic debates over identity, sovereignty, and tradition, these worldviews are increasingly informing the administration's strategic posture, diplomatic rhetoric, and institutional direction. Though they do not form a unified doctrine, four broad ideological tendencies can be identified: *National Conservatives*, *Claremonters*, *Post-Liberals*, and *MAGA Populists*.

[18] Overlaps between factions are common; for example, Economic Nationalists and Populists may align on trade policies but differ on industrial planning. Policy outcomes often depend on which faction prevails on specific issues rather than overall faction dominance. This can lead to apparent inconsistencies in foreign policy, such as imposing tariffs on allies while simultaneously advocating for alliance unity against China.

These factions differ in their philosophical foundations and policy priorities, yet they share a general scepticism towards liberal internationalism, global governance institutions, and the traditional, prevailing norms of US foreign policy. Their influence is exerted through political appointments, policy think tanks, media platforms, and congressional networks, gradually shifting the foreign policy conversation towards cultural and ideological frames of reference.[19]

National Conservatives emphasise a civilisational view of global affairs, centred on preserving Western cultural identity, strengthening national sovereignty, and reinforcing traditional social institutions, such as the family. They are wary of multilateralism, human rights activism, and transnational progressive movements, particularly in areas such as climate policy, gender equality, and migration. In foreign policy, they prefer bilateral engagement with like-minded nationalist states and seek to reduce US involvement in alliances and institutions perceived as undermining national or cultural integrity.[20] Vice President JD Vance and Elbridge Colby, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, are both closely associated with the national conservative movement.

Claremonters, closely associated with the Claremont Institute and related intellectual circles, interpret foreign policy through a moralised lens grounded in the ideals of the American founding. They advocate an approach to diplomacy based on regime type, arguing that the US should align with states that share its republican virtues and confront those that threaten them, chief among them China and international bureaucracies. This view supports a more assertive US posture abroad, but often one tied to a domestically focused civic nationalism rather than traditional strategic interests.[21] Michael Anton, serving as Director of Policy Planning at the State Department, is one of the most prominent advocates of this perspective within the administration

Post-Liberals represent a smaller but ideologically more coherent faction. Rooted in religious traditionalism and critiques of liberal modernity, they call for a foreign policy guided by the "common good" rather than individual rights or market liberalism. Their instincts tend towards non-interventionism unless US action is consistent with culturally conservative or faith-based objectives. As a result, they may resist cooperation with liberal democracies and instead seek alignment with authoritarian or illiberal states that reflect their moral worldview.[22]

MAGA Populists form the most electorally significant group, though they are less ideologically consistent. Motivated by cultural grievance and anti-elite sentiment, they tend to see international politics as an extension of domestic culture wars. This leads to calls for hardline immigration controls, opposition to DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) initiatives abroad, and a preference for transactional diplomacy over traditional alliances. Their influence often introduces volatility, as foreign policy decisions may be driven by symbolic political gestures rather than strategic calculations.[23]

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[19] Stefan Borg, "A 'natcon takeover'? The New Right and the future of American foreign policy", International Affairs, Vol. 100, no. 5 (September 2024).

[20] Edmund Burke Foundation, National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles, 2025, drafted by Will Chamberlain, Christopher DeMuth, Rod Dreher, Yoram Hazony, Daniel McCarthy, Joshua Mitchell, N. S. Lyons, John O'Sullivan, and R. R. Reno on behalf of the Edmund Burke Foundation; signed by 83 additional individuals, accessed August 8, 2025, https://nationalconservatism.org/national-conservatism-a-statement-of-principles/.

[21] Claremont Institute, "Mission and Overview," accessed August 8, 2025, https://www.claremont.org/mission-overview/.

[22] Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future* (New York City: Sentinel, 2023); Patrick J. Deen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2018); Ian Ward, "'I Don't Want to Violently Overthrow the Government. I Want Something Far More Revolutionary", Politico Magazine, June 8, 2023, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/06/08/the-new-right-patrick-deneen-00100279. Deneen is often cited as one of the most influential intellectual voices in the faction in the US.

[23] Britannica, "MAGA movement", no date, accessed August 7, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/topic/MAGA-movement. Britannica gives a short overview of MAGA.

These ideological factions are not centrally focused on grand strategy, and while there is overlap with the foreign policy factions of *Primacists*, *Prioritisers*, and *Restrainers*, the alignment is neither consistent nor straightforward. Nevertheless, their cumulative influence, particularly as elements of their worldview become institutionalised, has the potential to reshape US foreign and defence policy in unpredictable ways. This could manifest in weakened NATO cohesion, closer alignment with culturally conservative authoritarian regimes, and increased resistance to multilateral norms and institutions. When foreign policy decisions are driven by ideological priorities, especially those framed in zero-sum cultural terms, strategic coherence risks being subordinated to domestic political objectives.

If these ideological factions were to gain dominant influence over presidential decision-making, US foreign and defence policy could veer in a more erratic or confrontational direction than the scenarios outlined in the following chapters. That said, we assess such a development as implausible, given the resistance from other factions and the enduring constraints of existing institutional structures and geopolitical realities. Table 3 summarises the ideological factions and their alignment with the strategic camps.

Table 3: Ideological factions and their strategic implications[24]

Faction	Core Philosophy	Key Foreign Policy Orientation	Foreign & Defence Policy Effects	Alignment with Strategic Camps
National Conservatives	Civilisational identity; traditional values	Bilateralism; cultural alignment; scepticism of global norms	Weakening of multilateral institutions; alignment with nationalist governments	Often Primacists or Prioritisers; emphasise cultural and ideological dominance
Claremonters	Republican virtue; moralised American founding	Regime-type diplomacy; ideological confrontation	Heightened tension with China; foreign policy tied to domestic civic nationalism	Align with Prioritisers or Primacists; focus on ideological clarity
Post-Liberals	Common good; religious traditionalism	Non-intervention unless morally justified	Cooperation with illiberal religious states; reduced support for liberal democracies	Often Restrainers or Prioritisers, depending on moral justification
MAGA Populists	Anti-elite grievance; culture-war politics	Transactionalism; anti-DEI; hardline immigration stance	Alliance instability; politicisation of aid and diplomacy; erosion of liberal norms	Fluid alignment; rhetoric often Restrainer but can align with any camp

The factional dynamics within the Trump administration create a fundamental unpredictability in US foreign and security policy. With multiple competing groups, ranging from Primacists and Prioritisers to Restrainers, as well as distinct economic and ideological

[24] Overlap and fluidity between factions are common. For example, National Conservatives and Claremonters share scepticism of global institutions but differ in the emphasis on moral versus cultural arguments. Foreign policy outcomes often reflect the factional influence on particular decisions rather than a unified strategic vision, leading to inconsistent or contradictory policy directions.

factions, different interests can prevail on different issues, resulting in a fragmented and often inconsistent policy approach. Influence within this system is fluid; factions can rapidly gain or lose the president's ear, leading to abrupt shifts in direction and conflicting priorities. This unpredictability is compounded by the fact that strategic decisions often seem shaped as much by domestic political imperatives as by the constraints and demands of international realities. However, institutional checks and balances, along with vested interests within the bureaucracy, act as constraints that may obstruct, slow, or alter both policy formulation and implementation.

2.4 Institutional constraints and bureaucratic resistance

Even in the highly centralised Trump administration, the US foreign and security policy process is shaped and often constrained by a complex web of institutional checks and bureaucratic inertia. These constraints rarely prevent change outright, but they can obstruct, delay, or significantly reshape both the formulation and implementation of presidential directives, particularly those that diverge sharply from established norms or elite consensus.

Congress remains a central institutional check. Although the President wields considerable authority in foreign affairs and is the Commander-in-Chief, key levers, such as budget appropriations, treaty ratifications, and arms sales, fall under congressional purview. A divided or sceptical Congress, especially the Senate, can block or dilute major initiatives, including troop withdrawals, reallocation of defence spending, or abrupt shifts in alliance structures. For example, the fiscal year 2023 defence appropriations bill included more than USD 80 billion in modifications to the President's original Pentagon budget request, underscoring the legislature's capacity to influence foreign policy through financial controls.

Democratic opposition forms an additional line of resistance. While Republicans may control the executive branch, Democrats in Congress, particularly in the Senate and House committees on Foreign Affairs, Armed Services, and Intelligence, can leverage procedural tools, public hearings, and legislative oversight to scrutinise or stall controversial initiatives. During Trump's first term, for example, bipartisan coalitions, often led or backed by Democrats, moved to block or constrain certain foreign policy moves. In 2023, Congress passed legislation prohibiting the president from unilaterally withdrawing the United States from NATO without Senate approval, reflecting concerns over Trump's repeated criticisms of the alliance and signalling institutional commitment to transatlantic security.[25]

Furthermore, Democratic governors, attorneys general, and state-level actors have historically mobilised legal and political opposition to federal directives, especially on immigration, climate, and human rights, extending resistance beyond Washington and into the broader federal system. This multi-tiered resistance can constrain, delay, or reshape presidential foreign and security policy, even when the executive branch seeks to centralise control. Needless to say, if the Democrats win in the 2026 midterms, especially if they gain a majority in the House of Representatives, this resistance will likely become considerably more effective, with enhanced capacity to investigate, block, or amend executive actions across a range of foreign and security policy areas.

The DoD and the State Department, along with the broader national security bureaucracy, often act as stabilising forces. These institutions have vested interests in maintaining continuity, preserving alliances, and sustaining long-term planning cycles. Career officials and senior military leaders may resist sudden policy reversals, particularly when they conflict with operational and logistical realities, alliance management, or jeopardise US commitments and credibility abroad. A case in point is President Trump's late-term

[25] Laura Kelly, "Congress approves bill barring any president from unilaterally withdrawing from NATO," December 14, 2023. https://thehill.com/homenews/4360407-congress-approves-bill-barring-president-withdrawing-nato/.

announcement to withdraw approximately 12,000 US troops from Germany.[26] Implementation was delayed by bipartisan opposition in Congress, military concerns, bureaucratic complexities, and ultimately reversed by the incoming Biden administration.[27]

The intelligence community similarly operates according to professional norms and independent risk assessments. Intelligence briefings, threat analyses, and internal dissent may complicate and moderate presidential decision-making, especially in high-stakes areas such as relations with China, Iran, Russia, or Europe, by introducing friction between political instincts and security assessments.

Finally**,** the federal judiciary can intervene in foreign policy matters where executive actions are deemed to violate constitutional limits or existing law, such as in cases involving immigration policy, sanctions regimes, or the treatment of foreign nationals. During President Trump's first 100 days, a record number of injunctions were issued against the administration's policies.

While the Trump administration seeks to consolidate control over key institutions, through political appointments, organisational restructuring, and public messaging campaigns, it will likely continue to face resistance from entrenched bureaucratic cultures and institutional norms. Trump's populist critique of the so-called "deep state" and efforts to "drain the swamp" have framed parts of the national security and foreign policy establishment as obstructive, unaccountable elites. Yet these same institutions—Congress, the DoD, the State Department, the intelligence community, and the federal judiciary—represent enduring centres of power with their own procedures, legal mandates, and professional ethos.

These checks and balances do not necessarily block strategic shifts, but they can shape the pace, scope, and durability of change. Internal resistance, competing institutional priorities or logics, and bureaucratic inertia may temper or redirect presidential initiatives that sharply diverge from established practice or international commitments. This is why our scenarios account not only for presidential intent but also for the structural forces that can obstruct, delay, or reshape both policy implementation and, ultimately, US behaviour.

2.5 Conclusion

The interplay of competing factions within the Trump administration, across strategic, economic, ideological, and cultural dimensions, creates profound uncertainty for US foreign and defence policy. The shifting influence, tensions, and coalitions among these factions result in a policy process marked by inconsistency and unpredictability. Ideology deeply permeates several of these groups, infusing debates with cultural and moral stakes that heighten divisions and complicate consensus. Added to this is the overarching tension and polarisation between conservatives and progressives, as well as Republicans and Democrats, creating a charged atmosphere of intense division and mistrust where hysteria and hyperbole often overshadow reasoned debate.

Institutional checks and bureaucratic resistance further complicate this landscape, acting as both brakes and filters that prevent radical shifts while reshaping and delaying initiatives, often obscuring clear policy trajectories. These constraints limit the administration's ability to impose its agenda fully while opening space for internal contestation and unexpected outcomes.

The administration is also constrained by external realities and the international distribution of power, particularly the major geopolitical centres of gravity, such as China, Russia, and

[26] Ryan Browne and Zachary Cohen, "US to withdraw nearly 12,000 troops from Germany in move that will cost billions and take years," CNN, July 29, 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/29/politics/us-withdraw-troops-germany. The institutions and actors that delayed and reversed the decision often used the argument that the troop withdrawals had insufficient basis in geopolitical realities.

[27] Helene Cooper, "Biden freezes Trump's withdrawal of 12,000 troops from Germany," The New York Times, April 13, 2021.

Europe. These external dynamics, together with domestic political and institutional pressures, interact in a continuous and complex process. Internal debates and factional alignments within the administration will not unfold in isolation. Rather, they will be shaped, and continually reshaped, by evolving geopolitical events and global developments. The result is a fluid and often unpredictable interplay between domestic priorities and international imperatives.

Ultimately, the fragmented and ideologically charged environment ensures that foreign and security policy under Trump's second term will resist simple characterisation or prediction. Instead, it will be forged through ongoing struggles among competing forces, producing a broad spectrum of possible paths shaped by fluid power balances and evolving political realities, hence the need for scenario-based analysis.

3 The Scenarios

3.1 Overview

The future of US engagement in Europe will be shaped by a complex interplay of strategic priorities, domestic politics, alliance dynamics, and global threats. As the United States enters a period of intensifying geopolitical competition, shifting public sentiment, and evolving global responsibilities, most notably in the Indo-Pacific, the trajectory of its transatlantic posture remains uncertain. This report presents four plausible scenarios for US defence and security policy towards Europe under a second Trump administration, each reflecting different internal coalitions, external constraints, and strategic calculations.

These scenarios are not forecasts but structured narratives designed to illuminate how key drivers could interact to produce distinct policy outcomes. They range from a disciplined rebalancing effort that preserves deterrence while shifting resources to the Indo-Pacific, to a disruptive and ideologically driven retrenchment that undermines NATO cohesion and accelerates European fragmentation. They explore how US choices could affect alliance cohesion, deterrence, and European stability.

In two scenarios, policymaking is guided by a clearer politico-strategic and military rationale, producing more predictable behaviour and coherent outcomes. In the other two, political symbolism and personalisation dominate decision-making, with institutional processes sidelined and the President exercising heightened control. This leads to increased volatility and reduced strategic clarity.

The four scenarios are (hereafter, the italicised terms are used as abbreviations):

1. Policy Drift
2. *Bilateralisation* of US engagement
3. Asia First
4. *Abandonment* and Regionalisation

Together, these scenarios provide a framework for understanding divergent futures, each with different risks, trade-offs, and implications for US–Europe relations and the broader global order. They are intended to help policymakers and analysts anticipate potential inflection points, recognise early warning indicators, and prepare for a wide range of contingencies.

3.2 Policy Drift

The US largely maintains its security and defence engagement in Europe at or near 2025 levels.

In this scenario, bureaucratic inertia takes hold within the administration. Assisted by external realities, the Primacists steadily consolidate their influence, either by directly shaping the President's decisions or by effectively limiting the scope of policy options across key strategic areas. Efforts to alter the trajectory of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine stall, with peace negotiations stagnating amid deep-seated mistrust and competing interests. Meanwhile, US–Russia relations remain tense and unresolved, marked by a cycle of sanctions, diplomatic posturing, and limited engagement that fails to produce meaningful breakthroughs.

Confronted with these entrenched challenges and wary of incurring political or economic costs, the administration opts against sweeping changes. Instead, it adopts a cautious posture that prioritises stability and risk management over bold new initiatives. As a result, US security and defence commitments in Europe remain largely steady, reflecting a pragmatic but unambitious approach that preserves existing alliances and deterrence measures.

This scenario underscores how institutional resistance, strategic caution, and complex geopolitical realities combine to sustain a fragile status quo, one marked by unresolved conflict, persistent uncertainty, and a steady but restrained US presence on the European security stage.

US–Russia relations: Rhetoric without rapprochement

Peace negotiations over the war in Ukraine drag on with little to show for them. The administration increasingly blames multiple actors but identifies President Putin and Russia as primarily responsible for stringing along the US, including President Trump himself, without any genuine intent to end the conflict.

Concluding that rapprochement with Russia is unattainable due to Moscow's intransigence, the administration rejects concessions or rewards while tacitly allowing Congress to push further sanctions. Although Trump and some close advisers occasionally issue hopeful statements or propose initiatives to break the deadlock, these efforts fail to yield substantive progress, leaving US–Russia relations cold and distant.

Given Russia's perceived role in prolonging the war, and facing strong pro-Ukraine sentiment from Congress, the State Department, DoD, and other institutions, the administration opts for a cautious path: maintaining limited military support to Kyiv roughly at early spring 2025 levels.[28] This includes intelligence sharing, such as Starlink access, and logistical help facilitating European aid deliveries but stops short of sending large new military aid packages or expanding economic and humanitarian support. Meanwhile, European NATO members and Western allies ramp up their backing, gradually replacing much of the US's direct support. This steady European commitment allows Ukraine to sustain its current frontlines without dramatic shifts.

President Trump takes credit for Europe's increased efforts and is relieved to avoid domestic and international blame for a potential "loss of Ukraine," a failure he fears could echo Biden's 2021 Afghanistan withdrawal. Sensing that the US public's attention lies elsewhere, Trump prioritises other policy areas, leaving Ukraine and US–Russia relations largely frozen in cautious stalemate.

[28] As of June 16, 2025, the Trump administration had not allocated any new aid to Ukraine, but was continuing to spend funds that the Biden administration passed in 2024. Early indications suggest that European countries were beginning to fill the gap left by the reduction of US support. Additionally, in July 2024, the US and NATO agreed to establish a mechanism through which some NATO members would buy arms from the US, and send those arms to Ukraine. Kiel Institute for the World Economy, "Ukraine support: Europe largely fills the US aid withdrawal, led by the Nordics and the UK," Ukraine Support Tracker, June 16, 2025, https://www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/news/ukraine-support-europe-largely-fills-the-us-aid-withdrawal-lead-byn-the-nordics-and-the-uk/; Gram Slattery, Mike Stone, and Phil Stewart, "US, NATO developing novel funding mechanism for Ukraine weapons transfers", Reuters, August 1, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/us-nato-developing-novel-funding-mechanism-ukraine-weapons-transfers-2025-08-01/.

US–China relations: Strategic rivalry without full pivot

The Trump administration continues to frame China as the United States' primary strategic competitor in the international system. Backed by bipartisan consensus in Congress, defence budgets prioritise initiatives aimed at reinforcing US military posture and alliance networks in the Indo-Pacific. Funding streams such as the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, investments in the defence industrial base, and capabilities deemed essential for long-term competition with China remain protected and, in some areas, are modestly expanded.

While the overall defence budget remains roughly at 2025 levels, or sees slight increases, Washington maintains a global balancing act. Prioritisation of the Indo-Pacific does not translate into a full-scale pivot. Institutional inertia and interdepartmental interests exert significant influence: key elements within the DoD, State Department, and regional commands remain committed to sustaining US engagement and resources in Europe, the Middle East, and beyond. These bureaucracies resist deep cuts and sharp prioritisations, arguing that retrenchment could create strategic vacuums that adversaries might exploit.

As a result, the Indo-Pacific remains the central priority, but not at the direct expense of other theatres. The US maintains support for NATO and other global commitments, reflecting a strategy of global presence without full pivot.

Should a contingency arise, such as a Chinese military buildup near Taiwan, the administration is prepared to reallocate forces from other regions to reinforce deterrence and signal resolve. At the same time, it seeks to reassure allies outside the Indo-Pacific that the US remains a committed partner, aiming to avoid perceptions of neglect or strategic abandonment.

US–Europe relations: Persistent disagreements, sustained military partnership

The Trump administration remains critical of Europe's economic policies, frequently accusing the EU and individual countries of unfair trade practices and unfavourable balances. It also expresses ideological frustration with European approaches to governance, immigration, and progressive norms. However, these political, economic, and ideological disputes remain largely decoupled from the defence and security relationship.

European NATO members significantly increase their defence budgets and take on greater responsibility within NATO's planning and operational structures. This steady rebalancing of transatlantic burden-sharing allows the administration to claim a symbolic and political victory. President Trump, as in his first term, credits his negotiation tactics for prompting Europe's higher spending, publicly citing it as evidence of his leadership and leverage over allies.

Although the administration may continue to urge European countries to reach or even exceed 5% of GDP in defence spending**,** it avoids punitive measures if these targets are not met. There is no move to question Article 5 or to withdraw permanent US forces from the continent. The costs and risks of a dramatic reduction in US presence are made clear by senior defence and diplomatic officials, many of whom stress the expense and complexity of dismantling US infrastructure and command posts in Europe.

Instead, the administration defines success in maintaining current commitments: continuing to provide the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), chairing key NATO bodies, participating in joint exercises, and conducting a robust, though not expanded, set of deterrence operations. While the Indo-Pacific and homeland defence remain higher priorities, the administration gradually draws down the temporary posture reinforcements added by President Biden in 2022, returning the US presence to early 2022 levels, including ongoing Atlantic Resolve rotations.[29]

[29] At the height of the Biden administration's reinforcement of Europe in 2022, the US had around 100,000 troops in Europe. As of April 2025, that had decreased to approximately 80,000 troops, of which circa 15,000 were rotational troops, and 65,000 permanently stationed forces. These numbers also naturally fluctuate: for example, when a Carrier Strike Group (CSG) deploys to US EUCOM. A CSG often consists of around 7,500 personnel. 2025 Posture Statement to Congress,

The US role in the world: More continuity than change

No single faction within the administration dominates US strategic direction, and no coalition emerges capable of fundamentally breaking with existing foreign and security policies. Instead, the Primacists and Prioritisers reach workable compromises that balance key strategic, economic, and ideological priorities, while keeping the Restrainers effectively in check.

Congress, the DoD, the State Department, and allied governments successfully decouple even sharp ideological and economic disputes from core defence and security relationships. This separation allows political and economic tensions to persist without undermining essential security cooperation.

Meanwhile, the President's more erratic impulses are checked by advisors and institutional constraints, ensuring that policy and implementation are shaped by compromise and bureaucratic influence. The resulting approach blends elements of primacy and prioritisation, characterised by pragmatic multilateralism, modest military budget increases, and rhetoric that is often more heated than the reality on the ground.

In sum, the transatlantic relationship in this scenario is marked by clear political and economic friction but maintains a stable and functional defence partnership. Despite public disputes, confidence in US security commitments remains relatively strong on both sides of the Atlantic.

Indicators

The following developments across key areas may serve as indicators that the "Policy Drift" scenario is becoming more or less plausible.

External factors: US–allies and adversaries

- **US–Russia relations:** A continued stalemate or further deterioration in peace negotiations over Ukraine, driven by Russian intransigence, strengthens this scenario. As tensions rise and prospects for resolution fade, the administration faces limited options, reinforcing bureaucratic caution and disincentivising radical policy shifts.
- **US–China relations:** A transition towards a "managed rivalry" or "cold peace" with China would support this scenario. Conversely, sharp escalations, particularly military tensions over Taiwan or intensified trade conflicts, could prompt a pivot to the Indo-Pacific, reducing resources and attention to Europe and weakening institutional inertia. This is explored further in Scenario 3.
- **US–Europe relations:** Sustained increases in European defence spending, constructive transatlantic dialogue on trade and political issues, and progress towards a US–EU trade agreement strengthen this scenario. Crucially, the ability of both sides to compartmentalise political and ideological disputes from defence cooperation is essential. If this decoupling breaks down, the scenario's likelihood decreases.

Internal factors: US policy and institutional dynamics

- **Bureaucratic and institutional behaviour:** Persistent institutional caution within the DoD, State Department, and intelligence agencies, reflected in resistance to disruptive policy changes or large-scale force reductions, signals the resilience of established policy frameworks. Conversely, if the Trump administration successfully exerts greater control over these institutions, the scenario's plausibility diminishes.
- **Internal policy orientation:** The scenario becomes more likely if the administration prioritises guidance from Primacists who advocate a robust but measured global posture, while curbing the influence of Prioritisers and Restrainers. Sustained bipartisan support in Congress for strategic continuity and stable defence funding further reinforces this trajectory. Democratic control of the House after the

Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee (April 8, 2025) (statement of General Christopher Cavoli, Commander, US European Command, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe), https://www.eucom.mil/about-the-command/2025-posture-statement-to-congress.

2026 midterms, enabling increased oversight of executive foreign policy, would enhance this likelihood.

- **Presidential communication and staffing patterns:** If senior national security appointments increasingly go to experienced, conventional officials, and presidential rhetoric becomes more disciplined and institutionally aligned, this indicates strong bureaucratic influence, consistent with this scenario.[30]
- **Congressional oversight trends:** Frequent congressional oversight hearings or legislative actions reinforcing NATO commitments and limiting executive authority over troop deployments would further anchor institutional continuity.
- **Defence budget allocations by theatre:** Continuation of funding for European presence, including infrastructure, logistics, and rotations (e.g. Atlantic Resolve), supports the scenario's plausibility. A significant budgetary pivot towards the Indo-Pacific at Europe's expense would signal potential erosion of institutional inertia.

[30] A typical US Presidential administration has around 4,000 political appointees, of which 1,300 positions require Senate confirmation. As of August 6, 2025, the Trump administration had picked 368 nominees of which 127 had been confirmed by the Senate. The majority of those confirmed have been high-level positions. Apart from individuals nominated for positions that have previously lacked appointees, this indicator also accounts for people being fired, transferred to other posts, or resignations. The Washington Post, in collaboration with the Partnership for Public Service, "Donald Trump has picked 368 nominees to fill key roles in his administration so far," The Washington Post, June 26, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/interactive/2025/trump-appointee-tracker/. The tracker provides the reader with an overview of and an understanding that many positions remain to be filled by the Trump administration.

3.3 Bilateralisation of US engagement

The US adjusts its military posture in Europe and favours bilateral relationships with European countries.

In this scenario, none of the strategic factions within the administration—Primacists, Prioritisers, or Restrainers—gain a durable advantage. Instead, coalitions between these camps shift frequently throughout Trump's tenure, while ideological and economic factions, particularly economic nationalists and populists, steadily increase their influence. This shift drives a breakdown in the traditional compartmentalisation of political, economic, ideological, and security issues, which begins to undermine the cohesion of the US–Europe defence and security relationship.

The President pursues a transactional, short-term approach, rewarding countries that align with the administration's ideological outlook, especially national-conservative governments, as well as those perceived to have fair trade balances and that have increased their defence spending significantly. Conversely, countries falling out of favour face reduced US military presence, fewer joint exercises, and diminished strategic cooperation.

This results in a marked bilateralisation of US security and military engagement in Europe, fragmenting transatlantic unity and NATO cohesion. European countries diverge in their responses to Washington, with some deepening ties to the US, while others seek greater autonomy or alternative partnerships, reflecting the increasingly politicised and uneven nature of US foreign policy under this scenario.

US–Russia relations: Gradual progress amid uncertainty and transactional shifts

In this scenario, the administration's fractured internal dynamics and short-term, transactional worldview shape a cautious and inconsistent US policy towards Russia and Ukraine. With no single strategic faction holding durable sway, rising ideological and economic nationalist voices increasingly mould foreign policy.

Negotiations between Russia and Ukraine continue but move unevenly, producing occasional limited concessions, such as localised ceasefires, that the administration treats as sufficient grounds to sustain engagement. The growing influence of national conservatives and MAGA-aligned populists, who regard aspects of Russia's conservative domestic agenda with a degree of sympathy, contributes to a fragile perception of stabilisation in US–Russia relations. However, deeper diplomatic breakthroughs remain elusive, and mutual suspicion endures beneath the surface.

Meanwhile, the administration gradually scales back military and logistical support to Ukraine, despite the ongoing conflict. This reflects not only shifting priorities and conflict fatigue, but also a deepening scepticism towards President Zelensky, whom some administration officials view as politically self-serving or unreliable. The result is a fragile and unstable US–Russia dynamic, characterised by inconsistent policy, strategic ambiguity, and enduring mistrust on all sides.

US–China relations: Strategic drift and rising instability in the Indo-Pacific

In this scenario, US policy towards China is marked by internal divisions and shifting coalitions among strategic, ideological, and economic factions. No single approach dominates, leading to an inconsistent and often contradictory strategy. The administration's posture towards Beijing oscillates unpredictably; periods of rhetorical confrontation and increased military posturing may give way to temporary economic rapprochement, particularly if trade interests or political optics shift.

While the administration continues to publicly identify China as the United States' primary strategic competitor, reassuring regional allies in principle, its erratic diplomatic and security engagement undermines confidence in practice. Following a transactional logic, the US

selectively rewards Indo-Pacific allies perceived as ideologically aligned or sufficiently deferential, while sidelining or punishing others. This uneven treatment strains alliances, weakens coordination, and fosters uncertainty across the region.

Combined with the administration's mixed signals on deterrence and alliance commitments, this strategic incoherence could lead Beijing to perceive greater room for manoeuvre. If the regional military balance continues to shift, whether due to uneven US engagement or growing Chinese assertiveness, there is an increased potential for miscalculation or limited probing of US resolve. While not inevitable, the likelihood of instability in the Indo-Pacific region may grow.

US–Europe relations: Fragmented and politicised under ideological pressure

In this scenario, US–Europe relations deteriorate, shaped by the Trump administration's internal ideological shifts and transactional worldview. While no strategic faction within the administration gains lasting control, the growing influence of national conservatives and economic populists fuels a more adversarial posture towards key European allies.

The administration frequently and publicly criticises European domestic and foreign policies, especially what it views as liberal or "globalist" tendencies. Initiatives associated with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), marginalisation of far-right political movements like France's National Rally or Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), and elite-driven EU policies become repeated targets of condemnation. These ideological grievances are compounded by perceptions of unfair trade practices and insufficient European defence spending, especially within the EU. This discontent leads to policy actions. The administration begins linking trade and security more overtly, taking retaliatory measures against countries it perceives as disrespectful or economically exploitative.

US force posture in Europe shifts in line with the administration's ideological and transactional outlook. Troops are withdrawn from countries like Germany, which the administration criticises for low defence spending and trade imbalances, and redeployed to states seen as more ideologically aligned or economically "fair," such as Poland.

Initially, all temporary and rotational forces are affected by this bilateralisation, but permanently based US forces also experience changes. Potentially affected units include the 2nd Cavalry Regiment, elements of the 10th Army Air and Missile Defense Command (including the 52nd Air Defense Artillery Brigade) in Germany, the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Italy, and Arleigh Burke-class destroyers stationed at Rota Naval Station in Spain, which could be redirected to the continental US, the Middle East, or the Indo-Pacific. These posture changes are driven primarily by political symbolism rather than military logic, rendering them unpredictable and strategically incoherent.

While some relocations within Europe are feasible, more costly or operationally critical assets, such as command-and-control centres and advanced medical facilities, are likely to remain in place due to logistical constraints and broader US strategic interests elsewhere. Nonetheless, this development signals growing instability within the alliance structure.

The result is a sharp bilateralisation and fragmentation of US military engagement in Europe. NATO cohesion erodes as US participation in collective activities wanes. Instead, the administration favours bilateral exercises with ideologically aligned partners and reduces visible deterrence operations such as bomber task force deployments or joint naval missions.

European countries react unevenly: some seek to preserve bilateral ties by making concessions, while others distance themselves or look to alternative security arrangements. The administration appears largely indifferent to how these posture changes might affect Russia's threat perceptions, signalling that symbolic domestic and ideological victories take precedence over cohesive alliance strategy.

In sum, US–Europe relations under this scenario sour markedly, becoming increasingly politicised, unpredictable, and fractured.

The US role in the world: Bilateralism and growing ideological influence

In this scenario, no single strategic camp within the administration gains a durable advantage, though the Primacists lose ground as ideological and economic factions, notably national conservatives, economic nationalists and populists, steadily increase their influence. The President's instincts continue to play an outsized role in shaping US policy, leading to a more erratic and transactional approach to foreign affairs.

Unlike in Scenario 1, Congress, the DoD, the State Department, and allied governments struggle to contain the growing overlap between and breakdown of the traditional separation between political, economic, ideological, and security issues. The administration increasingly criticises the European Union, accusing it of unfair trade practices, bureaucratic overreach, and disrespect towards US interests. This rhetoric contributes to a sharp decline in EU–US coordination, as Washington prefers unilateral actions and bilateral deals with individual European countries over collective engagement through Brussels.

This erosion of trust and coordination undermines the cohesion of the US–Europe defence and security relationship, fuelling bilateralism and fragmentation. Several European countries respond by deepening their exploration of alternatives to the traditional heavy reliance on the United States. The result is heightened uncertainty and unpredictability in transatlantic relations. The alliance structure weakens as political symbolism increasingly drives security decisions, complicating coordinated defence efforts and strategic planning.

In sum, the transatlantic partnership faces significant strain, marked by shifting coalitions, transactional diplomacy, reduced multilateral coordination, and an uneven balance of influence within the US government, threatening long-term stability and mutual confidence.

Indicators

The following developments across key areas may serve as indicators that the "Bilateralisation of US engagement" scenario is becoming more or less plausible.

External factors: US–allies and adversaries

- **US–Russia relations**: The scenario becomes more likely if negotiations over the Russia-Ukraine conflict achieve only limited progress or a fragile breakthrough that fosters a cautious but tentative stabilisation. Signs of growing ideological affinity towards Russia within US policy circles, notably among national conservatives and populists, further increase this scenario's plausibility. Conversely, renewed disputes or a sharp deterioration in relations between the countries would challenge this trajectory.
- **US–China relations:** The direction of US–China relations influences this scenario's likelihood, though with some ambiguity. Positive developments, such as managed trade or diplomatic engagement, could reinforce the administration's preference for transactional, bilateral dealings with allies in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Conversely, heightened tensions or rising risks of conflict in the Indo-Pacific might prompt a strategic shift, diverting attention and resources away from Europe, and thereby supporting this scenario's fragmentation and unpredictability. However, if tensions with China escalate sharply, the administration might conclude that it is strategically prudent to unite with Europe against a common civilisational competitor, which would reduce this scenario's likelihood by encouraging renewed transatlantic cooperation.
- **US–Europe relations:** A worsening of transatlantic ties, exemplified by failed trade negotiations, increasing US criticism of the EU, and a breakdown in coordinated defence efforts, strengthens this scenario. The administration's preference for unilateral actions and bilateral deals over collective EU engagement, combined with growing ideological disputes, are key indicators. Additionally, strong and vocal European criticism of US policies and behaviour, reflecting frustration or distrust towards Washington, further increases the scenario's likelihood by deepening divisions and accelerating alliance fragmentation. Conversely, signs of renewed multilateralism or successful compartmentalisation of disagreements would weaken this trajectory.

Internal factors: US policy and institutional dynamics

- **Bureaucratic and institutional behaviour**: Diminished influence of traditional security institutions, such as the DoD, State Department, and intelligence agencies, or increased control of these institutions by the administration, especially when infused with ideological priorities, would increase the plausibility of this scenario. Conversely, if traditional institutions retain or regain influence and restore disciplined coordination, the scenario's likelihood would decrease.
- **Internal policy orientation**: This scenario becomes more likely if economic nationalists, populists, national conservatives, or other ideologically conservative factions increasingly shape US foreign policy, driving a more transactional and ideologically driven approach. A decline in the Primacists' influence and a weakening of bipartisan consensus in Congress on strategic continuity also support this outlook. Democratic control of the House after the 2026 midterms would decrease the likelihood of this scenario.
- **Presidential communication and staffing patterns:** The appointment of ideologically aligned, less traditionally experienced officials, combined with erratic or highly personalised presidential rhetoric, signals a shift towards this scenario's dynamics. Additionally, the trajectory of the President's personal relationships with European leaders, whether increasingly confrontational or cooperative, can respectively increase or decrease the plausibility of this scenario.
- **Congressional oversight trends:** Reduced Congressional engagement with foreign policy, fewer oversight hearings on alliances, or divided Congressional priorities can facilitate this scenario's emergence by weakening institutional checks. Conversely, an increase in ideologically charged hearings, such as those focusing on democracy or free speech issues in Europe, may also heighten tensions and increase the likelihood of this scenario.
- **Defence budget allocations by theatre**: Evidence of unpredictable or politically motivated force posture changes in Europe, reduced funding stability for transatlantic defence infrastructure, and a fragmented approach to military resources would reflect this scenario. Shifting budgetary emphasis without clear strategic coherence also signals increased instability.

3.4 Asia First

A tailored drawdown in Europe to enable Indo-Pacific prioritisation.

In this scenario, the United States sharpens its strategic focus on China, prompting a significant shift in global posture. With growing influence in both the administration and Congress, the Prioritisers drive a deliberate and sustained reallocation of military resources to the Indo-Pacific. This marks a departure from previous administrations, where rhetoric often outpaced implementation.[31]

Importantly, the administration seeks to manage this rebalancing strategically and in coordination with allies rather than through unilateral retrenchment. It emphasises the need for a more equitable distribution of defence responsibilities and rejects any suggestion of abandoning Europe. The pace, scope, and intensity of these changes may vary depending on diplomatic engagement and European responses. Constructive consultations could help mitigate the impact on European security, but the underlying shift in US focus introduces new uncertainty and pressure on transatlantic defence planning.

US–Russia relations: Russia as a secondary threat in a China-first strategy

In this scenario, the administration increasingly views Russia as a secondary, non-hegemonic threat, both to the US and to the broader Eurasian continent. This framing is largely conveyed internally within the US government and in closed-door discussions with allies, where officials stress that the strategic priority is confronting China in the Indo-Pacific. Public messaging remains more ambiguous.

In line with this strategic shift, continued support for Ukraine is seen as a drain on resources needed elsewhere.[32] The administration begins to scale back intelligence, logistical, and other forms of assistance, seeking to reallocate capacity towards the Indo-Pacific. Within the administration, some officials advocate a "reverse Kissinger" strategy: a limited rapprochement with Moscow aimed at weakening the Russia–China relationship, mirroring Nixon's Cold War outreach to Beijing, but in reverse. These proponents downplay external scepticism, viewing such a manoeuvre as a pragmatic way to divide adversaries and reduce global overextension. As part of this effort, the administration may consider concessions to Russia, including reductions in US force posture in Europe, without substantial consultation with European NATO allies.

Negotiations over the Russia–Ukraine war continue but follow one of two broad paths. On one path, the administration loses confidence in either side's willingness to reach a deal, begins to assign blame to both Moscow and Kyiv, and eventually disengages from the peace process. In another, the US brokers a compromise that leads to a peace agreement or extended ceasefire, potentially involving US concessions that reduce its military footprint in Europe. In either case, the outcome is a de facto handover of responsibility for Ukraine to Europe.

Regardless of battlefield developments in the short term, the administration is likely to present the shift as a strategic "win" that highlights the President's negotiation skills and the rebalancing of burdens. If Russia later makes significant breakthroughs and Ukraine's position deteriorates, the administration will likely seek to deflect blame for "losing Ukraine" by accusing European allies of failing to secure their own neighbourhood.

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[31] This scenario is partly inspired by the texts produced by individuals in the Prioritiser faction, mostly prior to taking office. See for example, Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021); A. Wess Mitchell, Jakub Grygiel, Elbridge A. Colby and Matt Pottinger, *Getting Strategic Deprioritization Right* (Washington D.C: The Marathon Initiative, 2023); Alex Velez-Green and Robert Peters, *The Prioritization Imperative: A Strategy to Defend America's Interests in a More Dangerous World* (Washington D.C: The Heritage Foundation); Austin J. Dahmer, *Resourcing the Strategy of Denial: Optimizing the Defense Budget in Three Alternative Futures* (Washington D.C: The Marathon Initiative, 2023); Christopher Miller, "Department of Defense," in *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* (Washington D.C: The Heritage Foundation), ed. Paul Dans and Steven Groves, 2023.

[32] Paul Mclearly, Jack Detsch and Joe Gould, "Pentagon halting some promised munitions for Ukraine," Politico, July 1, 2025, https://www.politico.com/news/2025/07/01/pentagon-munitions-ukraine-halt-00436048?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

US–China relations: Accelerated rivalry and Indo-Pacific primacy

The Trump administration continues the bipartisan trend of identifying China as the United States' principal strategic competitor, especially in the Indo-Pacific.[33] However, it departs from previous administrations by framing China not merely as a long-term challenge but as an immediate and singular threat to US interests over the coming decade.[34] This framing is pushed by both the Prioritisers and key ideological factions within the administration. At the same time, significant tensions persist between economic factions over the extent to which trade policy and economic issues should be compartmentalised from the broader strategic rivalry.

A central theme in the administration's thinking is the perceived window of maximum risk in 2027–2028, based on internal assessments that Xi Jinping has directed the PLA to be ready to invade Taiwan by 2027.[35] In response, the administration accelerates planning and military posturing aimed at deterring China and reassuring regional allies in the lead-up to this critical period. This sense of urgency drives a willingness to accept greater strategic risk elsewhere, notably in Europe and the Middle East.

This China-first posture manifests across several defence planning priorities. The Department of Defense concentrates concept development and force design on a Taiwan contingency, the so-called "pacing scenario."[36] Procurement accelerates for systems deemed critical to a Western Pacific conflict, while platforms and programmes seen as less relevant are cut, delayed, or mothballed. Resource allocation increasingly favours the Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps, while the Army, civilian workforce, and non-priority programmes face reductions.[37] Readiness guidance shifts towards near-term operational capability, "fight tonight," with a focus on the Indo-Pacific.

In the event of a potential crisis, the administration is prepared to rapidly reallocate resources from the continental US and other theatres to reinforce deterrence in the region. This includes deploying bombers to Guam, Australia, or Diego Garcia; redirecting naval assets from the Atlantic, Mediterranean, or Middle East; and repositioning Army logistical units, air defence, and long-range fires to the Indo-Pacific.

Unlike the more balanced approach described in the scenario "Policy Drift," in this scenario the Trump administration acts with fewer constraints. Strategic consultation is more limited, and the impacts on other theatres are accepted as necessary trade-offs to counter what it sees as the defining great power challenge of the era.

US–Europe relations: Structured rebalancing

The administration conducts intensive but largely top-down consultations with European NATO allies as it accelerates a strategic shift towards the Indo-Pacific. It frames the reallocation of US military resources not as a retreat from Europe but as a necessary

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[33] A bipartisan trend has been to call for increased US focus on the Indo-Pacific, but implementation has often lagged rhetoric. Several analysts have pointed this out over the years. See: Robert D. Blackwill and Richard Fontaine, *Lost Decade: The US Pivot to Asia and the Rise of Chinese Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024). This is a representative example.

[34] The Biden administration characterised Russia as an "immediate" threat, while China was viewed as the long-term strategic competitor. The White House, National Security Strategy (Washington D.C: The White House, 2022), 8.

[35] Riley Ceder, "Head Navy officer lists top tasks for service, eyes 2027," Military Times, May 2, 2025. https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2025/05/02/head-navy-officer-lists-top-tasks-for-service-eyes-2027/?utm_campaign=dfn-ebb&utm_medium=email&utm_source=sailthru "Our focus is 2027, and I want everyone's focus to be on 2027," Kilby said.

[36] Alex Horton and Hannah Natansson, "Secret Pentagon memo on China, homeland has Heritage fingerprints," The Washington Post, March 29, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/03/29/secret-pentagon-memo-hegseth-heritage-foundation-china/.

[37] For some indication of this, see: Pete Hegseth, Memorandum for Senior Pentagon Leadership: Army Transformation and Acquisition Reform (Washington D.C: Office of the Secretary of Defense, April 30, 2025).

redistribution of burden, requiring European nations to assume greater responsibility for conventional defence on the continent.[38]

Encouraged, if not pressured, by Washington, several European countries significantly increase their defence budgets. The scale of these commitments varies according to geography, threat perception, and economic capacity. The administration hails these increases as major wins and credits the President's negotiation skills for securing European responsiveness.

The structure of US–Europe consultations may follow one of two general paths. The more likely path involves Washington presenting a predetermined plan and timeline for reducing its military presence in Europe and shifting resources to the Indo-Pacific. Although European governments may attempt to influence the details, the US is expected to remain largely firm, citing the urgency of the shift and broader strategic imperatives. A less likely alternative would entail joint US–European planning of a phased transition. While such an approach could mitigate political fallout and strengthen trust, it would require significant discretion to avoid alarming European publics or emboldening adversaries. Given operational security concerns and the administration's preferred unilateral style, this collaborative route appears less probable.

US force reductions in Europe primarily focus on air, maritime, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets. This includes decreased deployment and rotation of strategic and tactical aircraft across the continent, along with a reduced naval presence in the Euro-Atlantic, as surface combatants and submarines are redirected to the Indo-Pacific. The administration may also rotate out some permanently stationed forces—such as the two F-35 squadrons of the 48th Fighter Wing at RAF Lakenheath. On the ground, the US Army will withdraw the temporary reinforcements deployed in response to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and scale back its rotational presence.[39] Additionally, it may reconfigure, reduce, or rotate out some permanently stationed units. Relevant formations include the 10th Army Air and Missile Defense Command, the 52nd Air Defense Artillery Brigade, long-range fires units, the burgeoning Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF), and selected logistical elements.[40]

Despite these adjustments, the administration clearly communicates, especially in closed-door settings, that it does not intend to abandon NATO and that Article 5 and the strategic deterrent will remain in place. It also stresses the need to preserve conditions for possible large-scale re-entry. This includes continued military exercises, though smaller in scale, substantial pre-positioned materiel, and the maintenance of bilateral and multilateral defence cooperation mechanisms, such as Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCAs).

Despite persistent criticism of Europe from both the economic and ideological factions within the Trump administration, disputes and tensions are largely compartmentalised from the realm of security cooperation. Through a combination of pressure and incentives, the administration manages to persuade key European states and the EU to limit engagement with China on issues where Washington sees its core interests at stake. However, the

[38] Another paper—on the more extreme side—that has inspired this scenario and section, is: Sumantra Maitra, Policy Brief; Pivoting the US Away from Europe to a Dormant NATO, Center for Renewing America, February 16, 2023, https://americarenewing.com/policy-brief-pivoting-the-us-away-from-europe-to-a-dormant-nato/. This paper has, to some extent, also inspired the "Abandonment" scenario.

[39] For more information on US force posture in Europe, see footnote 22.

[40] Assets that would be at risk of being withdrawn or rotated in less frequently include strategic bombers, tactical aircraft, electronic warfare aircraft, maritime surveillance aircraft, AEW&C aircraft, surface combatants, submarines (SSNs, SSBNs, SSGN), mobile air and missile defence assets, long-range fires systems, ammunition from some pre-positioned stocks, enablers such as transport aircraft, and sea transport ships. For more details, see: Alexander Velez-Green and Robert Peters, The Prioritization Imperative, Heritage, 2024, 17.

administration is likely to encourage only small and very limited European security contributions to activities in the Indo-Pacific, as the Prioritiser faction believes larger contributions distract from the Europeans' primary responsibility: Europe.

However, if several European countries or the EU respond to US economic nationalism by deepening trade ties with China, this compartmentalisation could unravel, drawing strategic cooperation into broader transatlantic tensions and complicating both defence planning and alliance cohesion.

The US role in the world: Realism and selective engagement

In this scenario, the Trump administration adopts a foreign policy shaped primarily by *Prioritisers*, whose influence is reinforced by economic nationalists, populists, and ideologically driven factions. These groups converge around a realist worldview that emphasises the need to conserve US resources and focus them narrowly on what the administration views as the most pressing threats.

Domestically, the administration focuses on securing the continental US, particularly the southern border, as a top priority. Regionally, it highlights the need to maintain stability within the Western Hemisphere, reflecting a longstanding US view of the Americas as a vital strategic buffer. Globally, the administration identifies China as the foremost threat and the Indo-Pacific as the central theatre of strategic competition. A heightened sense of urgency drives an assertive effort to deter China and reassure regional allies while accepting increased risk in other regions.

This China-first focus translates into a broader message to allies: the US will reduce its commitments elsewhere, particularly in Europe and the Middle East, and expects its partners to step up accordingly. The administration frames this shift as a necessary rebalancing of burdens and a rational alignment of military posture with strategic priorities.

The resulting US global posture reflects a form of selective engagement narrowly focused on key regions and adversaries. Unlike past approaches rooted in liberal internationalism or global leadership for its own sake, this strategy is transactional, interest-driven, and unapologetically strategic.

Indicators

The following developments across key areas may serve as indicators that the "Asia First" scenario is becoming more or less plausible:

External factors: US–allies and adversaries

- **US–Russia relations**: This scenario becomes more likely if US–Russia relations stabilise or modestly improve, particularly through a ceasefire, negotiated pause, or de facto freezing of the Ukraine conflict. A perception of a reduced threat from Moscow may lower the strategic cost of shifting US attention towards the Indo-Pacific. Conversely, a sharp deterioration, such as renewed escalation in Ukraine or provocative Russian behaviour in Europe, would complicate the rebalancing effort and reduce this scenario's plausibility.
- **US–China Relations**: The scenario's likelihood increases if US–China relations worsen, especially in ways that sharpen the perceived immediacy of the threat. Indicators include heightened military tensions over Taiwan, assertive rhetoric from senior US officials framing 2027–2028 as a window of maximum risk, or increased US force deployments and exercises in the Indo-Pacific. Conversely, diplomatic stabilisation or reduced urgency in Indo-Pacific defence planning could lower the plausibility of this scenario.
- US–Europe Relations: Strained transatlantic relations support the scenario, particularly if the administration expresses dissatisfaction with European defence spending levels or burden-sharing commitments. A failure by key European allies

to meet US expectations may be used as justification for accelerating the reallocation of resources to Asia. At the same time, a European turn towards strategic autonomy, backed by credible military investments, could paradoxically enable rebalancing by reassuring Washington that European security can be sustained with a smaller US footprint. In contrast, robust defence coordination and trust-building within NATO may reduce this scenario's likelihood.

Internal factors: US policy and institutional dynamics

- **Bureaucratic and institutional behaviour**: An increase in top-down decision-making that sidelines traditional national security institutions, such as the Department of Defense or the State Department, would support this scenario. If those institutions resist rebalancing or attempt to preserve European force levels, their relative influence becomes a key indicator. Institutional alignment behind prioritisation rhetoric and planning would reinforce this scenario's credibility.
- **Internal policy orientation**: The scenario becomes more plausible if Prioritisers gain greater influence within the administration and are empowered to steer strategic planning. Their positions may be echoed in defence and national security strategies, presidential speeches, and senior official statements—primarily at forums such as NATO summits. A reduced role for Primacists, alongside bipartisan fatigue over global commitments, would further tilt policy towards selective engagement.
- **Presidential communication and staffing patterns**: The appointment of senior defence and foreign policy officials who publicly advocate for Indo-Pacific prioritisation and resource realignment would reinforce the scenario. Additionally, consistent presidential messaging emphasising strategic discipline, military rebalancing, and a narrow conception of US interests would align with this trajectory. Signals of de-emphasising traditional alliance management in favour of capability-driven partnerships would also support this outlook.
- **Congressional oversight trends**: Congressional support for Indo-Pacific-focused defence investments, combined with muted oversight of troop reductions or rebalancing in Europe, would signal increased feasibility of this scenario. Conversely, if bipartisan coalitions in Congress work to tie the administration's hands by mandateing minimum US force levels in Europe or increasing scrutiny of alliance behaveiour, this would complicate implementation and reduce the scenario's plausibility.
- **Defence budget allocations by theatre**: A budgetary shift prioritising Indo-Pacific capabilities, such as naval modernisation, missile defence, and forward posture investments in Asia, at the expense of European force presence, would provide clear evidence supporting this scenario. Given the US Army's historically Europe-centred posture, reductions in Army end strength, funding for Europe-based units, or cuts to ground combat capabilities, such as mechanised and armoured brigade combat teams, would further signal a strategic shift away from the continent. Decreased investments in European infrastructure, prepositioned equipment, and joint exercises would underscore a decisive reorientation of US strategic priorities

3.5 Abandonment and Regionalisation

The US pursues a politically driven and disorderly retrenchment that disrupts alliances and undermines strategic stability.

In this scenario, the Restrainers gain dominant influence in the administration, backed by economic nationalists and populist factions. Together, they drive a sharp turn away from international commitments, notably in Europe. Unlike previous scenarios characterised by strategic planning, this retrenchment is abrupt, politically motivated, and largely uncoordinated. The traditional separation between political, economic, and security domains collapses as trade disputes and ideological rifts with European allies escalate. President Trump denounces NATO allies for "free-riding" on defence, lambasts Europe's trade practices, and increasingly questions the value of alliances.

With institutional guardrails weakened and internal dissent sidelined, the President issues sudden, symbolic orders to draw down US military presence abroad. Forces are pulled from Europe and other theatres with minimal notice, little interagency coordination, and no clear operational logic. The emphasis is on what can be moved quickly, not what should be preserved for strategic coherence. As a result, the drawdowns undermine deterrence and severely disrupt allied planning. NATO cohesion weakens as allies scramble to fill gaps and adapt to the abrupt US withdrawal, accelerating the erosion of the transatlantic security framework.

US–Russia relations: Disengagement and opportunistic rapprochement

In this scenario, US policy towards Russia is driven less by developments on the ground in Ukraine and more by the administration's goal of withdrawing from Europe and scaling back global commitments. The Russia–Ukraine war is no longer perceived as a national interest, and Washington seeks to disengage, casting the conflict as a regional issue best handled by European allies.

One possible path is that the administration pursues an opportunistic reset with Moscow. This could involve informal understandings on spheres of influence, rebranded with different terminology, paired with sanctions relief, trade incentives, and additional drawdowns of US forces in Europe. These efforts are driven by ideological factions, including national conservatives who view China as the primary threat and see accommodation with Russia as serving broader strategic goals. A high-profile Trump–Putin summit may be used to personalise and dramatise the diplomatic overture.

Alternatively, and perhaps more likely, the administration, preoccupied with reducing US global commitments, simply loses interest in the Russia–Ukraine war. Rather than pursuing a negotiated settlement or a broader grand bargain with Moscow, US officials disengage from the diplomatic process entirely, framing the conflict as a European problem and distancing themselves from its outcome. The administration adopts a posture of cynical detachment, blaming all sides—Russia, Ukraine, and European NATO allies—for prolonging what the administration characterises as a "pointless war." At the same time, it signals openness to bilateral trade agreements. If Ukraine or European states take actions the administration perceives as escalatory, Washington is quick to reject entanglement, emphasising that the US will not be drawn back in.

In both cases, US disengagement creates a strategic vacuum on Europe's eastern flank. As the administration prioritises rapid military withdrawals and undermines long-standing alliances, deterrence erodes and the credibility of the US commitment to European security is further called into question.

US–China relations: Deterrence erodes amid political retrenchment

US policy towards China reflects the competing priorities of restrainers, economic nationalists, and ideological factions that continue to view China as the United States' primary threat. The collapse of traditional boundaries between political, economic, and security domains further erodes strategic coherence, resulting in a fragmented and inconsistent approach. While ideologically motivated factions, backed by Prioritisers and Primacists, advocate a hard line against Beijing, the dominant Restrainer wing pushes to reduce US commitments abroad.

The administration signals that it no longer adheres to prior definitions of America's defence perimeter in Asia. Senior officials, including the President, openly question the credibility, feasibility and even the logic of intervening in a conflict over Taiwan, arguing that the costs are too high and that "the American people will not trade Los Angeles for Taipei." These statements cast serious doubt on US deterrence commitments and provoke alarm among regional allies.

At the same time, escalating economic grievances strain relations with key Asian partners. Frustrated by stalled trade negotiations and perceived inequities in burden-sharing, the administration accuses several Indo-Pacific allies of exploiting US security guarantees. After issuing repeated threats to withdraw US forces absent major concessions, the administration follows through with troop drawdowns.

These posture changes are driven more by political symbolism than military logic, making them unpredictable and strategically incoherent. Drawdowns could include forces stationed in South Korea, Japan, and rotational deployments in the Philippines. US forces in Guam and Australia may remain, but their long-term status is left ambiguous.

The result is a jarring dual signal: Washington both undermines its commitment to defend Taiwan and withdraws from forward positions in the region. This strategic drift unsettles allies and encourages hedging behaviour. Meanwhile, China may view the confusion as an opportunity to advance its position while the regional security architecture remains in flux.[41]

US–Europe relations: Strategic rupture and alliance unraveling

Restrainers gain dominant influence within the administration, supported by economic nationalists and populist factions. Political and ideological tensions between the Trump administration and several European governments escalate into what resembles a transatlantic culture war. The President and senior officials publicly condemn European states for betraying what they frame as foundational Western values—democracy, freedom, and individual liberty—while accusing European elites of entrenching themselves in power and repressing political opposition.[42]

This ideological clash spills into overt diplomatic confrontation, with US officials making provocative statements endorsing opposition parties and figures across Europe. European leaders respond in kind, accusing the US administration of authoritarian tendencies. The resulting mutual recriminations of democratic backsliding erode the normative foundations that have traditionally underpinned the transatlantic alliance.

Simultaneously, trade tensions between the US and the EU intensify sharply. Disputes over tariffs, subsidies, and regulatory standards trigger a cycle of retaliatory measures, undermining economic cooperation and further poisoning diplomatic relations.

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[41] It is implausible to imagine the United States abandoning Europe to the extent described in this scenario while simultaneously maintaining extensive engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Such a realignment is more consistent with the assumptions underpinning Scenario Three, where threat perceptions and strategic priorities are clearly focused on countering China.

[42] This scenario has been partly inspired by two texts: Celia Belin, MAGA goes global: Trump's plan for Europe, p. 5; Sophia Besch and Tara Varma, Alliance of Revisionists, a new era for the transatlantic relationship, Survival, no. 2 (March 31, 2025).

A breakdown of the traditional separation between political, economic, and security issues follows. The administration begins to openly question the value of NATO, including the credibility of Article 5 commitments. President Trump and senior officials issue direct and indirect threats, warning that unless European governments shift their positions on key political and economic issues, the US may withdraw its military presence from the continent.

With minimal warning to NATO allies, President Trump orders a drastic and accelerated drawdown of US forces in Europe. He demands immediate action, with aircraft to be in the air within weeks. While Democrats in Congress strongly oppose the decision—and some Republican senators also voice concerns, the administration proceeds with the plan.

The withdrawal is executed with little strategic foresight or military coordination. In the absence of a phased or systematic process, critical enablers are removed abruptly. US commanders exit NATO headquarters, joint exercises are suspended mid-operation, and US civilian officials in Brussels disengage entirely. The result is widespread confusion and operational disruption across the alliance, compromising both deterrence and operational coherence.

Although the exact sequence of withdrawals is unpredictable in this context, temporary reinforcements deployed in 2022 and rotational forces are the first to receive redeployment orders. Planned future rotations are indefinitely postponed, leaving NATO's eastern flank exposed and uncertain. Soon after, permanently stationed US forces begin to depart. Germany, held largely responsible by the administration for the deterioration in transatlantic relations, is targeted first. The 2nd Cavalry Regiment, the 12th Combat Aviation Brigade, and subordinate units of the 10th Army Air and Missile Defense Command are ordered to return to the US. Some command-and-control elements and the Spangdahlem military hospital may remain temporarily, but their future status is uncertain.

Naval forces are also drawn down. Surface combatants, including those with air defence capabilities, withdraw from European ports and redeploy either to the continental United States (CONUS) or to other combatant commands.[43] Attack submarines are pulled back from forward positions to protect US surface fleets and strategic ballistic missile submarines in operation elsewhere.

In the air domain, the administration cancels strategic deterrence operations in Europe, halting bomber task force deployments. Bombers are grounded in the US or redirected to focus on the Western Hemisphere. Tactical air units, especially those in Germany and the UK, are ordered home. Personnel guarding US nuclear weapons storage sites remain for now, but even these assets may eventually be reconsidered.

The chaotic and militarily incoherent nature of these withdrawals creates deep uncertainty surrounding NATO's conventional and nuclear deterrence posture. The US provides Europe with critical command and control, ISR, logistics, and experienced operational planners. These are capabilities without which European allies cannot effectively plan or conduct large-scale ground operations or complex air missions. As US assets are removed, anxiety surges across European capitals. Some governments declare national emergencies to accelerate defence investments, while others begin to hedge their bets, seeking bilateral arrangements with both the US and Russia to secure their interests. The result is growing fragmentation across the continent.

The war in Ukraine is profoundly affected. With US support diminishing and intra-European coordination in disarray, Ukraine struggles to sustain military and political momentum. Arms deliveries slow, intelligence-sharing becomes unreliable, and the strategic narrative shifts from deterrence to damage control. Sensing an opportunity, Moscow intensifies its efforts on the battlefield, exploiting the strategic disunity among Western powers before they can recover or reorganise.

[43] This scenario is driven more by political symbolism than military logic, meaning that the destroyers and air defence systems may be withdrawn regardless of the impact on the US's ability to defend against possible Iranian ballistic missile strikes.

US role in the world: Abrupt disengagement and strategic drift

In this scenario, the United States adopts a posture of abrupt disengagement from its traditional international role, driven by a powerful coalition of Restrainers, economic nationalists, and populist factions. Unlike earlier forms of retrenchment that sought strategic consolidation or burden-shifting, this shift is chaotic and politically motivated, reflecting a domestic agenda more than a coherent global strategy.

The administration redefines the US global role through the lens of national sovereignty, economic protectionism, and cultural confrontation. It rejects multilateralism and downplays the value of alliances, institutions, and international norms. Major global commitments are portrayed as exploitative or obsolete, and the administration expresses open disdain for what it views as "globalist entanglements." Foreign policy becomes increasingly personalised, reactive, and transactional, conducted through high-profile summits, provocative media statements, and unilateral moves designed to showcase American independence rather than reinforce global order.

There is no guiding doctrine or consistent prioritisation of interests. The collapse of traditional boundaries between economics, security, and ideology creates a fragmented approach to foreign policy. Strategic communications from the White House are often contradictory—simultaneously signalling disengagement and demands for concessions, threatening allies while courting adversaries, and calling for peace while escalating economic conflicts.

Military posture shifts follow political symbolism rather than operational logic. US forces are pulled back from key theatres, including Europe and parts of the Indo-Pacific, without coordination or long-term planning. These moves are announced with minimal notice, undermining trust among allies and sparking crises of confidence across regional security architectures.

In the absence of a clear alternative vision for global order, the US role becomes defined by unpredictability and disengagement. Partners are forced to hedge or act autonomously, adversaries exploit perceived openings, and multilateral institutions lose momentum without American leadership. The result is not a multipolar equilibrium but growing disorder and fragmentation in international politics.

While some factions within the administration continue to view China as the primary strategic rival, the overarching US posture is no longer shaped by a coherent, long-term rivalry framework. Instead, domestic political imperatives—electoral calculations, media narratives, and ideological loyalty—dictate abrupt shifts in tone and policy. In its effort to reorient its domestic agenda and renegotiate the US role in the world, the United States ceases to be a stabilising force and instead becomes a source of global uncertainty.

Indicators

The following developments across key areas may serve as indicators that the "Abandonment" scenario is becoming more or less plausible:

External factors: US–allies and adversaries

- **US–Russia relations**: This scenario becomes more plausible if the administration deprioritises the Russia–Ukraine war, framing it as a regional conflict rather than a core US interest. Indicators include the removal of, or at least reductions or delays in, military aid to Ukraine, diplomatic disengagement from peace efforts, and public rhetoric blaming all parties for prolonging the war. A Trump–Putin summit or gestures towards sanctions relief without strategic reciprocity would further strengthen this trajectory. Conversely, sustained US diplomatic engagement or military support for Ukraine would reduce the scenario's plausibility.
- **US–China relations**: The scenario is reinforced by growing contradictions in US China policy: aggressive rhetoric from ideological hardliners coupled with force reductions and strategic ambiguity in Asia. Public statements questioning US commitments to Taiwan, threats to withdraw troops from key allies, and breakdowns in trade negotiations with Indo-Pacific partners would signal increasing risk. A clear and

coherent strategy, backed by force posture investments and allied coordination, would make the scenario less likely.

- **US–Europe relations**: A sharp deterioration in transatlantic relations, especially involving public denunciations of NATO or threats to withdraw forces, strengthens this scenario. Indicators include sudden US troop drawdowns without allied consultation, suspension of joint exercises, and breakdowns in US–EU trade talks. Escalating political tensions, particularly US endorsement of European opposition parties or reciprocal accusations of democratic backsliding, would heighten the risk. Renewed diplomatic coordination or reaffirmations of Article 5 would counter these trends.

Internal factors: US policy and institutional dynamics

- **Bureaucratic and institutional behaviour:** The scenario becomes more plausible if key national security institutions (e.g., DoD, State, NSC) are sidelined or overridden in major foreign policy decisions. Indicators include abrupt policy announcements that bypass normal interagency processes, leadership changes replacing career officials with loyalists, and reduced engagement in strategic planning. If institutional guardrails reassert influence—evidenced by pushback against impulsive decisions or efforts to moderate rhetoric—the scenario becomes less likely.
- **Internal policy orientation:** The dominance of Restrainers, economic nationalists, and populist voices within the administration increases the plausibility of this scenario. A rhetorical and policy shift towards unilateralism, sovereignty, and anti-globalist themes, at the expense of alliance politics, would reinforce this path. Conversely, if primacist or traditional realist perspectives regain traction, especially with congressional or internal support, the retrenchment may become more measured, reducing the likelihood of disorderly outcomes.
- **Presidential communication and staffing patterns:** Frequent, improvisational foreign policy pronouncements, especially via social media or rallies, suggest growing detachment from formal diplomatic processes. Appointments of ideologically extreme or inexperienced individuals to senior positions, particularly in defence and diplomacy, further signal an erosion of strategic coherence. Alternatively, a shift towards institutional discipline in messaging and personnel choices would weaken the scenario's trajectory.
- **Congressional oversight trends:** Reduced congressional checks on executive foreign policy, such as failed attempts to constrain troop withdrawals or low oversight activity, make this scenario more likely. Conversely, strong bipartisan resistance, including legislative efforts to limit executive authority over NATO or forward deployments, would act as a moderating force.
- **Defence budget allocations by theatre:** A rapid and uncoordinated shift in defence funding away from Europe and parts of the Indo-Pacific, particularly if driven by political expediency rather than strategy, would reinforce this scenario. Sudden cuts to programmes supporting allied integration (e.g., rotational deployments, infrastructure, joint exercises) are key signals. Continued or increased funding for forward posture and allied operations would indicate a departure from disorderly retrenchment.

4 Conclusions and Implications for Europe

This report set out with the aim of supporting policymakers, primarily in European NATO countries, in thinking more clearly about what a reduced US engagement and military presence in Europe might look like during President Trump's second term, and how such a scenario could unfold. To that end, the study is guided by the question:

- *What plausible and relevant scenarios exist for the United States' security and defence engagement in Europe during the second Trump administration's tenure, 2025–2029?*

In one important step for deriving the scenarios, the second chapter describes and analyses the Trump administration's policy process, the relevant factions shaping the administration's foreign and security policy, and the US's institutional constraints. The strategic factions—the Primacists, Prioritisers, and Restrainers—are considered the most important for shaping the US's engagement in Europe. Given the Trump administration's coalition-based character, the chapter also outlines the relevant ideological and economic factions that may contribute to shaping the administration's direction.

The study uses the scenarios presented in the third chapter as a structured tool for anticipating and preparing for different strategic environments. The four scenarios developed—Policy Drift, Bilateralisation, Asia First, and Abandonment—are not predictions or forecasts, but analytically grounded possibilities. They are assessed as both *plausible*, in that they reflect observable political trends and historical patterns, and *relevant*, in that they matter strategically for European security and transatlantic relations.

Each scenario explores a distinct pathway for US engagement in Europe, shaped by the evolving dynamics of great power competition, domestic US politics, and the administration's strategic priorities. While none anticipates an increase in US military presence on the continent, they differ markedly in the scope, pace, and character of retrenchment, ranging from gradual institutional erosion to a more abrupt pivot towards other regions or priorities.

Taken together, the scenarios offer a framework for stress-testing European assumptions and strategic plans under varying conditions. They are designed to encourage strategic foresight, foster institutional preparedness, and enable more informed decision-making.

This final chapter summarises the scenarios, and distils the core strategic implications for Europe of each scenario. It focuses on the risks posed by reduced US engagement, and suggests policy measures that European leaders may consider in response.

4.1 Policy Drift: Managing gradual change amid uncertainty

In the Policy Drift scenario, the US maintains a broadly consistent military presence in Europe, retaining essential capabilities such as NATO command and control, advanced ISR platforms, strategic logistics, and experienced operational planners. However, this continuity exists alongside an unmistakable US strategic rebalancing towards the Indo-Pacific, increasing tension between US global priorities and European security needs.

While institutional and bureaucratic constraints in Washington slow the pace of this rebalancing, they do not prevent it. The resulting ambiguity leaves European defence planning exposed to uncertainty about the timing, scale, and permanence of future US reductions. In this environment, Europe continues to rely on American enablers for deterrence and operational readiness, even as high-end capabilities, such as missile defence and joint expeditionary support, may be gradually reallocated or downsized.

This evolving reality presents European policymakers with a core dilemma: whether to accelerate efforts to build greater strategic autonomy as a hedge against future US retrenchment, or to deepen defence cooperation within NATO to preserve close alignment with US leadership. In practice, the most viable path will likely involve a mix of these approaches: *complementing* US forces to reinforce interoperability and cohesion, *compensating* for emerging capability gaps in areas such as logistics, ISR, and cyber, and, where necessary, *replacing* key American functions in domains where disengagement is already underway or strategically likely.

These choices are complicated by Europe's limited experience in planning and executing large-scale ground operations and complex air campaigns without US leadership. Addressing this shortfall will require not just greater investment, but also a cultural and institutional shift in how European armed forces approach operational planning and command structures.

Strategic outlook

The Policy Drift scenario offers Europe a window of opportunity, which may be finite, to recalibrate its defence posture, while US engagement remains strong. Entirely relying on current American support without adaptation risks future capability gaps and strategic stagnation.

By investing in capabilities that complement NATO operations, compensating for evolving gaps, and replacing critical US functions where necessary, Europe can build a more balanced, resilient, and autonomous security architecture. This path preserves alliance cohesion while equipping Europe to manage the long-term consequences of geopolitical realignment with greater strategic confidence.

4.2 Bilateralisation: Fragmentation of US engagement

In the Bilateralisation scenario, the US favours ad hoc, interest-driven bilateral and minilateral defence relationships over NATO and multilateral arrangements. This approach reflects both growing scepticism in Washington towards collective defence commitments and a preference for more transactional security arrangements with selected European partners. While the US remains militarily engaged in Europe, its involvement becomes increasingly uneven, concentrated in states seen as capable, compliant, or strategically vital, and scaled back elsewhere.

The erosion of NATO as the central organising mechanism for collective and continental defence creates significant asymmetries across Europe. Some countries receive privileged access to US military cooperation, technology, and force posture, while others are left to manage growing capability shortfalls. Alliance cohesion suffers, and the European defence landscape becomes more fragmented as states respond by either doubling down on bilateral ties, seeking European alternatives, or hedging between both.

For European policymakers, this fragmented reality demands not only greater strategic autonomy but also a recalibrated approach to cooperation. A key possible consequence could be the emergence of a multi-tier security order, where some NATO members are more protected than others. As Scenario 2 indicated, it is possible to imagine the US favouring allies whom the administration considers are contributing their fair share to the defence burden. Northern and Eastern European states could emerge as frontrunners to this type of preferential treatment, a division resembling "new" versus "old" Europe, the earlier concept used by the George W. Bush administration. To counteract this, one possible remedy for Europe is to attempt to reinforce collective capabilities while reducing structural dependencies on selective US engagement.

Some of the capability priorities for Europe in this scenario would likely be interoperable command and control; increased intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capability; and strengthened logistics.

Strategic outlook

The Bilateralisation scenario would mark a departure from the predictability of NATO's collective structures, partly replacing them with selective and transactional US partnerships. If unaddressed, this trend could entrench division, reduce strategic solidarity, and leave parts of Europe vulnerable.

To counteract this fragmentation, European leaders may consider strengthening collective capabilities that both complement remaining US ties, and reduce dependence on US guarantees. Through a coordinated mix of *complementarity*, *compensation*, and *replacement*, tailored to a multipolar defence landscape, Europe can prevent the erosion of its strategic coherence and uphold the principle of collective security, even as institutional unity falters.

4.3 Asia First: Abrupt strategic reprioritisation

In the Asia First scenario, the US accelerates its strategic shift towards the Indo-Pacific in response to intensifying competition with China. This shift is not merely rhetorical or incremental; it is operationalised through redeployment of US forces, budgetary reallocation, and a downgrading of the European theatre in US defence planning. The result is a visible and significant reduction of US military presence and enabler functions in Europe.

This pivot leaves a vacuum in key domains that have long underpinned NATO's deterrent posture: high-end ISR, integrated air and missile defence, advanced logistics, and scalable expeditionary capabilities. While Washington maintains diplomatic commitments to NATO, its practical ability and willingness to reinforce Europe in a crisis becomes constrained.

For Europe, this scenario represents a stress test of its ability to defend itself without large-scale and guaranteed US backing. The urgency to fill capability gaps, rebalance strategic dependencies, and act autonomously becomes paramount. Time becomes the scarcest resource, and hesitation carries significant risk.

Unlike the Policy Drift or Bilateralisation scenarios, Asia First begets a more immediate and transformative European response. With the US deprioritising Europe in both posture and planning, European governments face a wartime-level imperative to reconstitute critical capabilities at speed and scale.

Some of the capability priorities for Europe in this scenario would be replacing and compensating for reduced US engagement in air and missile defence, ISR capabilities, and strategic and tactical mobility infrastructure and systems.

Strategic outlook

Asia First presents a disruptive yet managed transition in Europe's security environment. As Washington prioritises the Indo-Pacific, the US begins a deliberate and coordinated drawdown of high-end military capabilities from Europe. While the transatlantic alliance remains politically intact, the operational and conventional burden increasingly shifts to European allies.

This scenario does not mean abandonment, but it does signal the end of *automatic* US dominance in European defence planning. American disengagement is communicated and phased, but the trajectory is clear: Europe must assume a far greater share of responsibility for deterrence, readiness, and crisis response.

For European leaders, this represents both a challenge and an opportunity. With time and political alignment, Europe can shape a future-oriented defence ecosystem that is capable of autonomous planning and capable contributions to collective security. This will require

more than incremental adaptation. It likely demands a cultural and institutional transformation: higher defence investment, deeper integration, and bolder leadership.

By *replacing* critical US functions where drawdowns are occurring, *compensating* for capacity gaps in key enablers, and maintaining *targeted complementarity* in remaining joint areas, Europe can construct a credible and more strategically autonomous posture. This approach preserves NATO cohesion while preparing the continent to operate more independently in an increasingly contested and multipolar world.

4.4 Abandonment: Strategic dislocation

In the Abandonment scenario, a sharp political rupture in the US, driven by a restraint-dominated policy, domestic upheaval, or a populist administration, results in a formal or *de facto* US withdrawal from NATO and a rapid drawdown of military presence in Europe. Defence guarantees are suspended, transatlantic institutions hollow out, and bilateral military cooperation diminishes or ceases.

This scenario represents a collapse of the foundational assumptions of European security, not merely a shift in emphasis or posture. The US no longer acts as Europe's ultimate security guarantor. European capitals would need to absorb the full strategic, financial, and operational burden of continental defence, without transitional support or continuity planning from Washington.

The implications are profound. Nuclear deterrence, theatre-level defence integration, and crisis management mechanisms all fracture simultaneously. Europe is left to rebuild its security architecture under conditions of strategic dislocation, time pressure, and political volatility.

Abandonment forces Europe into a total strategic reset. With no US forces, coordination, or commitments to complement or compensate, Europe must undertake wholesale replacement of critical deterrent and warfighting functions. There is no shared transatlantic infrastructure to fall back on; only the capabilities and cohesion European states can generate themselves.

The capability requirements for Europe in the Abandonment scenario would be immense. European countries would have to replace many, if not all, of the assets that the US currently provides, most prominently in the nuclear domain. One or several European countries could attempt to acquire independent nuclear deterrents.

Strategic outlook

Abandonment is the most destabilising and dangerous scenario for Europe. It marks the end of the post-1945 transatlantic order and requires Europe to assume full responsibility for its defence under conditions of high risk and compressed timelines.

There is no substitute for US power, but there must be a substitute for US dependence. If Europe fails to act decisively, adversaries will exploit the vacuum. If Europe succeeds, it may emerge as a much stronger geopolitical actor.

This transformation requires massive investments, political consolidation, and a fundamental shift in European strategic culture. Several ways may exist to accomplish this: multilaterally within the EU, possibly bilaterally with European great powers, regionally, or between coalitions of the willing. The alternative is drift, vulnerability, and the possible unravelling of peace on the continent. In the absence of the United States, Europe must become the architect and guarantor of its own security.

4.5 Final thoughts

This report outlines a set of analytically grounded scenarios. None should be interpreted as a prediction or an inevitability; rather, they represent plausible and relevant possibilities. Elements from different scenarios may, in practice, converge to form new and unforeseen trajectories. The course of the transatlantic relationship in the coming years will be shaped by a series of decisions taken by influential actors, each capable of altering its direction.

Politics and strategy remain the art of the possible, yet the boundaries of the possible are often difficult to discern.[44] This report seeks to illuminate those boundaries; whether it succeeds in doing so is for the reader to judge. What is certain, however, is that avoiding the most perilous outcomes for Western deterrence and defence, and seizing opportunities to create a more stable and secure future, will require of those in power a combination of clear judgment, sustained strategic vision, and the flexibility to adapt to evolving circumstances.

[44] Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox and Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 22.

Contributors

Albin Aronsson is Deputy Programme Manager for NOTS and a Researcher in FOI's Department for International Security Policy. He focuses on politico-military affairs concerning the United States and NATO. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from Uppsala University, and a Master's degree in War Studies from King's College London.

Björn Ottosson is Programme Manager for NOTS and a Senior Researcher in FOI's Department for International Security Policy, focusing primarily on US foreign, security, and defence policy, and transatlantic relations. He holds a PhD in Political Science from Stockholm University.

For many Europeans, the term “shock and awe” aptly captures the opening months of President Trump’s second term. While some of his priorities were anticipated, few were prepared for the tidal wave of presidential directives and announcements, reflecting a Trump who appears far less constrained than in his first term.

The Trump administration is a coalition of diverse and often conflicting factions, each holding starkly different visions for U.S. domestic and international policy. When combined with the President’s personal style and decision-making process, this creates profound unpredictability regarding the future direction of U.S. policy.

In light of this uncertainty, this report offers a comprehensive background to better understand the dynamics at play. It then explores four plausible and relevant scenarios for the United States’ security engagement in Europe during Trump’s current term, helping policymakers, especially in European NATO countries, navigate a complex and uncertain landscape.

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