Andrew Goodhart

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AMERIŠKI PRITISK NA NATO: IZDAJA PRIJATELJEV ALI VZPOSTAVITEV EKIPE?

U.S. PRESSURE ON NATO: BETRAYING FRIENDS OR BUILDING UP A TEAM?

Povzetek Druga Trumpova vlada je pogosto označena kot uničevalka liberalnega mednarodnega reda. Kljub temu ZDA na področju Nata lahko pričakujejo okrepitev zavezništva. Dva trenda ustvarjata priložnost za oblikovanje močnejšega in bolj enakopravnega zavezništva. Prvič, ZDA morajo preusmeriti vire proti Vzhodni Aziji, kar zmanjšuje njihovo neposredno ukrepanje v Evropi. Drugič, ruski revanšizem ustvarja negotovost v evropskih prestolnicah, ne da bi ogrožal najpomembnejše ameriške varnostne interese. Ti dejavniki skupaj spodbujajo politično voljo za povečanje evropskih obrambnih izdatkov in rešitev dolgoletnega nerešenega vprašanja prelaganja odgovornosti v Natu.

Ključne besede ***Nato, hierarhija, hegemonija, javno dobro, Donald Trump.***

Abstract The second Trump administration is widely seen as destructive of the liberal international order and, indeed, many of its actions are. On NATO, however, the United States may be poised to strengthen the alliance in unexpected ways. Two trends create an opportunity for NATO to be a stronger alliance of more equal powers. First, the United States needs to shift resources to East Asia, creating incentives to do less in Europe. Second, Russian revanchism is creating insecurity in European capitals without threatening core U.S. security interests. Combined, these two trends are creating political will to increase European defense spending and break NATO's long-standing problem with buck-passing.

Key words ***NATO, hierarchy, hegemony, public goods, Donald Trump.***

Introduction

Donald Trump is less than a year into his second term, and administration officials have already taken aim at liberal American leadership of the international system. They have shuttered the U.S. Agency for International Development, gutted aid budgets, and rejected the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, calling them "inconsistent with U.S. sovereignty and adverse to the rights and interests of Americans" (Heartney, 2025). The United States has also withdrawn from international agreements and institutions, including the Paris Climate Agreement, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), and the World Health Organization (WHO). Secretary of State Marco Rubio has called the "post-war global order … not just obsolete" but "a weapon being used against us" (Rubio, 2025). Although Republican and Democratic administrations often differ in their enthusiasm for international organizations, President Trump seems to be distancing the United States from the liberal international order more aggressively than even his Republican predecessors.

This move is puzzling for academics and policy analysts, who see the liberal international order as a means not just of promoting high ideals, but of extending U.S. power. The conventional wisdom is that the United States established the current order after the Second World War as a tool to secure post-war peace and institutionalize U.S. leadership. By binding itself to international institutions, the United States could limit its own returns to power and make its leadership acceptable to others. The payoff for the United States was to be the enhanced durability of its privileged position in the system (Ikenberry, 2001). Current policy seems to be sending the opposite message about U.S. leadership, taking the United States "from indispensable to insufferable" (Schake, 2025, 12). The conventional wisdom is a fear that "(b)ecause the U.S. is alienating its allies … it could end up with less influence, potentially with less order" (Fadel, Obed, 2025). This shift in U.S. policy also comes at a time when the United States has a profound need for the contributions of its allies and partners to achieve its objectives. As Campbell and Doshi point out, it may not be possible for the United States to win a geopolitical competition with China unless it works closely with allied states; it simply lacks the requisite scale on its own. They note that "despite a tendency to dismiss Europe as economically stagnant, it outproduces the United States in steel, cars, ships, and civil aircraft; claims a greater share of global manufacturing; and has a manufacturing workforce three times the size of that of the United States" (2025).

This paper addresses the Trump administration's approach to the NATO allies, and explains why the United States is injecting friction into such a strategically important relationship. The United States has long harbored frustration with low levels of European defense spending, but may finally be forcing the issue for two reasons. First, the U.S. security establishment has concluded that all other geopolitical challenges pale in comparison with the one posed by a powerful, growing, and assertive China. The United States needs to shift its focus to address the possibility of Chinese aggression. Second, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has galvanized European public

opinion in support of Ukraine (European Parliamentary Research Service, ND), but it poses a comparatively low risk to the United States, making it easier for the United States to buck-pass to the European members of NATO. In the context of a highly uneven defense alliance, this buck-passing has the effect of somewhat rebalancing alliance contributions.

Security within an alliance can be usefully understood as a public good, and its production suffers from many of the same problems that afflict the production of other public goods. Foremost among these is the challenge of free riding. Indeed, NATO members have engaged in chronic under-investment in military capabilities, instead passing the buck to the United States. During the Cold War, the strength of the American interest in opposing Russian aggression meant that the United States was willing to bear a disproportionate share of the defense burden in Europe. Threats to withdraw the U.S. defense commitment were frightening enough to be useful as an occasional political cudgel, but they were not credible enough to force major increases in European defense spending.[1] However, with Russia bogged down in Ukraine, the costs of that war rising, and the United States focused on China, these dynamics have flipped. The risk to core U.S. interests in Europe (avoiding a hostile Eurasian hegemon and sustaining economic ties with Europe) is low, but European publics and leaders feel a more acute threat. The costs associated with maintaining European security are also rising. To date, the United States has spent over $174 billion on the war in Ukraine (U.S. Congress, 2024). Perhaps this spending has an indirect deterrent effect on China, but it is difficult to square that financial outlay with the chronic underinvestment in the capabilities (e.g. shipbuilding) which are necessary to successfully deter Chinese aggression. The result is a serious Lippmann Gap.[2] This creates powerful incentives for the United States to reduce its defense burden in Europe to help close that gap. Committing less to NATO will, as opponents argue, have a negative effect on the legitimacy of U.S. leadership, but NATO is likely to emerge as a stronger and more equal alliance as a result.[3] The United States is facing a tradeoff between hard power and soft – and it is opting for the former.

1 HOW WE GOT HERE

Since its establishment in 1949, NATO has extended a U.S. security umbrella to protect European allies from dual security threats: the Soviet Union and each other. As prominent defenders of the liberal international order have argued, the United States' "core alliance commitments … deter states with aspirations to

[1] *Under President Kennedy, the United States also sought to ensure American dominance in Europe. This represented a break with President Eisenhower, who sought to turn Europe into a "third force." See Schuessler and Shifrinson (2019).*

[2] *For more on this Lippmann Gap, see Ford (2018).*

[3] *This logic is consistent with that of Lake, who noted that an increase in the degree of hierarchy within a security relationship will tend to decrease the amount of effort the subordinate states expend on producing security (2007, 49). In the case of NATO, the United States would contribute less and produce a more equal alliance as other NATO members increase their respective shares.*

regional hegemony from contemplating expansion and make its partners more secure, reducing their incentive to adopt solutions to their security problems that threaten others and thus stoke security dilemmas" (Brooks et al., 2012, 34). This is consistent with scholarly work on alliances that treats them as multi-purpose tools. Although they usually have a capability aggregation function in which states pool their resources against external threats, alliances also "bind" or "tether" states to potential adversaries *within* an alliance (Schroeder, 1976; Weitsman 2003). The oft quoted (and perhaps apocryphal) statement from Lord Ismay put it most memorably: NATO was meant to "keep the Russians' out, the Americans in, and the Germans down". By protecting Western Europe from Soviet invasion and preventing the emergence of a German military that could threaten its neighbors, a U.S.-led NATO alliance was able to stave off security threats from outside Western Europe as well as from within.

Treating NATO as a security umbrella which could deter Russia and mitigate intra-European security dilemmas preserved the centrality of American power in the post-war order. It also meant that the United States bore a disproportionate share of the burden of defending Western Europe. This was more controversial than the contemporary political discourse would suggest. Hedley Bull wrote that "The commitments which the United States took on in 1949 were at that time widely regarded in America as temporary; the notion was that once the European allies were strong enough to stand on their own feet the time would be ripe for some measure of American disengagement…" (1964, 9). However, European states did not develop sufficiently strong and coordinated military power to defend themselves, and Trachtenberg has explained that the fear of Germany possessing nuclear weapons meant that country would lack the means to deter Soviet attacks on its own; it needed protection from other alliance members (Trachtenberg, 1999, 146). Despite its reservations, the United States would shoulder the lion's share of that collective defense burden, because of its interest in preventing the Soviet Union from dominating Europe.

Since the Cold War ended, American policymakers have maintained that defensive commitment and expanded it to new NATO members for a mix of geostrategic and ideological reasons. Expansion allowed the United States to consolidate its gains after the Soviet Union collapsed, and it promoted liberal political and economic developments in erstwhile communist countries. Proponents dismissed arguments that these moves were likely to provoke Russia and "impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking", arguing instead that Russia was likely to accommodate itself to the new reality (Kennan, cited in Talbot, 2002, 231-232). Advocates of expansion also sometimes shifted from strategic arguments to normative ones, emphasizing "the sovereign right of each state to freely seek its own security arrangements, to belong or not to belong to international organisations [sic], including treaties of alliance" (NATO, 1995). Membership of NATO was viewed as the right of former Soviet bloc states, and expansion seemed to offer the prospect of an enlarged liberal community with little risk of conflict.

The broader set of liberal institutions which constituted a regional order during the Cold War expended their geographic reach, as well as their reach into domestic societies, after the Soviet Union collapsed. Börzel and Zürn have argued that efforts to build a postnational liberal order have generated considerable international opposition (2021). However, this expanded liberal community was viewed as a way to help assuage the security concerns of other great powers and turn them into "responsible stakeholders". Enmeshing both smaller states and possible great power rivals into liberal international institutions was thought to cultivate their development at home and peaceful behavior abroad. In the heady post-Cold War period, in which arguments about the end of history were popular, policymakers focused on *managing* the rise of other great powers more than *preventing* their rise. If powerful states could be made to be economically and politically liberal, perhaps competition and conflict could be avoided.

Some analysts and policymakers have argued that the United States never had such high expectations for engagement, so it cannot be viewed as a failure for not meeting them. However, as Aaron Friedberg has argued, U.S. policymakers frequently justified engagement as a tool for liberalizing China's economic and political systems (2022, Ch. 1-2). Efforts to use international institutions to bind adversaries into the system and influence their behavior were also not limited to China. The NATO Partnership Peace (which Russia joined in 1994) and the NATO-Russia Council (which was established in 2002) were efforts to institutionalize a fraught relationship with Russia. However, the post-Cold War tasks of managing relations with China and Russia were fundamentally different. Russia was a collapsing power, while China was a rising one. It is the failure of U.S.-China policy which has created the demand on U.S. resources that is driving the re-evaluation of U.S. policy toward NATO.

The foreign policy consensus has now shifted decisively. Having concluded that Russia and China both have aggressive designs on their neighbors (and on American influence), American policy has turned sharply against engagement. Instead, the foreign policy establishments of both major American political parties have shifted toward an emphasis on military competition, and they are grasping for the power to win it. President Trump's National Security Strategy during his first administration described two decades of American foreign policy that assumed "engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part," Trump argued, "this premise turned out to be false" (2017). It was a characteristically blunt assessment from Trump, but it is one that is shared across the political aisle. Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner are both prominent Democrats and served as senior officials in the Biden administration. They wrote that "As China joined multilateral institutions, U.S. policymakers hoped that it would learn to play by the rules and soon begin to contribute to their upkeep", but "(d)iplomatic and commercial engagement have not brought political and economic openness" or "dissuaded China from trying to build a world-class military of its own" (2018). It is striking that these two future Biden administration officials would frame the

situation in terms so similar to the terms used in Trump's own National Security Strategy *while the first Trump term was still underway.* As prominent Democrats with aspirations to serve in the next Democratic administration, they would seem to have an incentive to differentiate their foreign policy from Trump's. However, on the failure of engagement, they sang from the same sheet of music. This is evidence of how decisively the pendulum has swung against engagement as a tool of defanging potential adversaries.

The United States did hedge against the possibility of great power revisionism (a point also made by Campbell and Ratner), but military efforts were just that: a hedge. They did not represent a military buildup in East Asia of the sophistication, scope, or scale now required to address the military threat posed by the People's Republic of China. This matters, because the need to invest greater resources in East Asia is forcing the United States to shift its focus away from Europe. The bill for maintaining security in the United States' priority region is coming due. When the United States believed that conflict in Europe was unlikely (or if one assumed that the United States would defend NATO members but not states on the NATO periphery such as Ukraine), then the United States could afford to maintain and extend such alliance commitments. Indeed, it extended such commitments to 29 NATO states (31 if one includes the accession of Finland and Sweden after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine) without much fear that it would need to bring large military and economic resources to bear against Russia. That country's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the West's decision to help Ukraine defend itself have strained the U.S ability to continue providing a security umbrella in Europe without taking unacceptable risk elsewhere.

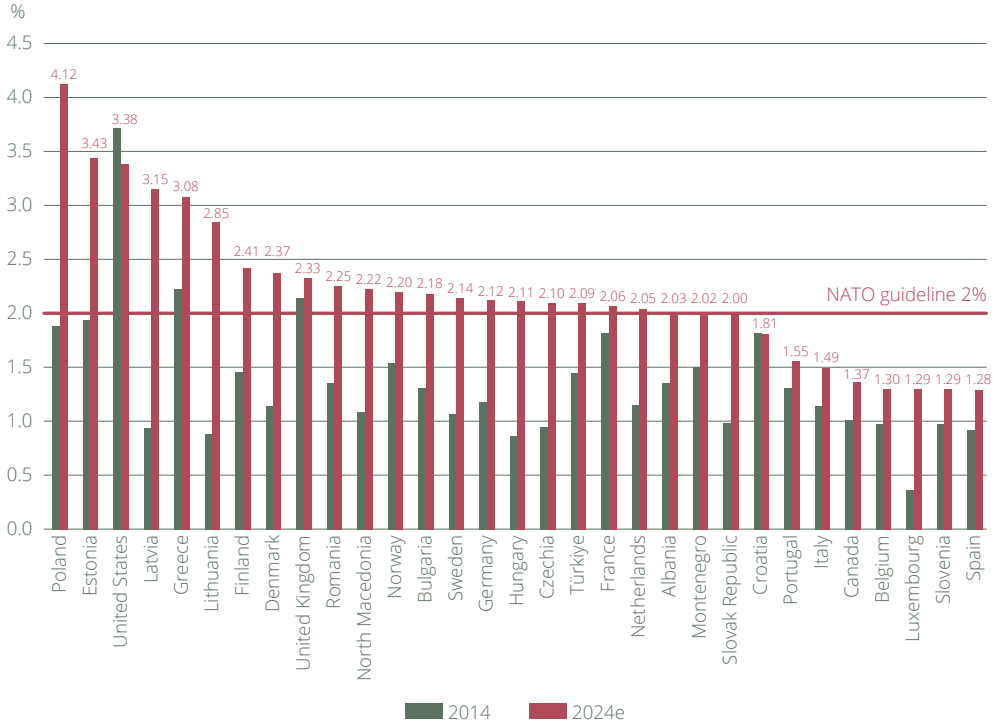
Tracing the shift in U.S. foreign policy thinking from an engagement-centric approach to a material power-based approach is not just intellectual score settling. It is also important for understanding the United States' increased pressure on other members of NATO. Decision-makers are seeking to shift burden sharing in lower priority theaters to free up resources for a conflict with China that the United States could quite plausibly lose. It is this increased need for military capabilities in East Asia that explains the United States' willingness to coerce NATO allies to field greater capabilities. It is therefore worth highlighting the current state of NATO defense spending.

2 NATO DEFENSE SPENDING

The United States accounts for the vast majority of military spending within NATO. In 2022, the United States spent over 700 billion dollars, more than twice as much as the rest of NATO. Some of that disparity is the result of the comparatively larger size of the U.S. economy and the United States' broader global commitments, but only seven NATO members spent above 2% of their gross domestic product on defense in 2022. That number improved to 10 NATO members in 2023 and then spiked to 23 in 2024. Poland spent the highest percent of its GDP (4.12), followed by Estonia (3.43), the United States (3.38), Latvia (3.15), Greece (3.08), and Lithuania (2.85).

The following table shows the change in NATO defense spending between 2014 and 2024.

Graph 1: Defence expenditure as a share of GDP (%). Based on 2015 prices and exchange rates) **Source:** NATO (2024)



Note: Figures for 2024 are estimates.

These improvements in NATO defense spending are worth celebrating. They help NATO bring greater capabilities to bear – capabilities that are being used now to help Ukraine defend itself. However, as Eliot Cohen has pointed out, some European states are "…robust on paper, (but) have been cutting muscle far more than fat from their defense budgets for decades" (2016, 212). A short period of higher spending is an important political step, but it does not erase years of chronic under-investment. Indeed, NATO continues to face important gaps, including most visibly in munitions shortfalls. This is reinforcing the need for even greater defense spending beyond 2% of GDP. Indeed, that was established as the minimum target for defense spending, not an ideal spending level, a point that NATO members confirmed in 2023 (Monghan et al., 2024). This is not surprising, given that 2% defense spending was identified as a peacetime goal, and NATO members have been missing it for years. This has produced persistent shortfalls in the capabilities that European states are trying to rebuild while they are in the midst of a proxy war in Ukraine.

The need to be able to handle contingencies such as Ukraine without a central role for the United States further intensifies the pressure for European states to field capable military forces. This pressure is also not entirely new, and calls for European states to address European problems have emerged before (e.g. after U.S. led interventions in the Balkans). Scholars argued then that removing the U.S. security umbrella from Europe would lead Europeans to successfully balance against such threats (Gholz et al., 1997, 16). Although isolationists advocate a U.S. pullback from Europe, even prominent defenders of NATO make similar arguments. For example, Goldgeier notes that "Europe should assume more of the burden for its defense. And the United States does not have to run everything, as it seemingly sought to do at the end of the Cold War" (in Snyder et al., 2025).

In recognition of NATO's shortfalls and the need for allies to field additional military force, the alliance agreed this year to a new 5% spending target (NATO, 2025a). These changes are partly a reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, but it is impossible to ignore the role of the Trump administration in pushing for greater spending – even at the risk of destroying alliance solidarity. While still a presidential candidate, Trump answered a question about the U.S. defense commitment this way: "You didn't pay? You're delinquent? No I would not protect you. In fact, I would encourage them (Russia) to do whatever the hell they want. You gotta pay. You gotta pay your bills" (Colvin, 2024).

President Trump's threats and Secretary Rubio's rejection of the liberal international order suggest that the administration aims to move beyond liberal ordering and hegemonic security provision to something more transactional, more balanced (in terms of the level of contributions), or both. It is a vision that is deeply threatening, not just to NATO states who have enjoyed low-cost U.S. protection, but also to those Americans who are invested in the current version of the liberal international order. Indeed, the reaction from the foreign policy community has been swift. Foreign Affairs recently devoted an entire issue to the subject, with the title "Who Needs Allies" suggesting that the United States was deciding to go it alone. A common theme was that the United States is neglecting the very tool that helped it win the Cold War and is making itself less secure in the process. The leading proponent of soft power described the Trump administration's posture toward allies as a self-defeating move in which the United States was failing to maximize its own power: "(p)ower has three dimensions, and by ignoring attraction, Trump is neglecting a key source of American strength" (Keohane, Nye 2025, 73). American policy, in this reading, exhibits an a-strategic and self-defeating antipathy toward its allies which will ultimately doom U.S. strategic competitiveness.

There is an important kernel of truth in this argument. The United States really is leaning into a focus on hard power and interacting in a coercive and offensive way with its allies. There is also a distinct risk that the United States will overplay its hand. Pete Hegseth, who was then the U.S. Secretary of Defense, said in February that "the U.S. would continue to be a strong NATO partner … But to endure for the future,

partners must do far more for Europe's defense" (Lopez, 2025). The United States may wish to maintain a strong alliance with European states taking on more of the collective burden, but defection is possible by European states as well. For example, Italy joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2019, which is understood to be a tool of Chinese overseas influence.[4] International hierarchy is sometimes framed as a kind of market transaction in which powerful states offer protection and other benefits to weaker states in exchange for their political support (Lake, 2011). If the United States is offering Europeans a less favorable set of benefits, they may seek out alternatives from China. Rather than rebalancing a (strengthened) alliance, the Trump administration may cede allies to a rival. This cost of European defection would be high, as evidenced by Campbell and Doshi's observation of the size and centrality of European economic power in the global system.

However, the risks associated with this approach only tell part of the story, and there may be a silver lining to the Trump administration's approach to NATO. If it succeeded, it would shift NATO allies from consumers of security to co-producers and increase the overall power of the alliance. Put differently, the Trump administration appears to be aiming at transitioning NATO from a hegemonic security model of alliance relations to one of capability aggregation. The result may, counter-intuitively, be an alliance that is ultimately stronger as a result. Indeed, Olson and Zeckhauser (who studied alliance politics as a collective goods problem) note the "paradoxical conclusion that a *decline in the amity, unity, and community of interest among allies need not necessarily reduce the effectiveness of an alliance*, because the decline in these alliance "virtues" produces a greater ratio of private to collective benefits. This suggests that alliances troubled by suspicions and disagreements may continue to work reasonably well" (1966, 272, italics in original). Indeed, historical precedents in which the United States used heavy-handed tactics with allies suggest that NATO relations may be less fragile than they appear. As Schuessler and Shifrinson have argued, "American alliance relations have been characterized by more uncertainty – and less restraint and reassurance – than institutionalists have cared to emphasize…NATO…is robust enough to survive President Trump's attempts at coercion" (2019, 38).

3 U.S. ALLIANCE MANAGEMENT FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Marc Trachtenberg, an eminent diplomatic historian and expert on the Cold War, similarly described President Trump's threats against NATO as "less anomalous than people seemed to think" (in Snyder et al., 2025). For example, when U.S. leaders call into question whether the United States' Article 5 commitment is truly sacred, they depart more from the post-Cold War way in which U.S. leaders have talked about NATO than from Cold War practice. Trachtenberg noted that President Eisenhower threatened to withdraw U.S. support over French intransigence in opposing the establishment of the European Defense Community in 1953 (in Snyder et al., 2025).

[4] *Italy subsequently withdrew from BRI in 2023. See: Mazzocco and Palazzi (2023).*

Similarly, Schuessler and Shifrinson describe a U.S. strategy which was, until the 1960s, focused on divesting itself of a permanent security commitment to Europe (2019). Kennedy was more committed to a permanent U.S. role in Europe, but he made similar threats (again against France) over economic issues. This pattern of dissatisfaction with allies and threats to shape their behavior repeated itself under Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Reagan (Trachtenberg, in Snyder et al., 2025).

NATO was viewed by Cold War policymakers as an instrument of statecraft aimed at shaping the international political environment, not a sacred obligation. In this context, efforts to pressure NATO allies look less like efforts to undermine the alliance and more like steps to manage costs, benefits, and mutual expectations within a hierarchical arrangement. Indeed, Brooks et al. note that the United States has considerable bargaining leverage to shape a "hegemonic bargain" with its allies (2012, 28).[5] Such a focus on bargaining sounds dissonant from a perspective that views alliances as sacred or "ironclad" and unbreakable, but the large and growing literature about hierarchy in international politics helps make sense of it. Hierarchy scholars clarify the way that large and smaller states manage their unequal relations as they pursue a mix of shared and divergent interests. For example, as mentioned previously, Lake frames international hierarchies as contractual relations in which subordinate actors cede a degree of autonomy in exchange for protection. The greater the degree of hierarchy, the less subordinate states will do to provide for their own security (2007, 2011).

Thinking of relations among NATO states as intra-hierarchy bargains helps to make sense of U.S. pressure on its allies. However, this focus on hierarchy and hegemonic bargains sits uncomfortably with the rhetoric that the United States has used during the post-Cold War period to legitimate its international position. Having emphasized the right of all states to choose their alliances (irrespective of the costs to the relations between great powers), the sovereign equality of states, and the sacredness of U.S. security commitments, it is difficult to re-negotiate that hegemonic bargain without substantial loss of legitimacy. After the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States increasingly framed its leadership in terms of a "rules based international order," because this was a useful rhetorical frame for building buy-in from other states. But this rhetoric contained the seeds of its own destruction, because the concept of an order based on rules rather than bargains is in tension with the occasional need to renegotiate relationships within a hierarchy. The United States today seeks to limit its exposure to security liabilities in Europe, because it faces a serious Lippmann Gap. This means that the United States will likely lose a degree of legitimacy for its international leadership while it puts itself on a more sustainable political footing. The next section explains how legitimacy functions and why the current strategic environment incentivizes the United States to accept a loss of legitimacy in favor of other forms of power.

[5] *Brooks et al. are skeptical of the public goods model of alliance politics, but I use it here because it helps to illuminate important tensions within the alliance over questions of burden sharing.*

4 LEGITIMACY AND ITS ROLE IN INTERNATIONAL ORDERING

Most Western treatments of legitimacy lean on Max Weber's *Economy and Society* (2019 (1921)), which argued that powerful actors achieve dominance by force and then set about building voluntary consent. The logic is about how to most efficiently maintain a dominant political position once it is attained. A political leader must expend more resources if they rely on coercion or positive inducements to maintain their power than they do if they can convince others to follow them voluntarily. Voluntary support is an extraordinarily powerful thing, and leaders draw on social traditions, charisma, and legal-rational authority to build it. Franck defined legitimacy as "a property of a rule or rule-making institution which itself exerts a pull toward compliance on those addressed normatively because those addressed believe that the rule or institution has come into being and operates in accordance with generally accepted principles" (1990, 24). A less sophisticated way of expressing this idea is that 'if people think you're good, they'll follow you'. This makes the attraction of soft power a useful asset, as Nye has emphasized (Keohane and Nye, 2025).

Indeed, the United States has sought to cloak its foreign policy choices in legitimacy by presenting itself as a defender of democracy and liberal values. President Truman's 1947 speech to the U.S. Congress famously framed the emerging Cold War as a choice between freedom and oppression. In this framing, U.S. efforts to rally NATO states to compete with the Soviet Union were less about a pragmatic assessment of shared threat than the principled defense of an indivisible liberal community. It is generally unclear how cynically one should view such claims, and how much they represent the views of an American foreign policy establishment with firm ideological commitments. Furthermore, sometimes cynical power politics and ideological principles push in the same direction. Truman may have overstated his case to Congress (making it "clearer than the truth" in Acheson's memorable phrasing), but the Soviet Union actually was an expansionist empire aimed at spreading its domestic ideology.

More than seventy years later, President Biden echoed the refrain to argue that America's current geopolitical challenges constitute a showdown between democracy and autocracy (2021), but the claim is considerably more tenuous than it was for Truman. China is an expansionist state (consider its land grabs in the South China Sea), but it appears more bent on self-enrichment than on converting others to its way of operating. Compared to the Soviet Union, China is less focused on promoting its form of government abroad. However, the United States continues to employ an ideological logic to justify U.S. leadership as the "last best hope" of protecting a community of democracies.[6] Russia and China are presented as threats, not only because of their efforts to take over their neighbors or coerce the United States and its allies, but because of the alien nature of their political system. Whenever dominant

[6] *The phrase comes from Lincoln, but echoes through contemporary arguments about the United States' role in the world. For example, see Daalder and Lindsay (2022).*

actors legitimate their rule with these kinds of ideological claims, they are sending the message that 'You should support me, because I am like you. I share your values, and I will act in ways that are comprehensible and acceptable'.

It is easy to understand the appeal of using ideological appeals to legitimacy. It appears to be 'free money', allowing leaders to add soft power on top of hard power. However, such legitimacy is a two-way street. By articulating a shared normative structure, it encourages support from weaker actors. However, it also sets expectations about what the superordinate actor will do for this shared community. Once a leader has articulated their foreign policy goal as the promotion of a shared community (in this case defined around liberal, democratic values), it becomes more difficult to adjust course. For example, President Truman's rhetoric contributed to the United States getting drawn into the Korean War, despite having previously placed it outside the United States defense perimeter. Truman feared paying hypocrisy costs, notably with a Republican-led Congress, and faced considerable pressure to make his foreign policy behavior match his rhetoric.[7] Had Truman chosen to accept the loss of Korea, he would have suffered a loss of legitimacy and perhaps of domestic political support for his efforts to contain the Soviet Union.

In short, ideological arguments impede a dispassionate discussion of interests, and they make it harder to make adjustments based on changing geopolitical circumstances. The articulation of foreign policy behavior in maximalist and normative terms (e.g. defense of a community of shared values) rather than pragmatic, consequentialist terms (e.g. cooperating to the extent that interests continue to align), means that a leader who attempts to limit their state's contributions to allies is viewed as violating a sacred obligation, rather than renegotiating a market transaction. There are two implications here. First, U.S. interests may push it in a direction at odds with its stated principles, and following those interests may lead to a loss of legitimacy. Second, despite viewing the United States less positively, European states may continue to see the United States as a useful ally and NATO as the best tool for achieving security. Put differently, violating the terms of political legitimacy diminishes an actor's social standing, but it may not sever its relationships. In the next section, I explain why the United States may be accepting this loss of social standing in the pursuit of greater material strength for the NATO alliance overall.

5 WHY THIS TIME IS DIFFERENT: NATO SECURITY AS A PUBLIC GOODS PROBLEM

Two trends which would initially seem to produce contradictory pressures on US policy are combining and pushing the United States away from providing a hegemonic security umbrella and toward demanding greater allied contributions. First, Russia is behaving aggressively toward its neighbors, most immediately in Ukraine. President Putin appears to envision a reinvigoration of the Russian empire,

[7] *For more on this period of history, see Gaddis (1982).*

and wants to deter the West from interfering in a Russian sphere of influence (Hill, Stent, 2022). Second, although Russia is clearly strong enough to inflict suffering and devastation in Ukraine, it is hardly the juggernaut that NATO was formed against. Indeed, the fact that Russia has failed to impose its will on Ukraine in nearly four years of fighting is more suggestive of Russian weakness than strength. Russia has disrupted the security and stability of Europe, including through cyber-attacks (The Economist, 2025), using energy exports as coercive leverage (Gross, Stelzenmueller, 2024) and unleashing a "firehose of falsehood" through its propaganda efforts (Paul, Mathews, 2016). However, Russia does not appear remotely capable of dominating Western Europe. These two trends combine to paint a portrait of Russia as a disruptive force in Europe, but one which hardly threatens the core U.S. interest of avoiding a hostile Eurasian hegemon while maintaining robust economic ties with Europe. Russia's relative weakness undermines the strategic imperative for the United States to commit scarce resources to Europe, because European states have the resources to contain it. Furthermore, the United States' deteriorating power position vis-à-vis China is making the diversion of resources to Europe unsustainable for the United States. Greater burden sharing with European allies has long been an American goal, but it has also become a strategic necessity.

Faced with the dual challenges of a revanchist Russia and an increasingly powerful and assertive China, the United States needs its allies to be more than passive locations from which the United States projects power or junior partners in multilateral military operations. It needs them to help create situations of strength against geopolitical adversaries. This task calls, not for reassuring allies that they will be safe from American predation if they remain weak, but convincing them that they must strain to contribute to shared security if they are to retain American support. The shift in U.S. interests from Europe to Asia is creating a situation in which the United States no longer has sufficient European interests to justify the provision of a security umbrella for NATO (and adjacent) states. Instead, it seeks to partner with European states on a more equal basis to aggregate their respective capabilities against a shared threat which is more acute for Europeans than Americans.

To understand why the United States is forcing a shift to more equitable NATO burden sharing – and why it did not do so sooner – it is helpful to revisit Olson and Zeckhauser's 1966 treatment of intra-alliance dynamics. The authors explain the prevalence of higher levels of defense spending by big states in an alliance than by small ones by building on the logic that Olson articulated in his seminal book *The Logic of Collective Action.* That book explained the incentive which exists in large groups for members to free ride on the contributions of others. Provided that the benefits are non-excludable (i.e. that members of the group cannot be prevented from enjoying them) and non-rivalrous (i.e. one member's use of the good does not diminish another's use of it), most group members will have a rational interest in allowing other members to provide the good. This free-riding (or buck-passing) behavior allows states to enjoy security without the associated guns-butter tradeoffs. This is a general dynamic facing members of large groups, and Olson and Zeckhauser

applied the theory to understand the United States' investments in European security, and its allies' comparatively smaller investments in their own security. The United States sought to deter a Soviet attack on Western Europe because of the latter's industrial capacity. A Soviet seizure of such a large percentage of global industrial production would threaten U.S. security, so the United States had a sufficient incentive to deter or defeat the Soviet Union on its own, irrespective of European contributions. European states had little need to provide for their own security, making free riding the most rational choice for most NATO states. Indeed, because its interests in Europe were so great, the United States was never entirely credible when it threatened to abandon NATO. This meant that, despite a persistent desire for a more equitable burden sharing agreement within NATO, the United States was never able to overcome this public goods problem and the associated free-riding dynamic. The result was that it provided the bulk of the NATO fighting force.

The status quo in which the United States underwrote the security of Western Europe against a Soviet threat rooted in Central and Eastern Europe changed in two ways after the Cold War ended. First, the threat receded as the Soviet Union collapsed, and the Warsaw Pact was dissolved. Russia was less able to threaten the industrial heart of Europe, because of both its internal weakness and its geographic distance. Without a friendly communist government in East Germany and Soviet troops in central Europe, the front moved considerably eastward – away from the centers of European industry. Second, NATO began expanding eastward. This was not framed as a buffer against a possible Russian invasion of Western Europe (and that framing would run strongly counter to the narrative of a security community of democratic states committed to each other's defense), but it created such a buffer nonetheless. The geographic reality is that an expanded NATO became more difficult to defend against a Russian invasion,[8] but these states are also less important to U.S. national security interests than the powerful economies of Western Europe. A loss of one or more of these states to Russia would deal a powerful blow to U.S. prestige and credibility, but it would create far fewer material challenges for American security than the domination of Germany, for example. As Josh Shifrinson recently put it, "it is virtually irrelevant to US national security whether many NATO members, and especially those states which joined the alliance after 1991, are or feel secure. These states matter as symbols of the US commitment, but not in any real way to the balance of power" (in Snyder et al., 2025). Such statements often elicit strong reactions, ranging from dismay to moral condemnation. Indeed, the United States has invited that condemnation. American leaders have built legitimacy for the U.S. role in the world by reference to a sense of moral commitment to other states. When the United States pursues its material interests in a manner that deviates from these moral commitments, it pays a legitimacy cost. Whether it is nevertheless a wise policy depends on whether the gains from increased burden sharing offset European disillusionment with the U.S. The Trump administration seems to be betting

[8] *For example, see Shlapak and Johnson (2016) and Kofman (2016) on the difficulty of defending NATO's Baltic members.*

that NATO allies can be induced to make considerable increases to their defense spending without fatally damaging those alliance bonds. Put differently, the strategic environment is incentivizing the United States to focus on building additional power, not legitimizing its existing power.

6 THE RISK OF INFERRING TOO MUCH COHERENCE

This paper has articulated that the Trump administration's policy toward NATO may be a rational response to structural changes in the international system. By shifting investments from Europe to East Asia, the United States may be able to align its own resources against its highest priorities while inducing its allies to fill the gaps in capabilities needed to contain Russian aggression. However, there is uncertainty associated with any analysis, and it is possible that the interpretation here attributes too much coherence to the Trump administration's efforts. U.S. actions are consistent with the reasoning articulated in this paper, but that does not prove that the administration is motivated by the same logic. Indeed, it is often difficult to attribute coherent doctrines to sitting U.S. presidents. This is a persistent, perhaps unavoidable, problem in foreign policy analysis, and it is made more complicated by a president whose policies exhibit a greater degree of volatility than is typically the case.

It is possible that the Trump administration is pursuing the NATO policy described here for different reasons. Yascha Mounk argues, for example, that the President is driven by a spiteful reaction to European disdain for him personally (2025). That would suggest that the administration has simply stumbled upon a useful strategic posture by accident. Indeed, if the administration were single-mindedly focused on prevailing in a great power competition with China, many of its non-NATO policies appear strategically counter-productive. The scattershot nature of its trade wars, threats to annex allied territory in Greenland, and funding cuts to American universities all undermine the United States' strategic position at a time when it needs to maximize its comparative advantages. Similarly, funding cuts to those parts of the government which have been most intimately involved in strategic competition suggest that the administration's policies are, at the least, not an optimal response to an increasingly competitive strategic environment (Drezner, 2025). Furthermore, the overall U.S. "rebalance" to the Asia-Pacific theater appears to have stalled, a serious problem which spans multiple administrations (Cooper, 2025). However, there remains in the Trump policy the outlines of a coherent approach to alliances which is sometimes articulated by members of his administration. For example, the shift in focus away from Europe parallels the advice from Elbridge Colby, who is the Pentagon's policy lead. He has written very clearly about the need for the United States to limit its security commitments outside of Asia so that it can focus its attention on the threat from China (Colby, 2024). This suggests that the administration's policy toward NATO is a deliberate effort to shift strategic focus.

The Trump administration has taken an aggressive posture toward NATO, threatening to refuse its Article 5 obligations to states who do not invest sufficiently in their military capabilities. This paper has argued that the Trump administration's pressure on NATO allies is likely not an effort to destroy the alliance, but rather an attempt to close a growing Lippmann Gap by shifting some security responsibilities to European allies. The United States could easily withdraw from NATO if it wanted to entirely divest itself of responsibility for European security. However, its aims appear more modest: shifting from a hegemonic security umbrella to a more equitable distribution of responsibility within the NATO alliance.

Conclusions

The United States is forcing this change, because it has concluded that its optimistic post-Cold War strategy of using the liberal international order to turn potential adversaries into responsible stakeholders has failed. It is instead pursuing a policy that prioritizes responding to the threat posed by China. Russia is aggressive and volatile but lacks the ability to credibly threaten the industrial heart of Europe. Europeans' comparatively greater interest in responding to Russian revanchism means that the United States can force a shift in burden sharing, a long-standing goal.

This shift in the United States' relationship with NATO, coming while NATO states are responding to Russian aggression – and implemented with blunt threats from President Trump – will undermine the legitimacy of U.S. international leadership. However, the U.S. leaders seem to have concluded that, in a world of dwindling hard power advantage, their strategic priority should be building new capabilities, not legitimating existing ones. Paradoxically, U.S. pressure on NATO allies to shoulder a bigger share of the collective defense burden may ultimately enhance European stability and produce a stronger transatlantic partnership by increasing its overall capabilities. It is perhaps counterintuitive that an American president known for his willingness to coerce allies may end up strengthening NATO. Two areas of uncertainty are worth watching closely. First, it remains to be seen whether the recent increase in European defense spending will be sustained and reinforced. If it is not, European capabilities may be insufficient to the task of building sufficient power to deter Russia without a central American role. Second, the Trump administration will need to build closer cooperation with allies and reinvest in the domestic sources of American competitive power (e.g. university research) if it wants to integrate gains from an updated NATO into a broader competition with China. If it does so, it may find itself on a better strategic footing.

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E-mail: agoodhart2@unl.edu
ORCID: 0009-0004-3163-4003

Doc. dr. Andrew Goodhart je docent političnih ved na Univerzi Nebraska-Lincoln. Doktorat iz političnih ved je pridobil na The Ohio State University. Pred tem je deloval kot strateg na Ministrstvu za obrambo ZDA. Njegovo raziskovalno delo se osredotoča na mednarodni red, družbeno mobilizacijo in transnacionalno zagovorništvo, pri čemer preučuje, kako države, družbene skupine in nevladne organizacije vplivajo na oblikovanje globalnih politik. Njegove študije združujejo teoretične in empirične pristope za razumevanje sodobnih izzivov v mednarodnih odnosih.

Assoc. Prof. Andrew Goodhart, PhD, is an associate professor of political science at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He received his PhD in political science from The Ohio State University. Prior to that, he served as a strategist at the US Department of Defense. His research focuses on the international order, social mobilization, and transnational advocacy, examining how states, social groups, and non-governmental organizations influence global policy-making. His studies combine theoretical and empirical approaches to understanding contemporary challenges in international relations.

E-mail: agoodhart2@unl.edu
ORCID: 0009-0004-3163-4003