RESEARCH BRIEF

How the United States Retrenches Matters

Key NATO Allies' Likely Responses to Alternative U.S. Approaches

Since coming into office, the second Trump administration has been reshaping U.S. policy toward Europe. In addition to imposing tariffs, raising doubts about the U.S. commitment to NATO, seeking control of Greenland, and reducing support for Ukraine, the administration has called for a reduced U.S. security role in Europe. The administration's concept for Europe—NATO 3.0—envisions allies taking primary responsibility for their own conventional defense. In line with this vision, the administration has reduced planned contributions to NATO crisis operations, announced the withdrawal of 5,000 troops stationed in Germany, and launched a review to inform further force reductions.

A RAND study provides insights into how four of the most influential and militarily capable NATO allies (France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom) would likely respond to further U.S. retrenchment and identifies steps the United States can take to realize its strategic goals and mitigate risks of unintended reactions. These four allies are key, given that France and the UK are Europe's only nuclear powers, Germany is its largest economy, and Poland is an increasingly capable ally that now has the third-largest active-duty force in NATO.

KEY FINDINGS

- How the United States retrenches, not just whether it does, will shape key allies' responses.
- A phased and coordinated approach to retrenchment is likely to increase and/or focus allies' defense spending and deepen regional cooperation. And allies would likely seek to maintain remaining ties with Washington.
- However, an uncoordinated, rapid withdrawal—especially combined with normalizing ties with Russia while the war with Ukraine is ongoing—risks allies further loosening economic and security ties with the United States.
- Using posture and commitments to reward and punish individual allies could undermine regional cooperation.

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Anticipating Key Allies' Reactions to Alternative U.S. Policies

Working from the assumption that the United States maintains its formal commitments to allies through the North Atlantic Treaty, the research team examined how the four allies would likely react to different U.S. approaches to retrenchment, focusing on changes to commitments and posture, as well as two other important policy areas: tariffs and policy toward Russia. The analysis considered how U.S. policy alternatives would affect the four allies' perceptions, actions, and cooperation with each other (see sidebar).

Overview of U.S. Policy Alternatives and Responses Considered in the Study

Policy Alternatives Considered

- U.S. commitments to NATO allies
  - Signals of less willingness to bear costs and risks to uphold commitments
  - Changes in scope of commitments (commitments apply uniformly to all NATO countries versus only to favored ones)
- U.S. military posture in Europe
  - Changes to size and/or composition of forces
  - Speed of withdrawals and coordination with allies
  - Use of military presence to reward and punish individual allies
- U.S. policy toward Russia
  - Pursuit of a détente that either prioritizes or disregards European stability
- Tariffs
  - Further increases

Responses Considered

- Allies' threat perceptions of Russia
- Allies' bilateral ties with Washington
- Allies' relationships with Russia and China
- Allies' defense spending
- European regional security cooperation

Findings

The researchers approached each ally individually and in the context of its unique circumstances. The research team found that the four countries will likely respond to U.S. retrenchment in similar ways—driven in part by a shared, high threat perception of Russia—but there are some ways that the countries may diverge in their responses, highlighted below.

Anticipated Changes in Allies' Policies Toward the United States

Allies will likely seek to sustain remaining security and economic ties with the United States in the face of coordinated, gradual U.S. retrenchment. Allies see the United States as an irreplaceable partner and would likely try to preserve remaining ties in the face of what allies would see as an undesirable, but relatively responsible, U.S. approach to retrenchment.

But allies might see the United States as a less reliable arms supplier in the face of a large-scale, uncoordinated, rapid withdrawal. Allies believe that such a U.S. move would create capability gaps that would leave them vulnerable to a Russian attack. In turn, allies might see the United States as indifferent to their security and therefore an unreliable source for arms. Loss of trust in the United States as a reliable ally and arms supplier could cause allies to take more-aggressive steps to reduce reliance on the U.S. industrial base, likely accelerating UK, German, and Polish shifts away from U.S. defense systems and toward European or sovereign alternatives.

Other U.S. actions and statements that coincide with retrenchment and suggest fundamentally diverging U.S.-European interests could lead allies to reduce economic and technological dependence on and intelligence-sharing with the United States. For example, U.S. pursuit of rapprochement with Moscow while Russia's war in Ukraine continues could lead allies to fear that Washington has fundamentally different interests—a concern that would likely be felt most acutely in Poland, a frontline state with historically high threat perceptions of Moscow. Such a policy, in turn, could lead allies to reduce intelligence-sharing out of fear that the United States might share sensitive information with Moscow. Further U.S. tariffs or export controls might accelerate allies' efforts to reduce economic and technological dependence on the United States, with Poland likely to expand economic

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cooperation with European and non-European partners and the UK likely to deepen economic ties with the European Union, potentially accelerating UK purchases of European arms.

Anticipated Changes in Allies' Policies Toward Russia and China

None of the four allies will pursue security alignment with Russia or China, regardless of the U.S. approach to retrenchment. Allies see Russia as a threat and China's interests as misaligned with theirs. The four allies do not have risk factors for aligning, or *bandwagoning*, with a rival. Even so, worries about a NATO-Russia conflict could lead some allies—especially Poland—to harden their policies toward Moscow, taking more-assertive steps (e.g., in response to Russian airspace violations) to signal resolve despite weaker U.S. commitments, while others might moderate their approach, such as by reducing military support to Ukraine. On China, the UK and Poland would likely take a harder line if they believed that doing so might favorably affect U.S. presence or commitments.

Electoral gains by the far right or far left could make France or Germany more likely to adopt a less hardline approach to Russia, regardless of U.S. policy. Both countries have histories of outreach to Moscow, and such parties gaining power could prompt renewed engagement with Russia, particularly if the United States abandons its effort to broker ceasefire talks between Russia and Ukraine. Poland, by contrast, would likely wait the longest to soften its stance toward Russia even if the United States brokers a durable ceasefire, given Warsaw's conviction that any sign of Western softness emboldens Moscow.

Anticipated Changes in Allies' Defense Spending and Regional Cooperation

Initiating plans for large-scale force withdrawals and further reductions in crisis contributions would likely spur allies to cooperate more deeply with each other and, in some cases, increase defense spending further. Allies have already initiated such changes because of the threat from Russia, especially after 2022, and the growing prospect of U.S. retrenchment in 2025. The United States taking more-tangible steps to retrench would likely reinforce this trend. Poland is most likely to increase defense spending further in response, given its higher threat perceptions and growing economy, including possible consideration of independent nuclear capabilities as feelings of acute vulnerability grow. Germany is somewhat likely to further increase spending, especially if increases can be tied to investments that promote domestic economic growth.

France and the UK will struggle to meet defense spending targets, especially if U.S. policies add more economic headwinds. Both countries are already struggling to meet NATO spending targets given fiscal constraints; additional tariffs could modestly reduce the countries' fiscal capacity and erode public support for defense spending.

Therefore, France and the UK may scale back—though not eliminate—spending for missions outside Europe in response to large-scale U.S. retrenchment or a U.S. détente with Russia that does not prioritize European security.

U.S. pursuit of a détente with Russia that does not prioritize European security could also stimulate European cooperation but would also likely lead allies to reduce cooperation with the United States. Perceived U.S. disinterest in European stability would likely push all four allies to prioritize ties with European partners over ties with the United States, to the extent the two come into conflict. As with other actions that suggest diverging interests, such a détente could also lead allies to reduce their reliance on U.S. arms over time and prompt reduced intelligence-sharing and defense coordination.

The costs and trade-offs associated with higher defense spending and regional cooperation could

increase political resistance and contribute to social unrest. Future electoral gains by far-right and far-left parties would likely increase political pressure to reduce defense spending, particularly in Germany and to a lesser extent in France and the UK. Such electoral shifts would also likely increase resistance to regional cooperation.

Allies would likely have diverse responses to greater U.S. use of presence and commitments to reward and punish individual states, which could create fissures that undermine regional cooperation. Poland, the UK, and—to a lesser extent—Germany might be willing to make concessions, such as buying U.S. arms, to preserve favored status with Washington, even if doing so comes at the expense of deeper European cooperation. France, by contrast, is less inclined to prioritize bilateral concessions to the United States over its emphasis on European strategic autonomy. Differential treatment therefore risks undercutting regional security cooperation and, in turn, NATO 3.0's goal of increasing European capabilities for collective defense.

Recommendations

The United States should take the following steps to implement NATO 3.0 or other future concepts that aim to maintain a partnership with Europe while increasing burden-sharing and reducing the U.S. military role:

- **Develop and coordinate with allies on long-term plans for reductions in peacetime presence and crisis contributions, as well as force structure changes.** Sharing this type of plan with allies would help them more thoughtfully phase their investments and would signal U.S. desire for the continued partnership that NATO 3.0 envisions. As of early October 2026, it is not clear whether the U.S. Department of War's Europe posture review will produce such a plan. If not, a follow-on process could do so.
- **Take tangible steps to implement this long-term plan.** Initiating larger-scale force withdrawals and further reductions in U.S. crisis contributions—and continuing to do so over time as conditions allow—may help allies sustain momentum on defense spending even if it becomes more politically difficult domestically. In deciding on the size of such changes and which forces to remove, U.S. policymakers should keep in mind that some allies, including France and the UK, already have significant fiscal challenges and may not quickly increase spending further. Alternatively, such allies may increase short-term defense spending, but at greater risk of social unrest and opposition to longer-term spending.
- **Encourage deeper regional cooperation.** NATO 3.0 envisions a self-sufficient Europe that reduces the burden on U.S. forces. Because no one ally is prepared to fill the U.S. role, allies will need to work together to increase their collective strength.
- **Avoid leveraging U.S. presence and commitments for secondary U.S. priorities.** Policymakers need to weigh the downside of U.S. pressure—undermining regional cooperation—against the value of the concessions that such pressure is meant to elicit.
- **Accept that promoting Europe's capacity for self-defense could mean that allies have fewer capabilities for missions in other regions.**
- **Support allies' economic growth.** Allies need an economic boost to support higher defense spending, not further headwinds in the form of additional tariffs. U.S. policies in some areas could help. For example, an end to the war with Iran could ease fiscal—and associated

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political—pressures that make it harder for allies to meet spending targets.

- **Work with allies to promote a durable ceasefire in Ukraine.** NATO 3.0 calls for the alliance to stabilize ties with Russia, but some approaches could lead allies to weaken ties with the United States. Allies would perceive a one-sided ceasefire deal favoring Russia, negotiated over their heads, as signaling a fundamental divergence of interests between the United States and Europe. This perception could, over the long term, lead to reductions in European defense equipment purchases, defense coordination, and intelligence-sharing with Washington. The United States does not necessarily need to shift from trilateral talks to direct European participation. But Washington should at least have a process to gain European input, especially because Europe's contributions—such as security guarantees and financial support to Ukraine—will likely be needed for Kyiv to accept a deal.

About the Study

This brief summarizes findings from a study that explored how four influential NATO allies (France, Germany, Poland, and the UK) might react to U.S. retrenchment from Europe, focusing on outcomes with implications for U.S. interests. Researchers used three sources to anticipate allied reactions, each offsetting the limitations of the others: applied lessons from history; public debates taking place in, and official documents from, the four countries in 2025 and 2026; and interviews with policymakers and experts in the four countries in mid-2025. The analysis aimed to isolate the effects of U.S. policies, even though U.S. policies may not be the primary driver of allies' choices. The findings of the analysis apply only to the four allies and not necessarily all other NATO members.

This research brief was written by Miranda Priebe and Chandra Garber and documents work done in RAND Global and Emerging Risks and documented in *Anticipating Allies' Responses to U.S. Retrenchment from Europe: How France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom Might Adapt to Alternative U.S. Approaches*, by Miranda Priebe, Stephanie Pezard, Anna M. Dowd, James Black, Paul van Hooft, Clara de Lataillade, Zachary Burdette, Daniel Cebul, Nathaniel Edenfield, and Scott Behmer, RR-A5006-1, 2026 (available at www.rand.org/t/RRA5006-1). To view this research brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RBA5006-1.
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