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The Transatlantic Bargain Between the United States and European States and the Transformation of NATO (1949–2025)

Abstract: The aim of the article is an analysis of the transatlantic bargain between the United States and Europe in a historical perspective since the establishment of NATO in 1949 till the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022. NATO is described as a transatlantic bargain meaning that the United States commits itself to remain involved in European security arrangements, and Europe contributes significantly to a system of collective defence. The transatlantic bargain remained a crucial foundation for the partnership between the United States and Europe during the Cold War when the Soviet Union constituted a tangible threat. After the Cold War, there have been many problems in the transatlantic bargain, but Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 highlighted the importance of NATO as a defence alliance. However, the transatlantic bargain may be challenged by the transactional and unilateral approach of President Donald Trump, who returned to power in 2025.

Key words: NATO, transatlantic bargain, Cold War, Russian aggression against Ukraine

Introduction

Donald Trump's return to power as President of the United States in January 2025 raises questions about the United States' commitment to developing the transatlantic relationship. At the heart of the debate is the US contribution to Western support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression. US aid to Ukraine has been called into question by Donald Trump, who has largely adopted a false Russian narrative about Ukraine and sought to end the war quickly by accepting a number of Russian demands (Collinson, 2025). The end of Russia's conflict with Ukraine would allow the United States to focus on implementing its grand strategy in the Pacific rather than the Atlantic, on reviving the US economy, which would serve to strengthen the country's global position, and on developing economic and political cooperation with Russia in various fields. However, the question is more universal, as it concerns the new US administration's attitude towards alliance commitments within the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and towards Russian neo-imperialism. Given Donald Trump's somewhat ambiguous statements, there is concern that the United States could pursue a policy that would strengthen Russia and significantly weaken Ukraine, with negative consequences for the security architecture in Europe. Moreover, Donald Trump's current policies could lead to a substantial weakening of the transatlantic partnership and even to the marginalisation of NATO, which could have the effect of challenging the international order that the United States created after the Second World War, in part by institutionalising relations with Western European countries.

Donald Trump posits that the United States was once a preeminent global superpower but has since lost its prominence due to a confluence of external and internal factors. These include the decline of the American manufacturing sector, the influx of illegal immigrants, and the promotion of multiculturalism in domestic politics. Donald Trump's strategy to "Make America Great Again" is leading to a challenge to liberal internationalism that has been the dominant paradigm since the Second World War and had its roots in the ideas of President Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921). This mindset found its expression in the NBC interview of 8 December 2024, in which President-elect Donald Trump acknowledged that the United States would remain in NATO on the condition that European countries would pay their bills. He further elaborated that "Europe is in for a fraction, and war with Russia is more important for Europe than it is for us," emphasizing that "We have a little thing called an ocean in between us" (Sigalos, 2024).

Although the 2024 US presidential race placed less emphasis on international issues than might have been expected, given the prevalence of domestic concerns, it is evident that the discourse on the global role of the United States is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, a significant number of issues under consideration have been raised previously, particularly in the post-Cold War period. During the early 1990s, the discourse included slogans such as the peace dividend, focus on domestic economic issues and job creation, and a reduction in US involvement in global affairs. In the 21st century, only President George W. Bush took the decision to intervene in Afghanistan and Iraq as part of the war on terror, which he had previously declared in response to the attack on the United States by Al Qaeda on 11 September 2001. However, regardless of their disparate stances, subsequent presidents, including Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden, were already inclined to curtail the global commitments and role of the United States. This was despite the necessity to alter their positions in response to international developments, such as Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 or 2022. Furthermore, the United States has frequently demonstrated that a unilateral approach is often dominant, particularly when its national interests are threatened. At the core of discussions on US international strategy is the identification of priority threats and challenges and the development of relationships with allies and partners, both bilaterally and multilaterally. It is therefore evident that US strategy plays a pivotal role in the evolution of NATO, given the economic, political, and military influence wielded by the United States in its position as the sole superpower in the present era. However, the actions of European allies, whose considerable contribution to the effective functioning of NATO may also influence decisions taken by the United States, which has repeatedly cautioned its European partners against free-riding, are not to be underestimated.

In view of the above, the main objective of the article is to place the problem of the transatlantic bargain between the United States and Europe in a historical perspective since the establishment of NATO in 1949 till the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022. As the American diplomat Harlan Cleveland put it in the late 1960s, NATO could be described as a transatlantic bargain (Sloan, 2020, p. 3). This means that the United States commits itself to remain involved in European security arrangements, and Europe commits itself to organise itself for external defence. That's why the evolution of the US strategy towards Europe is shown, as well as the reaction of the European states to the American position, which has a significant impact on how transatlantic relations

continue to develop. In light of the ongoing shifts in the global balance of power and the evolving security architecture in Europe, it can be argued that the transatlantic relationship, despite its challenges, remains a crucial foundation for the partnership between the United States and Europe. This partnership played a crucial role in navigating the Cold War era when the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc constituted a tangible threat. It is beyond question that NATO played a pivotal role in institutionalising relations between the United States and Europe. On the one hand, the Alliance committed the United States to guaranteeing the security of Western Europe, while on the other it highlighted the need for military cooperation between European states. As a result, a universal and effective model for conducting deterrence policy and countering threats and security challenges was created. In light of the contemporary challenges and threats, as well as a historical perspective, the essence of allied commitments and cooperation can be understood as a transatlantic bargain, which entails a balance between the commitment of the United States to guarantee security in Europe and the commitment of European states to contribute significantly to a system of collective defence against external threats (Sloan, 2020, pp. 3–19).

The establishment of NATO and the Transatlantic Bargain during the cold war

The establishment of NATO in 1949 was a pivotal advancement in the strategic approaches of Western states to the considerable shift in the global power dynamics following the end of the Second World War. The United States moved away from its traditional foreign policy, which was generally referred to as isolationist or unilateralist. This policy was based on President George Washington's Farewell Address of 19 September 1796 (*Washington's Farewell Address...*, 1796), in which he called for America's destiny not to be linked to any part of Europe, not to make its own peace and prosperity dependent on European ambitions and conflicts, and to avoid permanent alliances with any other parts of the world. However, Washington's approach, which largely influenced American policy until the Second World War, did not result in complete isolationism. Indeed, it meant a lack of involvement in European conflicts, while developing trade with all powers, i.e. often different parties to the conflict. The approach adopted by Washington was reinforced by the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 and it was only at the beginning of the 20th century that it began to undergo a transformation, due to the concept of liberal internationalism developed by President Woodrow Wilson at the end of the First World War. Wilsonism ultimately proved unsuccessful, as the United States did not become a member of the League of Nations and instead reverted to a policy of isolationism. However, the principles of Wilsonism subsequently formed the foundation of the United States' grand strategy in the aftermath of the Second World War. Due to the outbreak of the Cold War, the prevailing belief was that the withdrawal of US troops from Europe could result in the outbreak of another world war soon.

European states were also compelled to undergo a significant transformation in their foreign policy paradigms. This occurred in the context of Europe's declining global influence and the emergence of two superpowers, namely the United States and the Soviet Union, which led to the onset of the Cold War. The transformation of European politics

was characterised by a shift away from the competition for primacy in Europe, which had resulted in inter-state and pan-European conflicts for centuries and was shaped by the necessity for cooperation and a close partnership, which over time led to the integration of Western Europe. At the time when NATO was formed, the establishment of the Western Union, a collective security alliance comprising Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg, in 1948, represented a significant step towards the creation of a transatlantic security system. This was an unambiguous indication to the Americans that the Europeans considered the assurance of security to be one of the most pressing concerns in the context of the emerging Cold War. The formation of the Western Union provided the US administration with the opportunity to consider the feasibility of establishing a transatlantic alliance and to persuade Congress to approve the Washington Treaty.

While the Soviet threat undoubtedly played a role in fostering internal cohesion within the Alliance during the Cold War, it is important to acknowledge that even under these circumstances, challenges and crises persisted. The most significant of these was France's withdrawal from NATO's integrated military structure in 1966, despite the country's continued membership in the Alliance. This decision can be attributed to the dissatisfaction that France expressed with what it perceived as an excessive degree of US influence over the NATO's activities. President Charles de Gaulle's concept of Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals was clearly aimed at reducing American influence on the European continent by taking steps to create a European alternative to NATO (Mahan, 2002, pp. 22–28). This concept was in stark contrast to the Grand Design proposed by President John F. Kennedy in 1962. In light of the increasing economic influence of the European Community, Kennedy proposed the establishment of a novel transatlantic partnership, comprising two distinct yet equal actors. He was of the opinion that Europe should assume a more prominent role in matters of defence during the Cold War, while nevertheless respecting the primacy of American leadership in defining a broader economic, political, and military agenda (Costigliola, 1984). The aforementioned examples demonstrate the contrasting strategies employed to ensure European security. One approach involves the adoption of transatlantic solutions with the United States assuming a leadership role. Another involves the establishment and development of European structures, which may result in a reduced role for the United States. This dilemma has remained unresolved and has, to some extent, influenced NATO's transformation in the 21st century.

Towards a new US-European equilibrium in the post-cold war era

The conclusion of the Cold War prompted a re-evaluation of the continued relevance of NATO. The prevailing view in Western societies, including the United States, was that the Soviet Union was no longer a threat and that, therefore, it was necessary to take advantage of the peace dividend and devote a significant portion of defence spending to domestic economic development. Conversely, numerous experts and analysts posited that the absence of a perceived threat from the Soviet Union, and subsequently the Russian Federation, would result in either the dissolution of NATO or a significant reduction

in its influence. As early as 1990, the prominent representative of neo-realism, John Mearsheimer (p. 52), emphasised that the absence of a threat from the Soviet Union could result in the United States' withdrawal from Europe and, subsequently, the potential disintegration of NATO. Similarly, Kenneth Waltz (1993, p. 76) was also pessimistic about the future of NATO. In 1993, he asserted that while the Alliance's existence was not in question, its longevity was uncertain.

Although the conclusion of the Cold War was perceived as a triumph for the United States, NATO and the West as a whole, President George Bush (1989–1993), who had previously served two terms as vice president under Ronald Reagan (1981–1989), was aware of the necessity for the North Atlantic Alliance to persist as the bedrock of an evolving transatlantic security framework, one that necessitated adaptation to shifting global circumstances (Podraza, 2018, p. 23). An illustration of this approach was the concept of New Atlanticism, which was proposed by US Secretary of State James Baker in December 1989 (Podraza, 1996, pp. 196–197). This entailed the construction of a new Europe based on a renewed Atlantic solidarity. The new security architecture was to comprise established structures such as NATO, in addition to the European Community. The latter was to facilitate the integration of Western European states and to serve as an “open door” for Central and Eastern European states. Baker perceived the new security architecture as a means of overcoming the division of Europe, including Berlin and Germany, while also reflecting the United States' desire for close political, military, and economic ties with Europe. Baker's approach constituted a significant adaptation of US strategy to the rapidly changing realities in Central and Eastern Europe. It was based on the belief that the United States should continue to play a leadership role, including through NATO, that the process of European integration was in line with US global interests, and that there should be an opening to the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. To a certain extent, Baker's proposal reflected the Grand Design proposed by John F. Kennedy in the early 1960s, which advocated a partnership between Americans and Europeans.

This open-minded approach of the US administration was in stark contrast to the position of some European countries, most notably France. In January 1990, the then French President François Mitterrand proposed the concept of a European confederation, which was clearly at odds with James Baker's approach (Podraza, 1996, pp. 197–198). In his proposal, Mitterrand did not address the role of the United States in the construction of a new Europe. Furthermore, in a number of statements, he highlighted the limitations of NATO, thereby advocating the development of an independent European security policy. In light of these considerations and in response to a number of challenges, including the transformation of Central and Eastern Europe, reunification of Germany and the Gulf War, the Maastricht Treaty, which came into force on 1 November 1993 and led to the formation of the European Union, established the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The Maastricht Treaty permitted the establishment of a common defence policy in the future and, potentially, the formation of a common defence, which could have prompted concerns about the creation of an alternative to NATO.

The issue remained unresolved, as it was a point of contention among the member states of the European Union. France was unequivocally in favour of European solutions to security and defence issues, whereas the United Kingdom was committed to transat-

lantic cooperation. The solutions that were ultimately adopted represented a compromise between the two opposing positions. The Western European Union (WEU), a military alliance established in 1955 as a continuation of the Brussels Treaty Organisation, was incorporated into the European Union system. The WEU was tasked with implementing EU decisions pertaining to matters of defence. Concurrently, the WEU assumed the role of a conduit between the European Union and NATO. This was in accordance with the objective of the WEU, which was to serve as the military arm of the EU, with the aim of reinforcing the European pillar within NATO. This solution was consistent with the approach developed within the WEU since 1984, which sought to foster the development of a European security identity within the context of NATO, while ensuring compatibility with integration within the European Union (Podraza, 1992, p. 23). A compromise approach between two contradictory positions – that of the explicitly pro-European France and that of the pro-Atlantic UK – dominated the decisions adopted on the establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The compromise between France and the UK was not the only one that needed to be reached in order to develop a defence component within the European Union, initially with the complicity of the WEU. Additionally, an agreement had to be reached between the EU and the US, between EU member states with a greater orientation towards the EU and those with a greater orientation towards NATO, between neutral states and members of NATO, and between states with civilian or military crisis management traditions (Keukeleire, Delreux, 2014, p. 172).

For the United States, the establishment of the CFSP could be seen as an indication that the Europeans would assume a more prominent role in ensuring global and European security, particularly in the context of the imperative to avert the outbreak of conflict in the former Yugoslavia, which bordered the European Union. Nevertheless, it became evident that the EU was a comparatively constrained actor and not a genuine military ally of the United States. The break-up of Yugoslavia demonstrated the limitations of the concept of EU's civilian power in situations of major armed conflict and ethnic cleansing. Despite President Bill Clinton's desire for the EU to assume global responsibilities alongside the United States, the European Union was unable to become a genuine partner for the United States in matters of security (Rees, 2011, p. 53). Initially, President Clinton and his Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, espoused the tenets of assertive multilateralism in foreign policy. This approach was seen as a synthesis of the contrasting principles of multilateralism and unilateralism. It entailed a dual emphasis: on the one hand, on resolving international issues through collective action involving multiple actors; and on the other, on the preservation of US leadership (Cronberg, 2017, p. 7). However, due to the UN and the European Union's inability to effectively address the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the United States was compelled to transition from an assertive multilateral approach to the concept of an indispensable nation. This shift in strategy resulted in the United States authorising NATO airstrikes against Serbian targets in 1995. This reinforced the primacy of the North Atlantic Alliance in resolving major international crises, particularly in relation to the EU (Podraza, 2015, p. 78).

The European Union's transition from a primarily political entity to an actor assuming also military responsibilities was marked by a joint declaration issued by French President Jacques Chirac and British Prime Minister Tony Blair at a meeting in Saint-Malo

on 3–4 December 1998 (*Joint Declaration. British-French Summit...*, 2001). This declaration, in response to the EU's inaction in the face of the bloody wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, asserted the Union's right to autonomous military operations. Nevertheless, this could not contravene the pledges of those countries that were concurrently members of NATO or the WEU. The declaration marked a significant step forward in the development of European defence policy. Both countries revised their initial stances. The British became more European, moving away from the notion that European security could only be ensured by NATO. The French, on the other hand, became more Atlanticist, without explicitly seeking to adopt solutions that would curtail the role of NATO. Despite certain reservations, the Saint-Malo Declaration was generally supported by the United States (Rohan, 2014, pp. 298–299). From the perspective of the Europeans, the American endorsement was of significant consequence, as it enabled the European Union to gain access to the military capabilities of NATO. This was indicative of the restricted military capabilities of European states, which had a detrimental impact on the Union's capacity to engage on the international stage.

Transformation of NATO in the 21st century

In light of the challenges inherent in formulating a novel model for transatlantic relations, particularly in the context of an evolving international order characterised by uncertainty, NATO initiated efforts to redefine its role, encompassing both its core functions and the advancement of diverse forms of collaboration with third countries. This resulted in the admission of new member states, which represented an expansion of the democratic and security zone. However, this also led to a crisis in relations with the Russian Federation, which was increasingly pursuing a traditional imperial policy. NATO became an international security hub with a certain capacity for alliance-building through the creation of coalitions of the willing to support US actions on the global stage, as evidenced by its involvement in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The transformation of NATO in the 21st century has given rise to several distinct conceptualisations of the organisation. These include: NATO as a global expeditionary alliance, a perspective that has been favoured by the USA; NATO as a foundation for regional security cooperation and a tool for developing relations with Russia, a position that has been advanced by France and Germany; NATO as a collective defence organisation based on Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, a stance that has been strongly supported by Poland and the Baltic States (Michta, 2011, p. 56). These various concepts influenced the manner and degree of institutionalisation of transatlantic relations within NATO in different ways. Generally, they were not competitive, but rather they complemented each other.

The incremental evolution of NATO through the acquisition of new functions has not entirely dispelled concerns about the Alliance's future and efficacy. The hypothesis of a persistent decline in relevance has also been a topic of discussion in political and academic circles in the 21st century (Rupp, 2006). This was exemplified by French President Emmanuel Macron's statement in November 2019, in which he cautioned European nations that the United States was disengaging from the European project, thereby undermining the reliability of the US to uphold the commitments of NATO allies ("The

Economist”, 2019). Macron made a figurative reference to the “brain death of NATO,” proposing that Europe should begin to conceptualise itself as a geopolitical power. This statement was consistent with the European Union’s objective of attaining strategic autonomy, which entails the capacity to act independently in strategically significant policy domains, particularly those pertaining to security and defence, within a complex geopolitical context. The concept of strategic autonomy aligns with the aspirations of France and numerous member states of the Union. Nevertheless, it remains largely conceptual rather than operationalised.

The pessimistic view of the significance of transatlantic relations has undergone a transformation as a consequence of Russia’s neo-imperialism. This is evidenced by Russia’s actions in Ukraine and Crimea in 2014, including the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent military invasion of Ukraine that commenced on 24 February 2022. The emergence of a direct threat from the Russian Federation to the international order can be thus seen as an important factor in reinforcing the transatlantic relationship and NATO itself. This does not, of course, imply an unequivocal endorsement of the theses put forward by the neorealism just after the end of the Cold War. Contrary to their projections, NATO’s survival and transformation was a natural process of institutional adaptation to changing international realities. Ultimately, this enabled a return to the original functions of the North Atlantic Alliance related to collective defence.

US strategy in the 21st century: diminishing the importance of the transatlantic bargain?

The formation of a new international order in the 21st century, characterised by the emergence of new security challenges and threats, including terrorism, the influx of refugees, and organised crime, which did not play such an important role during the Cold War period, began to have a significant impact on US global strategy and transatlantic relations. In particular, following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, terrorism became a major threat when President George Bush declared war on it and adopted the so-called Bush Doctrine (Podraza, 2013, p. 209). The Bush Doctrine posed a significant challenge to transatlantic relations, as it reaffirmed the role of the United States as the sole remaining superpower and advocated for pre-emptive and unilateral rather than multilateral action. Consequently, other significant actors, including NATO, were expected to adopt a supportive role in the global war on terrorism (Nevers, 2007, p. 63).

From the perspective of the emerging global order, the discourse surrounding the Bush Doctrine pertains to the role of the United States as the preeminent superpower. This discussion can be seen as a consequence of discernible trends that had already emerged during the 1990s. The ascendance of the United States to a dominant position on the international stage in the aftermath of the Cold War gave rise to the question of whether the emerging international order could be characterised as unipolar or multipolar. The events of the 1990s, most notably Europe’s failure to find a solution to the Yugoslav crisis and the necessity of American intervention, served to confirm the unipolar structure of the international system. This was predicated on the assumption that no significant international crisis could be resolved without the involvement of the United

States. The Bush Doctrine was therefore not a radical departure from US international strategy; rather, it was adopted as a consequence of the inactivity of key actors, including the European Union.

The election of Barack Obama as US president in 2008 prompted considerable optimism in European countries regarding the potential for improving transatlantic relations, a sentiment particularly prevalent in countries such as Germany and France, which had been highly critical of George Bush's presidency and, in particular, his unilateral doctrine. Obama's actions placed a significant emphasis on a multilateral approach, which aligned with the concept of effective multilateralism as outlined in the security strategy adopted by the European Union in 2003 (Podraza, 2014, p. 64–67). But, contrary to the hopes of the Europeans, Asia-Pacific was of greater importance to Obama than Europe, which had increasingly lost its relevance as the main reference point in the creation of US grand strategy after the end of the Cold War. A manifestation of the clear turn towards Asia was Obama's November 2009 declaration from Tokyo that he was "America's first Pacific president" (The White House, 2009). The declaration elevated the significance of the trans-Pacific partnership at the expense of the trans-Atlantic alliance, despite an enhanced climate of dialogue between the United States and Europe. This shift was driven by apprehensions about the rising influence of China, which could potentially challenge the global standing of the United States as a superpower.

As far as Russia is concerned, Barack Obama initially sought to enhance the quality of the relationship. In early 2009, Vice President Joe Biden articulated the need for a "reset" of US policy towards Russia, which was to be oriented towards collaboration and consultation in areas of mutual interest (Kanet, 2022, pp. 42–43; Podraza, 2025, pp. 208–210). This new approach was exemplified by Barack Obama's decision to terminate the construction of a missile defence shield in Central and Eastern Europe. This was a response to Russia's earlier declaration that it would not deploy missile launchers along the border with Poland. The brief period of relaxation in the West's relations with Russia came to an end with the return of Vladimir Putin to the presidency in 2012. Putin became increasingly wary of the expansion of the European Union and NATO into the post-Soviet space and his neo-imperial foreign policy was driven by his belief that the collapse of the Soviet Union constituted the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century (BBC News, 2005).

A notable shift in US policy occurred in the wake of Russia's actions against Ukraine and the subsequent annexation of Crimea in early 2014. This initial Russian aggression can be attributed to Vladimir Putin's implementation of a neo-imperial policy designed to destabilise the situation in Ukraine. In response to the onset of mass demonstrations in Kyiv and other major Ukrainian cities that commenced in November 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich was compelled to flee the country in February 2014. The protests were instigated by Yanukovich's refusal to sign a negotiated association agreement with the European Union, which was largely the result of pressure from Russia. The source of the conflict was thus Ukraine's aspiration to become part of the European Union. Russia perceived this as a move to diminish its influence in the post-Soviet area. Furthermore, Russia sought to counteract the success of Ukraine's democratisation process, as the positive effects of the changes in Ukraine could encourage Russian society to remove from power politicians operating within Russia's corrupt system.

Russia's assertive stance towards Ukraine and the subsequent annexation of Crimea in 2014 prompted President Barack Obama to pursue a more active role for the United States in European security matters and to strengthen transatlantic relations. This new approach was exemplified by the provisions of the July 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw, which included an increase in the rotational presence of NATO troops in Poland. This was perceived as a decisive step towards containing Russia's neo-imperial actions. As a result of Vladimir Putin's policies, both the United States' approach and the strategy of NATO were transformed. The Alliance's focus shifted from external expeditionary missions to the defence of its eastern flank (Hyde-Price, 2016, p. 56). Russia's assertive stance towards Ukraine and the subsequent annexation of Crimea in 2014 prompted President Barack Obama to pursue a more active role for the United States in European security matters and to strengthen transatlantic relations. It is evident that the United States' re-engagement with Europe was motivated by a number of factors, including the prevailing instability in the Middle East and the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) as a significant threat to regional and global security. However, Obama was conscious of the constraints on US power and underscored the necessity for other nations to assume a more prominent role in upholding international peace and security. He asserted that the United States does not require a novel grand strategy, but rather the formation of a coalition of like-minded nations, and highlighted the issue of burden-sharing within NATO (Popescu, 2017, p. 178).

The issue of burden-sharing, which has generally been one of the more significant problems in relations between the United States and European states since the inception of NATO, was also addressed by President Donald Trump (2017–2021). However, in contrast to his predecessors, he did so in an irreverent and transactional manner, thereby indicating that the United States' obligations under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty were limited as a consequence of the United States' shift away from a missionary sense of responsibility for the Western world (Kiwierska, Kubera, Morozowski, 2017, pp. 81–83). This precipitated a significant crisis in the transatlantic relationship, which had constituted a pivotal axis of US global strategy since Harry Truman's presidency. Despite the attempts by senior administration officials to temper the impact of President Trump's statements, it was unprecedented for a leading US politician to question the US's treaty commitments to European allies and to undermine the value of NATO itself (Pothier, Vershbow, 2017, p. 1).

Despite Donald Trump's assertions during the presidential campaign that NATO was obsolete, his administration has been unambiguous in its emphasis on the necessity of defending NATO's eastern flank. In addition, during a visit to Ukraine in August 2017, US Secretary of Defence James Mattis affirmed the United States' unwavering commitment to the objective of restoring Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. This simultaneously exemplified the role of NATO's eastern flank within the US strategic framework (Dempsey, 2017, p. 15). It was evident that there were concerns among Central and East European states regarding the possibility of President Trump being unconvinced of the necessity for armed intervention against a tangible threat posed by Russia, given his proclivities towards unpredictability. However, other NATO member states also exhibited ambivalence with respect to the significance of the eastern flank. This was particularly evident in the case of Germany. Despite a notable intensification of Germany's commit-

ment to the eastern flank following 2014, Berlin continued to convey a series of ambiguous or even contradictory signals (Hadeed, Sus, 2020, p. 5–6). This was driven by a dual objective: to maintain cordial relations with Russia and to fulfil its obligations within the NATO framework. It was therefore the issue of attitudes towards Russia that influenced the determination of NATO's importance on the European continent.

The war in Ukraine and the us return to Europe

The defeat of Donald Trump in the 2020 election and the subsequent election of Joe Biden as the next US president (2021–2025) prompted optimism regarding a potential shift towards a more constructive US foreign policy, with a greater emphasis on collaboration with partners from diverse regions, including Europe. Joe Biden was regarded as a champion of the transatlantic relationship. In his inaugural address, he declared “America is back,” emphasising the transatlantic alliance's pivotal role in the US's aspirations for the 21st century (Brattberg, 2021). Despite the United States' continued emphasis on its strategic rivalry with China, a year after its inauguration, assertions about the role of the United States in international politics were significantly challenged by Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Russia's attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 provoked a profound sense of shock and concern among the populations of European countries. Furthermore, Russia's military intervention in Ukraine represents a pivotal challenge to both the fundamental structure and the cohesion of transatlantic relations. This is evident in the context of both NATO and the broader relationship between the United States and the European Union, as well as individual European states. Coinciding as it did with the adoption of the Alliance's new Strategic Concept in Madrid in June 2022, it provided an opportunity not only to present NATO's actual activities, but also to do so in relation to the stated framework and objectives of its conduct. The Alliance had never previously been obliged to adapt its strategic concept in response to such direct and significant threats, the impact of which is relevant not only regionally but also globally and in different areas, including military, economic, energy, political, and social.

This perspective on the role of the United States and NATO was outlined by President Joe Biden during his visit to Poland following the Brussels summit on 25–26 March 2022. He articulated the necessity for NATO to present a unified front in the face of Russian aggression, which has sought to sow discord among member states. He underscored the inviolable nature of Article 5 and its applicability to all members of the Alliance (“Rzeczpospolita”, 2022a). He demonstrated the leadership role of the United States, which is also a consequence of expectations from other countries, and the necessity to collaborate with a unified Europe. His remarks signified a “return” to a Europe from which the United States is unable to disassociate itself. Biden depicted Russia's actions against Ukraine as an ongoing struggle for democracy that did not conclude with the end of the Cold War. He referred to Pope John Paul II's famous words, “Do not be afraid,” which he suggested had a transformative impact on global events (“Rzeczpospolita”, 2022b).

Despite an increase in military presence on the eastern flank of NATO by European states, the war in Ukraine demonstrated that European states lacked the capacity to

defend themselves without US support (Rittimann, 2022, p. 9). This indicated that the objective of ending military dependence on the United States in the near future was not feasible. Concurrently, efforts to attain the objective of strategic autonomy for the European Union should be pursued. However, the overarching goal should be to establish a robust European pillar within the North Atlantic Alliance, in accordance with the rationale that guided NATO-EU relations in the early 1990s.

Despite their military dependence on the US, European countries have also been providing significant military and financial aid to Ukraine after the initial shock of Russian aggression (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2025). As for the transatlantic bargain, the West's reaction up to the end of Joe Biden's term has led to two conclusions about the value of NATO in crisis situations, as Russia's aggression against Ukraine has shown. Firstly, the leadership role of the most powerful member state, the United States, in determining the priorities and decision-making processes of the North Atlantic Alliance, was evidenced. Secondly, institutional roles of NATO as an organisation of collective defence and as a forum for coordinating the activities of individual member states when they extend beyond the scope of the Alliance's direct mandate were demonstrated.

An important element of NATO's efforts, in addition to its condemnation of Russian aggression and its support for Ukraine, was the adoption of the Strategic Concept in Madrid in June 2022, which can be seen as a renewal of the transatlantic bargain. The new Concept defines the way in which member states perceive the security environment, including threats and challenges, and delineates the role of the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO, 2022). In light of the preceding preparations for the concept and the war in Ukraine, both Russia and China were identified as posing a threat to Euro-Atlantic security. The aggression against Ukraine has led to the conclusion that the Euro-Atlantic area is not at peace. Furthermore, Russia, which can no longer be considered a partner, has violated norms and principles that have contributed to a stable and predictable European security order. Moreover, it was recognised that Moscow's behaviour reflects a pattern of Russian aggressive actions against its neighbours and the wider transatlantic community. This led to the unequivocal conclusion that Russia "is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area" (NATO, 2022, p. 4). Similarly, China was evaluated for the first time in the Alliance's strategic concept, though it was not explicitly identified as a threat. Nevertheless, it was emphasised that China "challenges our interests, security and values" and, through its actions, including by deepening its strategic partnership with the Russian Federation, undermines the rules-based international order, which is contrary to NATO's values and interests (NATO, 2022, p. 5). Consequently, both Russia and China were explicitly identified as revisionist powers whose objective is to undermine the existing liberal international order. This perception of Russia and China has an impact on the definition of NATO's key functions as set out in the Strategic Concept. Compared to the 2010 Concept, the three core tasks of the Alliance have been defined in a similar way: deterrence and defence (formerly collective defence), crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security. Although they are regarded as complementary, with the objective of providing collective defence and security for the Allies, the primary focus is on deterrence and defence, which has resulted in a shift away from the previously prioritised crisis management. It would be inaccurate to conclude from this that NATO is reverting to the way

it operated during the Cold War or that the transformation of the Alliance initiated in the 1990s is being reversed. Rather, the emphasis is changing in relation to NATO's core functions in light of the imminent threat posed by Russia and the ascendancy of China in international politics.

Conclusion

Donald Trump's 'America First' agenda, which can be seen as a manifestation of American nationalism and neo-isolationism, is likely to result in a major challenge to the classic transatlantic bargain that has framed the relationship between the United States and European countries since the founding of NATO in 1949. Despite occasional disagreements between Americans and Europeans, the United States has always played an important role in ensuring European security. These disagreements have often concerned the contribution of Europeans to the common defence, as exemplified by the discussion around the commitment made at the 2014 NATO Summit in Newport, UK, that member states would reach 2% of GDP in defence spending within a decade. The war in Ukraine has led many countries to increase their defence spending, but still in 2024, as many as 8 countries, including Italy and Spain among others, out of 31 member states¹ have not reached the 2% of GDP ceiling (NATO, 2024). The discussion around this issue is so important because it has already been stressed more than once that spending should be much higher, at 3 or even 5 per cent of GDP (Politico, 2025a).

In consideration of President Donald Trump's transactional stance, the matter of expenditure levels may bear implications for NATO alliance commitments. President Trump has repeatedly expressed uncertainty regarding the feasibility of providing assistance in accordance with Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, emphasising: "If they don't pay, I'm not going to defend them" (Politico, 2025b). In view of the unilateral decisions to withhold military aid to Ukraine, the actions of the current Trump administration give rise to questions regarding the nature of the transatlantic bargain up to this point. This situation gives rise to the necessity for European states to become more militarily independent of the United States by means of the strengthening of European security and defence policy arrangements, primarily within the European Union, but also in cooperation with non-member states, such as the United Kingdom in particular. The question of whether this could lead to an undermining of NATO's fundamental role in ensuring European security is not straightforward. The answer to this question is dependent upon the direction of US policy at present and in the near future.

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¹ There are currently 32 NATO members, but Iceland is not included because it has no armed forces.

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Układ transatlantycki między Stanami Zjednoczonymi a państwami europejskimi a transformacja NATO (1949–2025)

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza układu transatlantyckiego między Stanami Zjednoczonymi a Europą w perspektywie historycznej od momentu powstania NATO w 1949 r. do rosyjskiej agresji na Ukrainę w 2022 r. NATO jest określane jako transatlantycki układ, co oznacza, że Stany Zjednoczone zobowiązują się pozostać zaangażowane w europejskie rozwiązania dotyczące bezpieczeństwa, a Europa wnosi znaczący wkład w system zbiorowej obrony. Układ transatlantycki był kluczowym fundament partnerstwa między Stanami Zjednoczonymi a Europą podczas zimnej wojny, kiedy Związek Radziecki stanowił namacalne zagrożenie. Po zakończeniu zimnej wojny pojawiło się wiele problemów związanych z transatlantycką umową, ale atak Rosji na Ukrainę w 2022 roku podkreślił znaczenie NATO jako sojuszu obronnego. Transatlantycka umowa może jednak zostać zakwestionowana przez transakcyjne i unilateralne podejście prezydenta Donalda Trumpa, który powrócił do władzy w 2025 roku.

Słowa kluczowe: NATO, układ transatlantycki, zimna wojna, agresja Rosji na Ukrainę

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