

E-PAPER

Trump 2.0 and European cohesion

Scenario implications for
Ukraine and transatlantic
security

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Note: This e-paper is an updated version of the publication «US elections and European cohesion» from October 2024 that contained scenarios for both a Harris and a Trump 2.0 administration. The initial scenarios were refined, tested and reviewed in an online workshop with foreign policy and security experts.

Introduction

Over the last three years, the transatlantic alliance has demonstrated a largely remarkable unity in its support for Ukraine. Robust military aid, tough economic sanctions, intense diplomatic engagement and significant financial contributions of over €185 billion¹ to Ukraine are testimony to this. Though the support has often been less ambitious and slower than Kyiv has needed, it has at least enabled Ukraine's continued resistance against Russian aggression. But 2025 will bring significant change.

As Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is soon to enter its fourth year, public support in the EU has been eroding and a dramatic shift awaits in January of 2025. Donald Trump, who is on record as both a NATO skeptic and an opponent to continuing US support for Ukraine, returns to the White House on January 20, this time also with a GOP controlled Senate and House of Representatives. In the EU, too, Ukraine support is also becoming more contentious: Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has regularly blocked military aid; political forces opposed to continuing support for Ukraine are gaining momentum, with a notable shift to the hard right in the most recent EU parliamentary elections. Germany's new party Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), which is committed to ending the war at whatever cost to Ukraine, gained significant support in three recent regional elections alongside the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which also opposes continued support for Ukraine. Key EU states, including Germany, have earmarked fewer resources for Ukraine for the years to come.

This paper examines how the European Union and its Member States might adjust their Ukraine and NATO policies based on hypothetical scenarios that could arise from the outcome of the US election. We plot out potential Trump administration policies on key questions related to support for Ukraine and NATO, as well as possible European responses and potential outcomes along the variables of unity and decisiveness.

The three specific issues we examine are

- US military and financial support for Ukraine.
- A negotiated settlement between Ukraine and Russia.
- The short-term (4-year) future of NATO.

¹ Using the Kiel Institute numbers, and for the European side including the EU institutions and Member States, as well as the UK, Norway, Iceland and Switzerland.

We first present the likely positions of the second Trump administration on these issues, based on published positions, expert analysis and informed assumptions where necessary. Following this, we plot out three different European responses to US policies:

1. **Strong:** A united and decisive approach.
2. **Split:** A deeply divided approach.
3. **Stuck:** A united in indecision approach, where the EU holds together, but lacks the ability to act effectively.

Note: We have opted to not separate the <Split> scenario into decisive and indecisive alternatives, as our argument is that a split EU would contain states moving decisively in different directions, while others hedge, and hence a split response necessarily contains a mix of decisiveness. This leaves us with a 2x3 matrix of outcomes based on whether the EU responds to Harris or Trump positions with a strong, split or stuck stance.

Table 1: Overall summarized scenario results

EU	Strong (united/decisive)	Split (divided/differently decisive)	Stuck (united/indecisive)
Trump 2.0 Administration	Europeanization of NATO, deterrence preserved, but without Ukraine	Ukraine support evaporates, NATO weakened as bilateral relations prevail	Ukraine support evaporates, NATO weakened as US pivots and EU fails to step up

1. Trump 2.0: Ukraine and Europe on their own

Donald Trump has promised to end the war in 24 hours. While that is almost certainly not how it will turn out, he will make a point of changing the US position quickly, likely within the first 100 days. Military support will be curtailed, and no new funding requests will be put before Congress, unless it is in the context of negotiations (see section 2). Some financial support may continue, especially if linked to an agreement to enter negotiations (see section 2), but Europeans will be expected to pick up more of the financial burden, in particular, as well as the military costs. Trump's nominees for Secretary of Defense and National Security Advisor, Pete Hegseth and Mike Waltz, respectively do not seem likely to disagree with Trump's view that Washington should try to end the war or at least extricate itself from it. His administration will not want to divert capabilities from Asia or the Middle East to Ukraine, or to go deeper into US stockpiles, unless there is a big tradeoff. Furthermore, on questions of security guarantees for Ukraine, Trump will expect Europe to step up, with US support in the background.

1.1. Trump + strong EU: the election shocks the EU into action, but not for Ukraine

In this scenario, the re-election of Donald Trump to the White House is a wake-up call for the EU and its Member States. US financial and military support for Ukraine is on the chopping block, and Kyiv is running out of crucial air defense, artillery and anti-tank ammunition.^[2] There is a necessity to step up efforts and fill the gap. A debate in the EU emerges, regarding whether or not the EU should increase its support and cover the reduced US support to Ukraine. Poland, alongside the Baltic states, leads this charge. But after careful deliberation and calculation, the majority in the EU comes to the conclusion that more money must be put towards defense, but not necessarily to the defense of Ukraine.

Hoping to get a picture of Trump's thinking on Ukraine and future US support for Kyiv, different European actors start engaging Trump, such as the new NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte. In the context of the Polish EU Council presidency, President Duda, with the support of Prime Minister Tusk, also meets Trump and gauges the temperature. In coordination, other European leaders such as Giorgia Meloni follow. Increasingly, it becomes clear that Ukraine will not be able to keep up the fight for much longer without US support

2 For a list of U.S. deliveries to date, see: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine>

and that the EU will not be able to fill the gap. While several Member States wish to intensify support for Ukraine, these efforts simply come too late. The order books of the arms industry are already full.

Given these circumstances and uncertainty about whether a Trump administration will come to the EU's rescue in case of future Russian aggression, the EU and its Member States decide to provide one last – largely symbolic – support package to Ukraine for 2025, while massively investing in their own security. To speed things along, as President Trump enters office, the EU allows unspent EU cohesion funds to be used for supporting the European arms industry. At the same time, calls for €100 billion in common European defense bonds – based on the Next Generation EU fund as proposed by President Macron and HR/VP Kaja Kallas – overcome opposition from wary Member States. In the hope of placating Trump, the financing is used to strengthen the European pillar of NATO, with a significant portion allocated to purchasing armaments from the US military-industrial complex. However, the additional EU financing is primarily geared towards replenishing European armament stocks and increasing Europe's own military build-up. Defense investments also increase on the national level: In Germany, for example, elections bring forth a new government constellation with majorities in the Bundestag supporting reform of the country's debt brake, which leads to greater defense spending.

Internationally, the EU intensifies its engagement with other stakeholders, such as the UK, Japan and South Korea, in order to bring them on board when it comes to supporting Ukraine and filling the gap left by a reduction in US support.

US lack of support for Ukraine allows the Europeans to rhetorically take the moral high ground and emphasize their continued support for Ukraine, while most of the new financing actually focuses on the EU's own defense. In this context, the new European Commissioner for Defence reinforces the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), in order to incentivize common European procurement and boost EU armaments production.

In this scenario, the Trump administration jolts the EU into decisive action and keeps it united and decisive, but less in regard to Ukraine than to the EU's own territorial defense. Tensions emerge in the transatlantic alliance when it comes to isolating Russia and maintaining sanctions. Trump's rhetoric that he has very good relations with Putin and wants to cut a deal further emboldens Russia. Ukraine enters 2026 underfinanced and underarmed.

1.2. Trump + split EU: Trump and Orbán bring Meloni and others on board to oppose further support

In this scenario, the re-election of Donald Trump to the White House emboldens forces inside the EU that oppose support for Ukraine. Viktor Orbán, holding the EU Council

presidency, congratulates Trump and feels vindicated in his opposition. Soon after, other EU Member States, such as Slovakia and Italy, join Hungary in looking to reduce budgetary and domestic pressures. The EU is deeply divided and unable to advance additional support for Ukraine beyond what has already been agreed.

Wary of Trump's threats towards NATO, individual EU Member States re-direct financial and military support for Ukraine towards their own defense, in the hope of currying favor with Trump and keeping the US security umbrella safely over Europe. Individual Member States, such as Poland and the Baltics, try to hold the line at first when it comes to supporting Ukraine, but in the end give up, also focusing on their own national defense. The European Commission aims to coordinate these national defense efforts and strengthen common European procurement and puts forth the idea of common EU defense bonds, but the EU is too split to make any progress on them. Concerned about their own national security and opposed to further common European debt, EU Member States go it alone.

Additional rounds of EU sanctions against Russia fail, as Member States cannot agree and the new Trump administration mulls rolling back some of the US sanctions.

In this scenario, a new Trump administration deepens divisions within the EU and leads to European inaction and national action. Each Member State tries to approach him individually to promote their national agenda (as has happened in the past). The Trump administration encourages this situation, preferring bilateral meetings to going through official EU channels.

With a lack of leadership and coordination, the existing international coalition in support of Ukraine disintegrates. Ukraine is left to fend mostly for itself and is in a weak position when it comes to peace negotiations. Moscow is content knowing that time is on its side.

1.3. Trump + stuck EU: failing slowly

In this scenario, the re-election of Donald Trump to the White House leads to significant concerns in the European Union, which – although it largely remains united – leads to inertia. While showing unity in its political communication and commitment to support Ukraine, the EU struggles with indecision when it comes to action.

Trump's election is a shock leading to paralysis. Many Member States feel disheartened, believing that it is impossible for the EU to maintain its support for Kyiv amid reduced US aid. There is little appetite to fill the vacuum left by Washington. Already agreed financial and military assistance to Ukraine, as well as EU training missions, continue, but there is no expansion in support. Given Europe's own pressing domestic priorities, as well as political and budgetary challenges, EU Member States believe there is little reason to compensate for the loss of US support.

The EU becomes reactive-driven, looking for cues in the Trump administration and developments on the Ukrainian battlefield, to see how it should move forward. This results in fragmented and incremental responses rather than a cohesive and robust strategy. To make up for it, the EU focuses on diplomatic efforts to rally international support for Ukraine from other global actors, such as the UK, Japan and Canada. But the failure of the EU to augment its own support leads international partners to also limit their aid.

The EU continues to impose sanctions on Russia and works to maintain a unified front in international forums, but it cannot tighten the screws any further. Reduced US support and the EU's own limited actions create an impression of weakened resolve. Moscow sees this as an opportunity to press its advantages.

In this scenario, the EU's unity in political commitment is undermined by its inability to act decisively and effectively. Without US military support, Ukraine faces significant deficiencies in its capacity, leaving it vulnerable and unable to fight effectively. The reduced US support exacerbates the challenges Ukraine faces, and while the EU's diplomatic efforts help to keep the international spotlight on the conflict, they are not enough to counterbalance the effects of the reduced aid. Moscow continues to believe that time is on its side.

Table 2: Support for Ukraine

EU	Strong (united/decisive)	Split (divided/differently decisive)	Stuck (united/indecisive)
Trump 2.0 Administration	The election shock kicks the EU into action, but only for European defense, not for Ukraine	Ukraine left to fend for itself while some member states seek partnership with Trump, others fail to muster joint initiatives	No substitute for US withdrawal of support, EU political engagement proves too little

2. Push for peace between Trump and Putin

A new Trump administration would seek a «deal» to end the fighting in Ukraine as an early priority. Donald Trump can be expected to hold back or threaten to cut US support in order to apply pressure to Kyiv to take such a deal. This will certainly include loss of territory, and possibly also demands for neutrality and prohibition of NATO membership (Vice President-elect J.D. Vance has already suggested this). However, Trump has also signaled he could augment support for Ukraine, should Putin refuse to enter negotiations. In spite of this, Trump could be sympathetic to a Russian view of proposals and would be more focused on getting something done quickly rather than something better for Kyiv. That said, the Trump administration would want something that looks like a success, so Kyiv is not without some leverage.

2.1. Trump + strong EU: coordinated leverage gets EU a seat at the table

In this scenario, realizing Trump wants a quick solution to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and to push Kyiv into a negotiated settlement, the EU aims to shape the environment ahead of Trump entering office on 20 January and influence Trump's thinking on a negotiated settlement. There are discussions in the EU for another preliminary support package for Ukraine with the possibility of releasing up to €18 billion via qualified majority voting until end of 2024. That would help the country remain strong post-2025. In addition, limited strikes with western weapons into Russian territory are allowed; the aim being to strengthen Ukraine's position in the war as President Trump enters the White House.

European leaders, such as NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, Polish President Duda, and Italian Prime Minister Meloni, also try to convince Trump that a quick deal on Ukraine would not be in his interest. In an attempt to flatter his ego, they encourage him to aim for a deal that has the semblance of victory for Ukraine, postulating that, with the right deal, he might be a candidate for the Nobel peace prize – but not so with a deal Kyiv dislikes.

In addition, the EU – led by the Weimar triangle of Poland, France and Germany – makes it clear to Trump that they should be included in the negotiated settlement given that they hold the majority of the €300 billion worth of frozen Russian assets, which is a significant lever for negotiations. Additionally, the EU – under its new de-risking and economic security agenda – offers Trump a tougher approach towards China. EU officials propose increasing tariffs on certain Chinese goods and limiting critical Chinese technologies in sectors directly linked to security risks, hoping to appease both Trump's hawkish stance on China and the geopolitical realities of European industry.

The EU does not actively undermine Trumpian efforts but tries to shape Trump's thinking and room for maneuver, by highlighting that it too has strategic assets that can be used, such as frozen Russian assets, reconstruction funds, increased defense budgets with orders for US arms companies and EU membership for Ukraine, as well as a toughening of position vis-a-vis China. A key part of the EU's strategy is to push for long-term security guarantees for Ukraine, ensuring that any deal includes provisions for Ukraine's continued military and economic support, even after a ceasefire or peace agreement. French President Macron, in particular, emphasizes the need for a European-led defense initiative to bolster the EU, as reliance on US leadership under Trump may prove unpredictable. At the same time, European leaders make clear that the sanctions regime on Russia should remain in place until concrete and verifiable steps are taken by Moscow to end hostilities and withdraw forces from Ukrainian territory. Last but not least, a discussion emerges whether EU Member States and the UK are prepared to contribute peacekeeping troops in Ukraine and act as a security guarantor of a negotiated settlement, as having skin in the game would give the EU more of a right to sit at the negotiation table.

In this scenario, the EU shapes the strategic landscape in Europe by using all its leverage, such as reconstruction funds and frozen Russian assets, potential peacekeeping troops from a number of Member States as part of a negotiated ceasefire, as well as the prospect of EU membership for Ukraine and a tougher stance on China. Their coordinated pre-planning earns Europeans (in the Weimar 3 format) a seat at the negotiation table. 2025 is spent working with the Trump Administration and Putin to find a settlement that not only safeguards Ukraine's sovereignty but also strengthens Europe's security architecture and keeps the US engaged in Europe.

2.2. Trump + split EU: EU plays little to no role

In this scenario, while President Trump actively withdraws support for Ukraine and pressures Kyiv to enter a negotiated settlement with Russia, the EU is confounded and unable to find a common position. It splits into different camps ranging from those who publicly support Trump's efforts (Orbán, Le Pen, Wilders, Kickl and Weidel) to those who publicly decry Trump letting Ukraine down (Macron, Tusk and Kallas) and those who keep relatively silent, satisfied that the war might finally come to a standstill and relieve domestic pressure without acknowledging this publicly (Scholz).

The divide in the EU deepens as there are serious differences in debates on defense spending, support for Ukraine and the post-war security architecture in Europe. A number of countries, such as Hungary and Slovakia, openly look towards a return to full economic engagement with Russia. Others, such as Poland and the Baltic states, express outrage at the perceived abandonment of Ukraine, viewing it as a betrayal of their regional security interests.

In this scenario, the EU is so divided that it cannot play any meaningful role shaping the environment for a negotiated settlement and ultimately becomes marginalized. Some even soon advocate for a return to normal economic relations with Russia, in order to relieve economic pressures at home. Trump is looking for a high-stakes, high-publicity peace summit and the EU's security interests are overshadowed by direct dealings between Washington and Moscow.

2.3. Trump + stuck EU: wait and see

In this scenario, the European Union is united, but instead of actively shaping the outcome or taking a strong stance, the EU collectively decides to stay on the sidelines, avoiding deep involvement in the Trump-led push for a negotiated settlement between Ukraine and Russia. The decision is driven by a combination of war fatigue, domestic economic pressures, and a desire to let the US take the lead while avoiding further escalation or entanglement. Leaders across Europe, while generally agreeing that a negotiated settlement is inevitable, lack the political will to either oppose or engage fully with the process.

Countries like France and Germany, which have traditionally taken the lead on European foreign policy, are cautious. Macron and Scholz quietly agree that while Ukraine's sovereignty must be upheld, active involvement in the negotiations risks alienating their voters, who are increasingly focused on economic issues and weary of the conflict's impacts. The Eastern European states, led by Poland and the Baltics, are deeply concerned about any settlement that might compromise Ukraine's territorial integrity, but they feel isolated within the broader EU consensus. Despite their misgivings, they reluctantly agree to go along with the EU's overall stance to avoid further internal division.

As Trump pressures Ukraine into a settlement, the EU chooses a wait-and-see approach, opting to avoid direct confrontation with Washington or Moscow. This is a strategic decision based on the belief that any settlement pushed by Trump may ultimately fail or at least prove unstable, and the EU would prefer not to be associated with it if things go wrong. The EU issues vague diplomatic statements about supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and democratic future but avoids any concrete commitments that would tie it to the negotiation process. While the EU provides financial aid to Ukraine, it does so in a way that is decoupled from the negotiations.

The EU's leaders privately justify their inaction by pointing to the geopolitical realities of the moment. They see the Trump administration's approach to Ukraine as unreliable and believe that any settlement pushed by Trump will ultimately leave unresolved tensions in Eastern Europe. While the EU remains wary of Russia's intentions, it calculates that staying out of the negotiations will allow it to maintain leverage over Russia in the future, particularly through the frozen Russian assets and reconstruction funds. If the US-Russia

negotiations falter or produce an unsatisfactory outcome for Ukraine, the EU will then be in a position to step in and offer support to Kyiv on its own terms.

While the EU's strategy of non-involvement preserves its unity in the short term, it risks leaving Europe vulnerable to shifting global power dynamics. By allowing Trump and Russia to take the lead, the EU potentially loses its influence in shaping the post-war order in Europe and risks alienating Ukraine long-term.

In the long run, this scenario leads to a more fragmented and weakened European Union, particularly if the post-war settlement in Ukraine proves unstable. In the 2025–2026 window, while the EU remains united, its failure to engage in the negotiation process limits its influence over the future security architecture of Europe. Ultimately, this scenario reflects an EU that prioritizes internal cohesion and stability over assertive diplomacy but risks being left out of key geopolitical decisions.

Table 3: Pressure for peace negotiations

EU	Strong (united/decisive)	Split (divided/differently decisive)	Stuck (united/indecisive)
Trump 2.0 Administration	EU united ensures it has a seat at the table and that Kyiv gets strong security guarantees	EU divides over negotiations, weakening Ukraine's prospects and EU cohesion	EU unable to actively shape negotiations, weakening Ukraine's prospects

3. Toward a ‹dormant› NATO

A second Trump administration will be more committed to dramatically shifting transatlantic burden sharing in NATO. Unlike in the first term, when multiple Secretaries of Defense worked behind Trump's back to maintain the NATO status quo, Trump's first nominee to lead Defense, Pete Hegseth, will fully support the Trumpian position. Hegseth, a former soldier, can be expected to also push back against resistance from the military leadership. Trump will seek significant increases in European military spending, while his administration will push Europeans to take over the conventional defense of the continent. Accordingly, all infantry brigades and logistics permanently deployed in Eastern Europe should be European in combination and command, and infantry and logistics necessary for guarding the frontiers of Europe should be in European hands. On these conditions, the US would remain part of NATO, offering its nuclear deterrence and acting as a kind of last guarantor (with the open threat of withdrawing all support to NATO if Europeans do not step up). The non-military budget of NATO would be dramatically cut, and US contributions to the budget would fall sharply. Further expansion of NATO and out-of-area operations would be prohibited.

3.1. Trump 2.0 + strong EU: Europeanization of NATO

Europeans, having read the policy papers about a dormant NATO, began preparing ideas before November 2024. In this scenario, between mid-November and January, joint strategizing sessions are held with political representatives and members of the defense planning staffs of France, Germany, Italy and Poland. Together they develop a plan to offer to Trump and win the agreement of all key EU allies. The first element is an immediate increase in defense spending and contributions to NATO and to Ukraine support, which can be offered as a quick win for Trump. But additionally, the EU Member States plot out their own timeline toward European responsibility for conventional defense, including key strategic enablers, in order to placate the ‹dormant NATO› camp, while maintaining US engagement.

In this plan, the EU defense industry would be consolidated and spending increased. Capabilities would be coordinated among EU states (with some EU support and budget through the EDIP) but would also include partners such as South Korea, Japan and, especially, the UK. European conventional forces and readiness would have targets for an annual 5–10% increase over 10 years. Poland and other eastern flank countries resist the temptation to seek bilateral deals, understanding that some degree of US withdrawal is unavoidable. The pressure of security guarantees for Ukraine and wanting to keep the US engaged in NATO creates powerful momentum.

A compromise is found between those countries that want to strengthen EU defense industrial capacity and those that prefer the most efficient solutions. This unlocks EU funds to support collaborative EU industry projects to fill selected crucial capability gaps (air and missile defense, or underwater protection, for instance) while including the UK and Ukraine industry in other collaboration efforts, such as joint procurement and the coordination of strategic capabilities. The European Sky Shield Initiative dispute is resolved as France joins the initiative after a promise is made to increase reliance on the Franco-Italian MAMBA system in the medium-term. Thus, the EU common defense and defense industry will be strengthened, with increased coordination and cooperation among EU states, while at the same time the EU and UK coordinate capability building to strengthen the European pillar of NATO. Europeans continue to rely significantly on US-produced systems (F-35s and beyond) into the medium term and EU-NATO complementarity is assured.

Furthermore, understanding that US disengagement requires a stronger European deterrence, NATO members lock in spending at or above the 2%-target, as better coordination will improve the efficiency of European military spending.

In this scenario, the EU has made a new grand security bargain before mid-2026. This bargain bolsters a more collaborative and coordinated EU defense industry, while also collaborating with the UK toward a significantly more capable European pillar in NATO by 2035, including key strategic enabling capacities. Coordination with Ukraine's defense industry is also advanced. The European promises have kept the US engaged in NATO, including nuclear deterrence and some strategic capabilities, while the threat of further withdrawal remains ever present. Due to European cohesion and decisiveness, NATO deterrence remains credible, though support for Ukraine suffers and any further expansion of NATO membership is off the table.

3.2. Trump 2.0 + split EU: divide and abandon

Faced with a new Trump administration's more forceful criticism of NATO and war on the continent, Europeans divide. Paris pushes to bolster the EU defense industry, while eastern flank states seek bilateral assurances from Washington. France leads an effort to bolster the EDIP, also pushed by the Commission and the defense Commissioner. However, other partners seek faster, more reliable and immediate solutions. Furthermore, Germany and other frugal states refuse to add to the budget, leaving the EDIP hamstrung. Meanwhile, the eastern flank governments invest heavily in US weapons to more quickly increase capacity and keep the US engaged. Both efforts include Ukraine, but differently and not sustainably. Spending goes up in some countries, but not in others, and no notable capacity increases.

The European Sky Shield Initiative remains a bone of contention, with France continuing to push its alternative system while Germany and others move forward with US and Israeli supplied ESSI.

Furthermore, the far-right parties in Germany, Netherlands, France and elsewhere in Europe continue to foment anti-war and pro-Russian sentiment, intensifying political divisions within European countries over NATO and support for Ukraine. Italy and the Netherlands join the Orbán camp of supporting a Trump initiative to quickly «resolve» the Ukraine conflict. Ukraine's NATO membership and any expansion of NATO is off the table.

In this scenario, NATO enters 2026 much weakened. Lack of military and financial support has driven Ukraine into negotiations from a weak position and no significant progress toward a stronger European pillar in NATO is visible. Divisions over the EU defense industry remain unbridgeable, while states on Europe's eastern flank seek their own deal with Washington. The US shifts more capacity and attention to the Middle East and Asia, leaving NATO deterrence hollowed, as Europeans continue to underperform. Ukrainian security assurances are rhetorically consistent, but given divisions appear unreliable, NATO membership for Ukraine remains off the table.

3.3. Trump 2.0 + stuck EU: Trump withdraws while EU underperforms

Trump bemoans poor performance of underspending allies and unilaterally announces the withdrawal of troops and equipment. EU NATO partners scramble to find an answer to pacify Trump and keep him from an immediate full exit from NATO and the European theater – but they cannot agree on any measures that would significantly change the picture. EU Member States again offer promises to reach 2% and short-term appeasement but cannot manage any grand bargains.

France again makes the case for strategic autonomy and leads an effort to bolster the EDIP, also pushed by the Commission and the defense Commissioner. However, other partners seek faster, more reliable and immediate solutions. Furthermore, Germany and other frugal states refuse to add to the budget, leaving the EDIP hamstrung. Meanwhile, the eastern flank governments invest heavily in their defense, feeling vulnerable, relying on US weapons to more quickly increase capacity and keep the US engaged. Both efforts include Ukraine, but differently and not sustainably. Spending goes up in some countries, but not in others, and no notable capacity increases.

The ESSI remains a bone of contention, with France continuing to push its alternative system while Germany and others move forward with US and Israeli supplied ESSI.

Furthermore, the far-right parties in Germany, Netherlands, France and elsewhere in Europe, continue to foment anti-war and pro-Russian sentiment, intensifying political divisions within European countries over NATO and support for Ukraine. Italy and the Netherlands join the Orbán camp of supporting a Trump initiative to quickly «resolve» the Ukraine conflict. Ukraine NATO membership and any expansion of NATO is off the table.

In this scenario, NATO enters 2026 much weakened. Lack of military and financial support has driven Ukraine into negotiations from a position of weakness. Despite positive announcements and Commission papers, progress toward a stronger European pillar in NATO is small and more symbolic than meaningful. Fundamental divisions over EU defense industry strategy remain unbridgeable, while states continue to bolster their defenses individually. The US shifts more capacity and attention to the Middle East and Asia, leaving NATO deterrence hollowed, as Europeans continue to underperform. Ukrainian security assurances are rhetorically consistent, but given divisions appear unreliable, NATO membership for Ukraine remains off the table.

Table 4: Future of NATO

EU	Strong (united/decisive)	Split (divided/differently decisive)	Stuck (united/indecisive)
Trump 2.0 Administration	Due to European cohesion and decisiveness, NATO deterrence remains credible, despite US steps toward a «dormant NATO»	NATO enters 2026 much weakened. Support for Ukraine is rapidly dwindling, while no progress is made toward a stronger European pillar in NATO and Trump withdrawing	Trump begins to withdraw troops and capacity from NATO, while European NATO members try but fail to increase sharing and pooling capabilities, leaving large gaps ahead and weak deterrence

4. Conclusion

The hypothetical scenarios above indicate how interwoven the different elements of European security are. Support for Ukraine (or lack thereof) affects negotiation scenarios, obviously, but also the short-term prospects for NATO. In particular, the pressure of ensuring Ukraine's security might, with the right elements in place, make new grand bargains possible, despite the political challenges on both sides of the Atlantic.

Secondly, the scenarios illustrate well that the results of the US election are only part of the puzzle. Both positive and negative implications are possible, for NATO and for the state of European security and deterrence in the next four years. Most tellingly, given the state of acute challenges faced by Europe the stuck and split EU scenarios ended up being quite similar. Sometimes status quo action leads to not neutral, but negative results. If the scenarios above are accurate, Europe is entering such times.

Crucial elements in the EU responses are timing, resources and strategic linkages or leverage. A prepared and proactive Europe is a more secure one. The window between 6 November and 20 January will be paramount now that Trump is entering office (which also means that leadership will have to come from somewhere other than pre-election Berlin).

The scenarios also reveal that a conflict of interest could arise between self-defense and defense of Ukraine. To an extent, we see this already with some Member States unwilling to deplete their stockpiles to an overly vulnerable level, despite the genuine belief that Ukraine is also defending Europe more broadly by holding back Russia. Without strong US backing, this conflict grows more acute, as a couple of scenario outcomes see eastern flank countries prioritizing their own defense build-up in a Trump 2.0 administration.

Finally, the scenario exercise reveals that Europe is not without leverage and capabilities to shape the next four years. Europe holds Russian frozen assets and has significant financial resources to contribute, much more so if it were willing to consider eurobonds. Europe also has people that may be able to influence or help shape Trump's thinking. While Europe (including the UK) cannot compensate for a withdraw of US military support, it does have strong and growing defense industries. Finally, when it comes to Ukraine, the EU has a membership perspective to offer and reconstruction funds, both of which are an important element of Ukrainian and European stability – or instability – moving forward.

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