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Trump 2.0 may be a tipping point for NATO



During his first term, President Trump was often critical of NATO, arguing that European allies should spend more on defence, even threatening that the US might leave the alliance altogether. With Trump due to return to the White House this January, Michael Cox looks at what a second Trump presidency might mean for NATO. As he points out, Trump and many of those around him do not seem to be especially attached to the Alliance. As a transactional politician, Trump's continued desire to remove the US from expensive foreign commitments may have serious implications for the UK, Europe, and for European security more generally.

I recently attended a seminar at a London think tank, where someone representing a UK government ministry went out of their way to reassure all the assembled experts (mostly British, some American and a fair sprinkling from continental Europe) that not only would the special relationship between London and Washington be safe under a newly re-elected President Donald Trump, but so too by implication would be the wider transatlantic alliance.

What does Trump mean for NATO?

Indeed, many commentators have **said** in recent days that Trump's proverbial bark is bound to be much worse than his bite when it comes to the EU and NATO. This does not mean we in the UK and Europe should be complacent about what has just happened over there. In fact, one view doing the rounds around European capitals right now is that we all must get our act together, **spend a whole lot more on defence**, and in this way see off those MAGA-types across the pond who claim that for years we've been taking advantage of American generosity. I've even heard senior people in London telling us that Trump may even be good for the NATO alliance if he manages to get the Germans and the French and all those other 'free riders' to step up to the plate.

Yet one is still left wondering about the future. It may well be true that NATO has served the United States well since its founding in 1949, and that in purely monetary terms the US gets a lot of bangs for its bucks by stationing all those troops in Europe and the UK, which is **largely paid for by the locals**. Moreover, even if nobody wants to say so publicly, NATO plays a central role in making sure the Europeans and the British do not start singing from their own strategic hymn-sheet. As Richard Nixon **recognized** in the early 1970s when some were clamouring for change, NATO was an essential prop in supporting the US position world-wide.

Clearly much has changed since Nixon was in the White House. The USSR is no more; China has emerged as America's greatest long-term challenge; and NATO has grown from an organization of 12 to 32 today. But however much the world has changed there is no reason – or so it has been argued by its supporters – to let the most successful alliance in history wither on the vine. Indeed, why change something if 'it ain't broke', especially as the one country most opposed to NATO (Russia) is currently fighting a war to prevent another country (Ukraine) joining it?

Trump and his allies cast doubt on NATO

But we are still faced with a simple, but uncomfortable fact: that Trump and many of those around him do not seem to be especially attached to the Alliance. Words uttered during an election campaign do not necessarily translate into policy. But if the words are repeated time and time again, then one presumably must take them seriously. And Trump and his allies have been nothing but consistent when it comes to alliances in general and NATO in particular. And to put no finer point on it: Trump does not like alliances and has cast doubt on NATO.

Nor is his scepticism of recent vintage. He has form. Back in 2018 for instance on the eve of major NATO summit he went out of his way to **pick a fight** with NATO and specific NATO Allies. Earlier he even talked of having to deal with NATO, the UK, and Putin, and frankly (**he went on**) "Putin may be the easiest of them all." The message has not much changed since. We have even been **told by officials** who worked with him during his first term, that he has no worries about either 'reducing or even ending the United States' commitment to the Alliance'.

Transatlantic trade disputes can only further complicate the relationship. In fact, even before his inauguration, 'President Tariff' has already declared a **trade war** against one member of the Alliance in the shape of Canada. Meanwhile, European leaders are being **warned** that Trump's tariff threats 'are' not 'just a bluff'.



"President Trump Attends the NATO Plenary" (Public Domain) by The Trump White House Archived

Trump the transactional

At one level of course none of this makes a lot of strategic or economic sense to foreign policy insiders. However, for a transactional politician like Trump whose twin goal is to beat all economic rivals into the ground while ensuring that America withdraws from expensive foreign commitments such as Ukraine in which he claims the US has no vital interest, it makes perfect sense.

Nor it seems are there any more 'adults in the room' willing to take issue with a President upon whom they not only depend for their position at the top table, but with whom they also happen to agree. Take for example his nominee for Secretary of Defence Peter Hegseth, whose unconditional support for Israel only seems to be matched by his hostility to NATO and one of its key members, Turkey. As Hegseth has argued, 'NATO is not an alliance, it's a defense arrangement for Europe paid for and underwritten by the United States'. NATO, he insists is a 'relic'.

Of course, not everybody in the Republican establishment would agree with Hegseth. There are moreover quite a few Republicans (and more than a few Democrats) who realize how important Europe and NATO are for the United States. One must imagine that there is also a big constituency in the Pentagon making the case for the Alliance. But even here there is a division with more and more in the military arguing that if one is forced to choose between confronting the growing threat posed by China and piling in even more resources into a Europe that refuses to defend itself, it is obvious what the United States should do going forward.

A tipping point for NATO?

We are thus at one of those great tipping moments in history where the only thing we can be certain of is uncertainty. But of one thing we can be certain: the next four years is going to look a whole lot different to what has gone before. It took the Europeans some time to get over Trump 1.0. One can

almost guarantee that having won a more decisive electoral victory in 2024, Trump 2.0 might create even more headaches.

NATO leaders of course understand this only too well, which is why the organization's recently appointed Secretary- General, Mark Rutte, made a bee-line to [meet Trump in Florida](#) not long after he was elected. We are told that Rutte has always had a good rapport with Trump and that the discussions between the two went well. But whether or not the experienced Dutch politician – 14 years as Prime Minister of the Netherlands – managed to change the mind of someone who not so long ago was talking about refusing to defend NATO members against Russia if they refused to meet their financial obligations, remains to be seen.

Much of this of course could be sheer bluster; and perhaps those who reassure us that there really is not much to be worried about are right. Strategic logic will, we are reassured, save the day and ensure Trump does not do anything too damaging. But the worried looks on the faces of those committed Atlanticists in Berlin, Brussels and London seems to be telling us a different story.

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