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The NATO 3.0 Concept and US Europe Posture Review: Implications for Poland

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The US's commitment to the defence of NATO allies is becoming more limited and uncertain. This weakens Europe's security and poses a fundamental challenge, given the key military and political role played by the United States in the Alliance. Although Poland has prospects for a more permanent American military presence on its territory, changes in the US approach to NATO increase the need to also prepare for conflict scenarios with very limited, delayed or conditional US support, and to strengthen cooperation with European partners.

By the end of this year, the United States is due to finalise its review of its military presence in Europe (European Posture Review, EPR). US officials have indicated that this process will reduce America's footprint on the continent, accelerating the implementation of the NATO 3.0 concept.[1] Under this framework, the US is to scale back its military contributions to the Alliance in order to devote more forces and resources to other priorities and theatres: the Western Hemisphere and the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, Donald Trump's administration has signalled that, through these force reductions, it intends to punish certain European countries for their insufficient efforts to strengthen their own armed forces and support US foreign policy.[2] The review was launched after Trump stated he would cut troops in countries which, in his view, had not properly aided the United States in the war against Iran.

Related to the EPR are Polish-American talks regarding the permanent deployment of a US brigade-sized force in western Poland.[3] President Trump announced on 21 May that he will send a contingent of comparable scale, specifying "an additional 5,000" troops.[4] In doing so, he appeared to overturn a decision made by the Pentagon a few days earlier to end the rotation of one of the two armoured brigades present at that time in Poland. Decisions regarding permanent presence in Poland are to be made at the same or approximately the same time as those concerning the rest of US forces in Europe.

Whilst the direction of the Trump administration's policy changes towards NATO is clear, the scale and scope of reductions in the US presence in Europe remain uncertain. Statements and actions to date by the US administration indicate that the review is being conducted not only on the basis of strategic and military calculations, but also taking additional political criteria into consideration. Moreover, differences of opinion have already been visible within the Trump administration—and may yet deepen—regarding specific changes to the US military presence, including in Poland.

The main assumptions and origins of the NATO 3.0 concept

NATO 3.0 is a concept devised by the civilian leadership of the Department of War (the Pentagon) with Secretary Pete Hegseth, and in particular by the Department's chief strategist, Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge A. Colby.[5] This concept assumes that European members will take "primary responsibility" for the conventional defence of Europe and for supporting Ukraine, while the US contribution to the continent's security will be significantly reduced. The US has announced that it would continue to protect NATO members through nuclear deterrence, but at the same time it would provide a much smaller conventional contribution to the Alliance. This support is to be "critical, but more limited." Consequently, the Pentagon is calling for the European members of NATO to

[1] "Remarks by Elbridge Colby, Under Secretary of War for Policy, to NATO's North Atlantic Council (As Prepared)," U.S. Department of War, 27 August 2026, www.war.gov.

[2] See the speech by Secretary of War Pete Hegseth announcing the new review, as well as press reports on the special questionnaire circulated by the US to its NATO allies. The latter is said to have included questions on support for US foreign policy, attitudes towards the war with Iran, and purchases of American weapons. "Remarks by Secretary of War Pete Hegseth at the 2026 NATO Defence Ministerial in Brussels (As Delivered)," U.S. Department of War, 18 June 2026, www.war.gov; A. Palasciano, "US Presses Allies on Ideological Loyalty Ahead of Troop Cuts," Bloomberg, 14 August 2026, www.bloomberg.com.

[3] A. Helbin, "Amerykańska baza w Polsce za 15 mld zł. Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz ujawnia szczegóły," WNP, 23 October 2026, www.wnp.pl.

[4] "Trump says US will send an additional 5,000 troops to Poland," Reuters, 21 May 2026, www.reuters.com.

[5] According to Pentagon leadership, NATO 2.0 has been the period in the post-Cold War era (from the 1990s to the present day), characterised by the disarmament of US allies and their over-reliance on American capabilities, as well as a shift away from collective defence in favour of operations outside the territory of Alliance members. To date, the most comprehensive and publicly available explanation of the NATO 3.0 concept has been provided in Colby's speeches, in particular: "Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the NATO Defence Ministerial (As Prepared)," U.S. Department of War, 12 February 2026, www.war.gov; and "Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby to NATO's North Atlantic Council (As Prepared)," *op. cit.* For an objective account of NATO's evolution during the Cold War, see also R. Kupiecki, *Siła i solidarność. Strategia NATO 1949–1989*, Warszawa: PISM, 2021.

significantly increase defence spending and strengthen their capabilities to wage large-scale conflict. This transformation of the Alliance is intended to enable the US and its allies to simultaneously counter aggression in several regions of the world. The intention is also to achieve "fairer" burden-sharing within NATO.

NATO 3.0 echoes themes present in Trump's election platform dating back to the 2016 campaign and his first term, as well as in the strategic documents of his second administration. Trump has repeatedly accused allies of spending too little on defence and of taking advantage of the US, while the latest National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defence Strategy (NDS) have moved Europe from second to third place on the list of regions of importance to the United States.[6] The Western Hemisphere has taken first place, including as an area of the fight against the smuggling of people and drugs into the US. This reflects the primacy of the security of US territory and citizens, as embodied in the "America First" slogan, Trump's ambitions to expand US influence in its neighbourhood[7], and the more isolationist views of Vice-President J.D. Vance. The Indo-Pacific has been moved to second place, albeit with an even stronger emphasis than before on its strategic precedence over Europe. The published strategies highlight that the Indo-Pacific is a much larger market and that China is far stronger economically than Russia. Under Secretary Colby, together with his current advisers,[8] has long advocated a focus on deterring an increasingly militarily powerful China. The second Trump administration's strategy, meanwhile, describes Russia as a persistent threat to the countries on NATO's eastern flank, but concludes that it is not capable of dominating the whole of Europe, given the continent's significant economic and demographic advantages.

Another theme of a broader policy of Trump and his administration reflected in the Pentagon's stance is the avoidance of unequivocal declarations that the US will fight to protect its NATO allies, despite references to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty and the related collective defence within the Alliance.[9] Trump himself has been inconsistent in his statements on this issue, frequently casting doubt on US commitments to put pressure on allies, for example, to make them increase their defence spending quickly.[10] The Pentagon leadership, on the other hand, consistently emphasises the need to "incentivize" NATO members to strengthen their own military capabilities.

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[6] See the full texts of the unclassified versions of both documents: "National Security Strategy of the United States," The White House, November/December 2025, www.whitehouse.gov, and "2026 National Defense Strategy," U.S. Department of War, January 2026, *https://media.defense.gov*. See also: M.A. Piotrowski, "Publikacja nowej Strategii bezpieczeństwa narodowego USA," Depesza PISM, 12 December 2025, www.pism.pl; and A. Kacprzyk, "US Publishes New National Defense Strategy," PISM Spotlight, no. 7/2026, 27 January 2026, www.pism.pl.

[7] Another problem for the Alliance is the current US President's repeated claims against Denmark regarding Greenland and against Canada regarding some of its provinces. It cannot be ruled out that these will remain a source of further tensions between allies until the end of his presidency, affecting NATO's political cohesion in the face of military threats from Russia.

[8] See in particular: E.A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021.

[9] The NDS merely states that US support for Europe's conventional defence will be "critical, but more limited." In a similar vein, Under Secretary Colby stated that the US would continue to provide—albeit "in a more limited and focused fashion" — "conventional capabilities that contribute to NATO's defence". He also added, in general terms, that the Pentagon would "continue to ready our forces to do our part under Article V with Europe taking the lead for its conventional defence." In early 2025, Secretary Hegseth emphasised that the US remained "committed to the NATO alliance and to the defence partnership with Europe;" however, when asked in March 2026 about the US commitment to collective defence within NATO, he merely referred to the President's eventual decisions. By way of comparison, Hegseth's predecessor, Secretary Lloyd Austin, emphasised that "America's commitment to NATO and to Article 5 remains ironclad," and echoed then-President Joe Biden in stating that the US would defend "every inch of NATO territory". See "2026 National Defense Strategy," *op. cit*., pp. 11, 19; "Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the NATO Defence Ministerial (As Prepared)," *op. cit*.; "Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at the Ukraine Defence Contact Group (As Delivered)," U.S. Department of War, 12 February 2025, *www.war.gov*; P. Stewart, "Pentagon declines to reaffirm NATO's collective defense, says up to Trump," Reuters, 31 March 2026, www.reuters.com; "NATO Defense Ministerial: Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin Holds a Press Conference," US Mission to NATO, 17 February 2022, https://nato.usmission.gov.

[10] For example, ahead of the June 2025 summit in The Hague, Trump emphasised that there were "numerous definitions" of Article 5. However, following the summit, at which the allies adopted new spending targets pushed for by the US, he claimed that the US was in NATO "to help protect" its members. Subsequently, following disputes over Iran, he asked rhetorically in

The Trump administration promises preferential treatment to "model allies," defined in the NDS as those countries that invest "as they need" in their armed forces and assume greater responsibility for the defence of their regions. They are to be given priority for US weapon purchases, defence industry cooperation, and intelligence sharing. Pentagon officials have used this term to refer to Poland, the Baltic states, and Germany[11], with Under Secretary Colby also describing the latter as "a key leader of Europe's conventional defence," emphasising that it is Europe's largest economy (even though President Trump has strongly criticised Germany on numerous occasions).[12] Colby has also met with selected allies through the Bergen Group format, noting that it comprises the countries rapidly increasing their defence spending, possessing the greatest military potential, and prepared to move on to practical actions.[13] In addition to Poland and Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden also took part in the group's first meeting in June this year, and its membership may be expanded further to include other countries. In turn, the NSS drafted by the White House staff indicates broader political criteria for allies to receive US favour, such as the degree to which their markets are open to American companies or their ideological affinity with the MAGA movement. The NSS criticises some European countries for overly liberal policies, especially regarding migration, while praising the countries of Central, Eastern and Southern Europe as "healthy."[14]

It is worth noting that the NATO 3.0 concept also accommodates Trump's desire to improve relations with Russia, which the NSS frames as "reestablishing strategic stability." Colby has referred to NATO's "dual-track" approach from the Cold War era, which involved simultaneously strengthening military capabilities and seeking opportunities for dialogue, including on arms control.

Furthermore, Colby is sceptical about the feasibility and viability of deterrence by punishment (or cost imposition), under which a US ally being invaded would trigger retaliatory strikes against targets of high value to the aggressor. He argues that in a conflict with a nuclear adversary such as Russia, this would not only be extremely difficult but also dangerous, increasing the risk of escalation that would threaten US citizens and territory. The Pentagon is instead focused on deterrence by denial, which relies on the ability to prevent the adversary from achieving its objectives, such as the occupation of an ally's territory.[15] This approach is also reflected in NATO's newest "theory of victory," as set out by the current Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), US General Alexus Grynkewich. It envisages halting and defeating invading forces and, if necessary, also destroying their support facilities in Russia. Grynkewich emphasised that NATO forces would not escalate the conflict by attacking other targets, but would respond appropriately should the enemy escalate.[16]

March 2026: "we would have always been there for them, but now, based on their actions, I guess we don't have to be, do we?" A few days later, he claimed that he was considering withdrawing the US from NATO. Ultimately, however, he signed the declaration from the July summit in Ankara, in which the leaders of the Alliance's member states reaffirmed their "ironclad commitment" to collective defence and Article 5 (as in the Hague declaration). See J. Mason, S. Siebold, "Trump casts doubt on mutual defence as he flies to Europe for NATO summit," Reuters, 24 June 2025, www.reuters.com; L. Cook, "Trump says US would protect NATO allies, recognising that 'they love their countries'," Associated Press, 25 June 2025, https://apnews.com; S. Holland, G. Slattery, "Trump says 'we don't have to be there for NATO'," Reuters, 28 March 2026, www.reuters.com; C. Edwards, "Trump suggests in new interviews he is "absolutely" considering withdrawing the US from 'paper tiger' NATO," CNN, 1 April 2026, https://edition.cnn.com; "The Ankara Summit Declaration," NATO, 8 July 2026, www.nato.int.

[11] See, for example, A. Anwer, "Pentagon chief says 'model ally' Poland to receive 'special favour' as US resets security policy," TVP World, 7 December 2025, https://tvpworld.com.

[12] M. Górski, "US: 'Germany is the defence leader in Europe'," *Defence24*, 5 August 2026, https://defence24.com.

[13] E. Colby, post on X (Twitter), 9 June 2026, https://x.com/USWPColby/status/2064343669369360618.

[14] According to media reports, the full, classified version of the NSS is said to recommend that US diplomacy support political forces in Europe that are ideologically close to the American MAGA movement. The public version of the document also declares an end to the "open-door" policy towards NATO which underpinned successive waves of the Alliance's eastward enlargement, including Poland's accession in 1999. On the full text of the NSS, see M. Myers, "'Make Europe Great Again' and more from a longer version of the National Security Strategy," *Defense One*, 10 December 2025, www.defenseone.com.

[15] "Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the National War College (As Prepared)," U.S. Department of War, 19 May 2026, www.war.gov.

[16] "SACEUR's remarks at the Warsaw Security Forum," SHAPE, 12 October 2026, https://shape.nato.int.

The European Posture Review and talks with Poland

The EPR is being led by the Pentagon, in cooperation with US European Command (EUCOM), and is to include consultations with other parts of the US administration, Congress, and NATO allies. Options for changes to the US military presence in Europe are to be prepared under the leadership of Under Secretary Colby.[17] According to unofficial reports, these will be presented to Secretary Pete Hegseth by 6 November.[18] In line with established practice, the head of the Pentagon will then present the recommendations to the President, who may approve them, reject them or direct further changes.[19]

The Pentagon's recommendations to Trump are likely to include reducing the military presence in Europe by one-third or one-quarter, i.e., by approximately 20,000–25,000 troops. Although the President will likely opt for some cuts, it is difficult to predict how large they will be, and their actual scale may be constrained by Congress. Poland, meanwhile, stands to gain the permanent basing of some 5,000 US troops on its territory, though this would not necessarily result in a significant increase in the US contingent in Poland. In practice, it may simply amount to a change in the mode of deployment of the brigade which is currently rotating. There remains, however, a risk that negotiations and preparations for the permanent basing will drag on long enough that the subsequent US administration may reconsider and abandon the whole plan.

There are currently around 80,000 US troops in Europe, with around 10,000 on NATO's eastern flank,[20] including roughly 6,000 to 7,000 deployed in Poland.[21] While this is a higher number than in 2021, immediately prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it is a reduction from the 2022–2025 period. As a result of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the number of US troops in Poland doubled to around 10,000, whilst across Europe it rose from around 75,000 to, at times, over 100,000 troops. When Trump returned to office, there were some 85,000 US troops in Europe, but this figure fell by around 5,000–7,000 following the withdrawal of a light infantry brigade from Romania in October 2025 and an armoured brigade from Poland in May 2026.[22] The previous administration's planned temporary deployment of conventional medium-range missiles in Germany has also been cancelled. The US military presence in Poland and in other eastern flank countries consists overwhelmingly of troop rotations from the US.[23] Units rotate every few months, and soldiers arrive without their families, a marked contrast to the permanent bases which make up the bulk of the US presence in Western and Southern Europe.

Media reports have repeatedly suggested that the US is considering a withdrawal of 20,000–25,000 troops from Europe, and this has been the most frequently cited option in the press.[24] Some reports

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[17] N. Oliverio, "Pentagon has 'kicked off' review of US force posture in Europe," *Defence News*, 9 July 2026, www.defensenews.com.

[18] P. Stewart, "Pentagon's NATO review preparing troop options for Hegseth by 6 November," Reuters, 27 August 2026, www.reuters.com.

[19] See, for example, "Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby and Dr Mara Karlin, Performing the Duties of Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Hold a Press Briefing," U.S. Department of Defense, 29 November 2021, www.war.gov.

[20] Authors' own calculations, see below.

[21] M. Kozubal, M. Miłosz, "Cztery możliwe lokalizacje bazy USA w Polsce. „Sama baza to koszt 3 mld zł"," *Rzeczpospolita*, 29 October 2026, www.rp.pl.

[22] "Europe hopes for 'no surprises' as US weighs force withdrawals," *France 24*, 28 July 2025, www.france24.com. Consequently, the number of US brigade combat teams (frontline units) in Europe has fallen from five to three, returning to the 2021 level.

[23] The US forces permanently deployed in Poland consist of the ballistic missile defence system site in Redzikowo, as well as the forward command post of the US Army's V Corps, located in Poznań, and its accompanying administrative unit. In total, this amounts to approximately 400 soldiers. Figure source: "Number of Military and DoD Appropriated Fund (APF) Civilian Personnel," DMDC, March 2026, https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil.

[24] See, for example, C. Lunday, "Berlin left in the dark as Washington weighs troop cuts in Europe," *Politico*, 28 July 2025, https://www.politico.eu; K. Liptak, K. Holmes, "Trump mused about cutting troops in Europe by a third to send a message to NATO," CNN, 7 July 2026, https://edition.cnn.com.

indicate that a possible reduction of up to 40,000 has also been discussed[25]. However, US officials avoid publicly mentioning specific figures, merely noting that "there are going to be eventually less US troops in Europe than there has historically been for a variety of reasons."[26] Such a reduction would push US force levels below 63,000, the lowest point in NATO's history, recorded in 2013.[27] According to General Grynkewich, however, any downsizing of the US military presence in Europe will be a multi-year process and will proceed as the European countries strengthen their own capabilities.[28]

The countries most at risk of troop reductions are those in Western and Southern Europe, which Trump has criticised for their stance on the war with Iran and where the US stations the majority of its European contingent. In April, President Trump announced he would cut the approximately 38,000-strong US force in Germany, in response to Chancellor Friedrich Merz's criticism of the US war with Iran. Trump also suggested reductions in Italy and Spain, where some 12,000 and 4,000 US troops are stationed, respectively. Italy has restricted the use of its bases and airspace by American aircraft involved in the war, while Spain has completely prohibited the use of its territory. Trump also criticised the United Kingdom, which hosts around 10,000 US troops.[29]

It cannot be ruled out that changes will also take place in other countries. This summer, following the withdrawal from Poland of a brigade whose sub-units had been rotating to the Baltic states, the US pulled back most of the 1,000 troops deployed to Lithuania and 700 in Estonia. After a break of several months, the US began redeploying around 1,000 troops to Lithuania in October (from the brigade that continues to rotate to Poland), and is due to resume rotations in Estonia in November, though it is unclear whether these will be long-term arrangements. Consequently, Lithuania is seeking a permanent deployment of US troops, which Trump has said he would consider. Trump links the improved prospects of a more permanent presence in Poland to his good relations with President Karol Nawrocki, and has long praised Poland for its high defence spending and purchases of American-made weapons.

Although Trump has expressed general interest in building a large permanent US base in Poland, this remains uncertain given the Pentagon's consistent drive to cut the American military presence in Europe. In mid-September, the US President hailed "major progress" in talks on the permanent basing of troops in Poland, but Colby noted some two weeks later, more cautiously, that exploration of "potential opportunities" for such a deployment was underway.[30] Furthermore, the Pentagon under Hegseth and Colby has demonstrated a willingness to act contrary to the President's public declarations. The withdrawal of one of two rotational brigades from Poland contradicted Trump's earlier assurances that the US contingent there would not be reduced,[31] as well as the Pentagon's own praise of Poland as a "model ally." Although the military presence in Germany was initially due to be decreased by around 5,000 troops, this did not happen, and the Pentagon instead withdrew some 4,000 troops from Poland, presumably because this was much easier and quicker given the rotational mode of their deployment. The Pentagon subsequently claimed that the rotation of US forces to Poland had merely been delayed,[32] yet the brigade completing its tour in Poland left without being

[25] D. De Luce et al., "Pentagon weighs pulling nearly a third of U.S. forces from Europe," *NBC News*, 17 September 2026, www.nbcnews.com.
[26] M. Carlson, L. Cook, "NATO allies bewildered by Trump's about-face on U.S. troop moves in Europe," PBS, 22 May 2026, www.pbs.org.
[27] During the Cold War, there were several hundred thousand US troops in Europe, reaching almost 500,000 at peak times. See S.G. Jones, S.P. Daniels, "Deterring Russia: U.S. Military Posture in Europe," CSIS, 27 January 2025, www.csis.org.
[28] R. Ruitenberg, "More US troop withdrawals from Europe expected, NATO commander says," *Military Times*, 19 May 2026, www.militarytimes.com.
[29] Figures taken from: "Number of Military and DoD Appropriated…," *op. cit.*
[30] "Pentagon confirms review of possible permanent US base in Poland," Polish Radio, 30 September 2026, www.pap.pl.
[31] E. Jones, "US troops will stay in Poland, says Trump during Nawrocki meeting," TVP World, 3 September 2025, https://tvpworld.com.
[32] "Statement Attributable to Assistant to the Secretary of War for Public Affairs (ATSW(PA))," U.S. Department of War, 19 May 2026, www.war.gov.

replaced by an incoming unit (at least until the end of October). Taken together, these dynamics make it a realistic scenario that the Pentagon will draw out talks on establishing a permanent base and relocating forces to it, increasing the risk that the process will not be completed by the end of Trump's presidency in January 2029.

There is also a possibility that the US will agree to permanently base a single brigade or comparable-level force in Poland as a replacement for the currently rotating armoured brigade—but not in addition to it. In this situation, the US military presence in Poland would not return to the level of two brigades and 10,000 troops. This would be cheaper for the US, not only because of its reduced size. It would also no longer require the transport of personnel and equipment every nine months,[33] while Poland declared it would cover the costs of building additional infrastructure for soldiers and their families (housing, schools, etc.). Moreover, instead of deploying forces from the bases in the continental US or forming new units, the Trump administration may decide to transfer troops from Germany to Poland, as Trump has already suggested.[34]

Trump's future stance will be crucial, as he will make the final decision on whether to accept the Pentagon's recommendations. He also has the authority to pressure the Department's leadership to finalise and implement a potential agreement on a permanent base in Poland. It is unclear what approach he will ultimately take on the future of other US forces in Europe, which he treats as a bargaining chip in relations with allies. Despite widespread speculation, he did not opt for major cuts following last year's summit in The Hague, at which NATO adopted new spending targets pushed for by the US. Although he later announced that he would withdraw some troops due to transatlantic disputes over Iran, he made no declarations regarding cuts at the summit in Ankara—instead praising allies for their substantial purchases of American armaments and accelerating their defence spending increases.[35] Shortly afterwards, he again threatened to cut military presence in Europe if it did not support his claims regarding Greenland, but this tension was eased by the signing of an agreement between the US, Denmark and Greenland in September this year.

The US Congress may hinder efforts to reduce the military presence in Europe, but is unlikely to block a drawdown entirely. Congressional legislation has imposed a series of restrictions on reducing troop numbers in Europe below 76,000, yet the administration has already dismissed these limits as unconstitutional.[36] It may therefore opt to either disregard them outright, or to comply with the Congressional requirements only superficially, such as when justifying cuts, assessing their impact and conducting mandatory consultations. A far greater obstacle for the Trump administration would arise if Congress refused to appropriate funds for relocating permanently stationed forces back to the US (including the construction of domestic infrastructure to house them) or made the passage of priority legislation conditional on avoiding force reductions in Europe. Congress may become more assertive following this November's midterm election success, particularly as the Democrats have now secured control of both houses. Even so, issues relating to the US presence in Europe may ultimately prove

[33] See: J.R. Deni, "It's (still) more expensive to rotate military forces overseas than base them there," Atlantic Council, 18 December 2024, www.atlanticcouncil.org.

[34] L. Cater, "Trump says he 'might' move US troops to Poland from Germany," *Politico*, 9 May 2026, www.politico.eu. The leading candidate for such a shift to Poland would be the 2nd Cavalry Regiment (equivalent of a mechanised brigade) from Bavaria. The redeployment of smaller units could, for example, include helicopter and artillery units. It is, however, highly unlikely that Poland will host the medium-range missiles battalion previously earmarked for rotation in Germany. The Trump administration would probably regard this as too provocative for Russia, and see the unit itself as being needed more for any potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific.

[35] The White House even reportedly blocked the Pentagon from announcing further troop cuts in Europe just before the summit. Y. Kubota *et al.*, "Hegseth Prepared a Bombshell Plan to Cut Troops in Europe. Then It Got Nixed," *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 July 2026, www.wsj.com.

[36] "Statement by the President," The White House, 18 December 2025, www.whitehouse.gov.

secondary to broader priorities, such as the annual budget. In any case, a strong military presence in Poland enjoys broad support across both parties.[37]

The opinion of the US military is likely to carry far less weight than it has done to date. The Trump administration has, on more than one occasion, acted against the advice of senior military leadership. For example, the withdrawal of one of the two US brigades from Poland took place shortly after SACEUR had described their presence as critical to deterring Russia.[38] Furthermore, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has dismissed an unusually high number of generals.

Other changes in US involvement in NATO

Beyond reducing its military presence, the second Trump administration has taken several other steps to scale back US involvement in Europe's conventional defence. Nonetheless, the US retains decisive influence over NATO's activities and has no desire to see Europe become fully independent, including in arms production. At the same time, the US may yet take further actions to strengthen NATO's nuclear capabilities.

As a result of NATO decisions from early 2026, the participation and role of European allies within the Alliance's command structure are expanding as the US involvement declines, although an American officer, serving as SACEUR, continues to hold strategic command of all forces assigned to the Alliance.[39] By the end of the 2020s, Europeans will assume full leadership of the regional commands, situated one rung below the strategic level. They will head all Joint Force Commands (JFCs), which prepare and conduct operations in designated NATO sectors. Notably, a Polish and a German officer will rotate command of JFC Brunssum, responsible for the defence of the central sector of NATO's eastern flank (including Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia).[40] The US, meanwhile, will command all the headquarters at the next (lower) level, i.e. those of individual branches of NATO armed forces.[41]

Another change under NATO 3.0 is the reduction in the role of US forces in NATO joint operations. This is already evident in the Eastern Sentry and Baltic Sentry missions, both launched in 2025. The US provides strategic support (the "strategic backstop"), assisting with reconnaissance and air refuelling, executing strategic command (via SACEUR), and maintaining reserve units ready to reinforce these operations if necessary. However, the US has been avoiding first-line deployment of its own combat forces (fighter aircraft and warships), most likely to incentivise allies to do so. The US therefore no longer acts as NATO's "first responder," as it did at the turn of 2021 and 2022. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the US under the Joe Biden administration deployed the largest contingent of forces to the eastern flank of any ally.

In 2026, the Trump administration downsized the earmarked pool of forces for NATO defence, which mostly comprises units permanently stationed in the continental US which could be deployed to Europe in the event of a crisis. The cuts, announced in June this year, were effective immediately,

[37] See, for example: E. Mitchell, "Republicans grill Army leaders on pulling Poland troops: 'We're not happy'," *The Hill*, 15 May 2026, https://thehill.com.

[38] "US general says two armoured brigades in Poland 'critical' to deterring Russia," Polish Radio, 19 March 2026, www.polskieradio.pl.

[39] According to press reports and members of the US Congress, the administration was considering not filling the post of SACEUR at the start of Trump's term. "US Republican lawmakers voice alarm over possible Pentagon command shake-up," *Reuters*, 20 March 2025, www.reuters.com.

[40] Until recent changes, command of JFC Brunssum alternated between Germany and Italy. Command of JFC Norfolk—responsible for Scandinavia, the Arctic and the North Atlantic—has passed from an American to a British officer. The Italians will head JFC Naples, which is responsible for operations in the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions.

[41] American officers had previously led NATO's air force command (at Ramstein) and land forces command (at Izmir), and have now replaced the British in command of the naval forces (headquarters at Northwood).

affecting naval and air forces which would be particularly valuable in case of a crisis or war with China.[42] As a result of an earlier planning cycle within NATO, the US was already set to reduce its share of the pool of forces available to NATO from 44 per cent in 2025 to 30 per cent in 2032,[43] but this process has been significantly accelerated by the administration's recent decisions. Although NATO officials have stated that other allies have already pledged to replace the withdrawn US forces with their own, it will take many years to close the resulting gaps. For example, cuts to the US contribution have affected many platforms for launching medium-range missiles (over 1,000 km), of which European countries possess very few and which will not become available in greater numbers until the next decade.

In line with the NATO 3.0 framework and Trump's announcements, the US has ceased to provide Ukraine with free military equipment and ammunition. Furthermore, the Trump administration has used American support as political leverage over Ukraine. For example, in March 2025, the US temporarily suspended the supply of weapons and intelligence, in an attempt to force Ukraine to enter peace talks on terms unfavourable to it. In October 2026, Trump pressed for a halt to Ukrainian strikes on Russian refineries, even though European states, Canada and select non-NATO partners are now fully funding the supply of military equipment to Ukraine, including purchases of American weapons and munitions. European allies and Canada have also assumed responsibility for air defence and supporting the logistics hub in Jasionka, Poland. An officer from one of these countries is likewise set to take charge of NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU), the Alliance headquarters coordinating military aid.

Meanwhile, the prospects of further strengthening NATO's nuclear capabilities have increased, as the Pentagon is considering an expansion of options for responding to the limited use of nuclear weapons in various regions.[44] According to Polish officials and press reports, the United States has expressed openness to certifying Polish F-35A aircraft to carry US nuclear bombs stationed in Europe.[45] This change would make it more difficult for Russia to destroy NATO's entire fleet of nuclear-capable aircraft. There are no indications, however, that stationing warheads in Poland or other new locations is being considered.[46] It is possible, in turn, that the US will develop short- or medium-range nuclear missiles launched from aircraft or mobile land-based launchers. Interest in such capabilities has been growing in Congress,[47] although their production and potential deployment in Europe would most likely extend beyond President Trump's term of office.[48] While US officials have backed an increased role for French and British nuclear forces in European deterrence efforts to complement the much

[42] "U.S. rightsizes NATO Force Model contributions," U.S. European Command, 3 June 2026, www.eucom.mil. According to unofficial reports, the cuts were to include half of the NATO-allocated aircraft carriers, bomber groups and unmanned reconnaissance aircraft; almost half of the destroyers and maritime patrol aircraft; the sole submarine equipped with a large number of cruise missiles; and a smaller proportion of air-to-air refuelling aircraft. See S. Siebold, 'Europeans fill most gaps left by US in NATO defence plans, top commander says', Reuters, 1 July 2026, www.reuters.com.

[43] See "Address by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, followed by a moderated conversation," NATO, 26 May 2025, www.nato.int.

[44] A. Roque, A. Mehta, "Pentagon wants "expanding options" for nuclear weapons, officials say," *Breaking Defense*, 7 August 2026, https://breakingdefense.com.

[45] J. Palowski, "Polska w Nuclear Sharing. Co chciał powiedzieć minister Zalewski?," *Defence24*, 28 August 2026, www.defence24.pl; H. Foy, A. Mackinnon, "US in talks to expand nuclear-capable deployments in Europe," *Financial Times*, 2 June 2026, www.ft.com.

[46] Vice-President J.D. Vance criticised the idea of deploying nuclear weapons in Poland, suggesting it would be provocative towards Russia. See: M. Mehrara, "JD Vance Quashes Poland Request for US Nuclear Weapons: 'Shocked'," *Newsweek*, 14 March 2025, www.newsweek.com.

[47] X. Liang, "U.S. Congress Committees Seek New Nuclear Systems," *Arms Control Today*, July/August 2026, www.armscontrol.org.

[48] For further reading, see: M. Górski, "F-35s and new missiles: U.S. strengthens its nuclear response [INTERVIEW]," *Defence24*, 8 September 2026, www.defence24.pl.

larger US arsenal, the United States remains firmly opposed to other NATO members acquiring their own nuclear weapons.[49]

On the other hand, the US has become more open to the licensed production and maintenance of American conventional weapons in Europe. Closer cooperation in this direction is intended to help Europe arm itself, especially as previously contracted deliveries to allies of American-made equipment have been delayed due to the Iran war and the US prioritising the replenishment of its own stocks. Germany will produce ATACMS tactical ballistic missiles and PAC-2 GEM-T interceptors for the Patriot air and missile defence system, while Poland will produce low-cost Barracuda cruise missiles and host maintenance facilities for Abrams tanks, Apache helicopters, and the more advanced PAC-3 interceptors. The US is also considering licensing production of the latter missiles in Europe. Nevertheless, it remains unwilling to share all advanced technologies; for example, it has thus far refused to permit the production of missiles for HIMARS launchers in Poland. Furthermore, despite urging European countries to strengthen their capabilities and deepen cooperation,[50] the Trump administration remains opposed to Europe building a completely independent defence industry. US officials have criticised programmes that give preferential treatment to European companies, such as the EU's SAFE loan programme, and the development of weapons that compete with American ones.[51]

Risks for Europe

In light of the NATO 3.0 assumptions and the broader policy of the Trump administration, the US's commitment to the defence of its allies is becoming more limited and uncertain. This de facto weakens Europe's security and poses a fundamental challenge, as the United States plays a key military and political role in NATO's deterrence and defence against Russia. While the scaling back of US contributions to European security is inevitable, its pace, manner of implementation and implications remain uncertain. The current Pentagon leadership seeks to rapidly cut US forces available to NATO, widening capability gaps in the Alliance, and, above all, deepening doubts about the US's readiness to defend its allies—particularly when combined with Trump's often confrontational rhetoric towards them and his attempts to normalise bilateral relations with Russia. The current administration's stance therefore increases the risk that Russia will test the Alliance more forcefully. The situation has likely already contributed to the recent escalation of aggressive Russian actions below the level of open conflict. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the authors of the NATO 3.0 concept have any specific end goal in mind. It cannot be ruled out that this concept is ultimately intended to lead to the complete withdrawal of US conventional kinetic support from NATO. However, the realisation of such an objective would most likely extend beyond Trump's second term and require the next US president—potentially another representative of the MAGA movement—to continue the current approach towards Europe.

In the context of further reductions in Europe, cuts to conventional presence on the Alliance's eastern flank would raise the greatest doubts about the US's resolve to protect NATO, as this is the area most vulnerable to Russian aggression. From a military perspective, however, the most difficult assets for European countries to replace would be the American destroyers equipped with Tomahawk medium-range missiles and SM-3 ballistic missile interceptors (based in Spain), the EPAA system ballistic missile defence sites (Poland, Romania and Turkey), Patriot systems (Germany), as well as reconnaissance

[49] "U.S. would oppose Poland and others developing nuclear capabilities, Pentagon says," Polish Radio, 5 March 2026, www.polskieradio.pl.

[50] For example, Under Secretary Colby encouraged defence cooperation between Poland and Germany. See: "Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the 2026 United States Strategic Command Deterrence Symposium," U.S. Department of War, 5 August 2026, www.war.gov.

[51] E. Colby, post on the X portal, 14 July 2026, https://x.com/USWPColby/status/2077060564900077620?s=20; A. Puzder, M. Whitaker, "Why US-EU defence industrial cooperation matters more than ever," *Politico*, 23 February 2026, www.politico.eu.

aircraft (the United Kingdom), aircraft specialised in countering enemy air defences (Germany), those for aerial refuelling and heavy transport (Germany and the United Kingdom), as well as electronic warfare capabilities (including the multi-domain task force in Germany). These are the capabilities where the shortcomings in the European part of the Alliance are greatest and most acute, and at the same time, are the assets most useful to the US in a potential Indo-Pacific conflict.

The negative consequences of scaling back the American military footprint in Europe would be mitigated by maintaining, and even more so by strengthening, the presence of US forces on NATO's eastern flank. This would signal that the United States remains committed to defending this region, despite overall cuts to its troop numbers in Europe. Moreover, conducting US force reductions in accordance with the timetable agreed with allies would give European allies time to develop the necessary military capabilities to replace the withdrawn US assets.

The changes already made to the US involvement in NATO increase the risk that, in the event of aggression, the Alliance may be forced to wage a protracted war of attrition rather than the swift defensive war envisaged by General Grynkewich. NATO's ability to "break" the Russian attacking forces and destroy their logistical infrastructure has already been weakened by the reduced availability of specific US capabilities for the Alliance, particularly deep strike missiles. Further reductions of forces in Europe and in the pool of reinforcements might diminish this capability still further. Moreover, American support for Europe in a time of crisis may be further restricted or delayed due to US involvement in another conflict, to preserve resources for such an eventuality, or to incentivise allies to send their units first. The recent practice of keeping US combat forces in reserve during NATO operations suggests the US intends to retain considerable flexibility regarding if, and when, it joins any conflict. Given the stance of Trump and his administration towards Ukraine, there is also a growing risk that the US would curtail its support in a crisis should differences arise between it and its allies on the objectives, means and methods of waging the war and related escalation risks. Even if US support for NATO allies were exclusively non-kinetic, reducing or withdrawing it would fundamentally diminish the Alliance's ability to conduct large-scale, rapid, and coordinated strikes and other operations. This is because NATO member states still rely heavily on the US for strategic intelligence and reconnaissance, operational planning, and command.[52]

Although the signals regarding further strengthening of NATO's nuclear capabilities are positive, cuts to the US conventional military presence may still reduce the political credibility of nuclear deterrence.[53] Reluctance to bear the costs associated with stationing US troops in Europe, or committing them to the conventional phase of a war, will heighten doubts as to whether the US would in fact be willing to risk nuclear conflict, which would pose a far greater danger to the American homeland. Conventional force reductions may also lower the probability of aggression against NATO escalating disadvantageously for Russia. In this context, maintaining as large a US military presence as possible in Poland and the Baltic states remains particularly important. Doing so increases the risk for Russia that an attack on NATO's eastern flank would mean fighting US troops from the outset, increasing the likelihood of the conflict escalating far beyond the local battlefield and Europe, drawing in US capabilities with global reach, including nuclear forces.

[52] See R. Stewart, A European Way of War Without the United States, IISS, 15 June 2026, www.iiss.org. Some of these capabilities have global reach and are not limited to the forces and systems present in Europe. They include, in particular, satellites for imagery and electronic intelligence, for the detection of ballistic missile launches, as well as cyber warfare and reconnaissance.

[53] See also D. Dolzikova, "NATO 3.0: US Conventional Retrenchment and Nuclear Deterrence in Europe," RUSI, 23 June 2026, www.rusi.org.

Implications for Poland

The Trump administration is likely to accelerate the reduction of the US military contribution to NATO, including through further cuts to American troop presence in Europe. US involvement in NATO will continue to confront Russia with unique escalation risks should it attack Alliance members; however, the American capacity to provide operational support for the conventional defence of Poland and Europe will continue to decline. Therefore, although the NATO 3.0 concept offers Poland prospects to strengthen its military cooperation with the US, it is becoming even more important to also intensify collaboration with European allies, and to expand Poland's own military capabilities. There is also a growing need for Poland to prepare for crisis and conflict scenarios in which US support would not only be more limited, but also delayed or conditional.

A larger permanent US military presence on Polish territory would offer Poland greater stability than rotational deployments, and would send a stronger signal to Russia regarding US resolve to defend Poland and the region. While it would not guarantee automatic American intervention in a conflict, it would make it easier for the US to preserve or expand options that increase the likelihood of US forces directly entering the fight, as a permanent presence is cheaper to maintain than troop rotations. Even units stationed in western Poland could be used to mount a relatively rapid response to a Russian attack, including by reinforcing the US-led NATO battalion-sized battlegroup in the north-eastern part of the country (Orzysz).[54] Finalising talks on permanent basing and implementing their outcomes will likely require not only continued engagement with the Pentagon, but also maintaining President Trump's personal interest in the matter.

At the same time, the US will expect Poland to further strengthen its own defence capabilities and its role in defending the region. Closer military cooperation between the two countries would facilitate this process. A more permanent US military presence and the inclusion of Polish F-35A aircraft in NATO's nuclear mission would better protect Poland against Russian threats (including nuclear escalation) by increasing the likelihood that such an escalation would be met with a strong American response. In turn, further expanding production and maintenance of US-made weaponry in Poland would facilitate supplying Polish armed forces to defend both their own territory and the wider region. Closer bilateral defence-industrial cooperation would also provide additional opportunities for arms deliveries to other allies and repairing their equipment.

Nonetheless, given the need to fill the gaps left by withdrawals of US capabilities from NATO, Poland's operational and industrial defence cooperation with European countries will become increasingly important, an outcome which the US itself expects. It is not advisable for such regional formats to duplicate NATO structures, as this would be very costly and could potentially further accelerate the Trump administration's scaling back of US involvement in the Alliance. However, developing practical cooperation within smaller frameworks could strengthen the capabilities of Poland and its allies to both implement NATO's operational defence plans and act if not all its members (including the US) become involved in conflict. This argues in favour of deepening cooperation both with other countries in the eastern part of NATO—united by a shared perception of the threat posed by Russia—and with the states possessing the greatest military and industrial-technological potential in Europe (France, Germany and the United Kingdom). This may include conducting exercises with the Nordic and Baltic states on neutralising key Russian targets in the Baltic Sea region, including offensive systems and arms factories. Meanwhile, further development of "coalition of the willing" exercises could strengthen the capacity to support not only Ukraine but also the eastern flank in the event of a conflict (the first manoeuvres in this format will take place in Poland this year). The practical implementation of the French "forward deterrence" initiative could, in turn, better complement US and NATO nuclear deterrence, for example through exercises in Poland and the region involving French nuclear-capable

[54] US armoured brigades rotating to Poland have already carried out exercises involving this reinforcement. See D. Bradford, "NATO exercise brings heavy armour to Poland's Eastern Flank," U.S. Army, 28 November 2025, www.army.mil.

aircraft. Another potential area for cooperation with European states is the development of deep-strike missiles, a task on which France, Germany and the United Kingdom, and Ukraine are currently working. The EU's role will remain important in supporting arms procurement and the development of defence industries through financial instruments, such as the SAFE loan facility currently being implemented or the EDP programme being prepared for the Union's next financial framework. At the same time, industrial issues may be a source of further transatlantic and intra-European tensions. In some cases, competition over who will locally produce US equipment is already underway (including between Poland and Germany). In other cases, the US may pressure allies not to develop or buy armaments that compete with its own, or for EU-level actions to be aligned with American expectations.

Heightened uncertainty regarding the scale and nature of US support for Poland and NATO in a potential conflict strengthens the case for Poland to conduct contingency preparations for a protracted war. It is particularly important to further increase stockpiles and production of armaments that are already available or can be developed relatively quickly, especially drones (including those capable of striking deep into Russia) and various types of ammunition, as well as to expand personnel reserves. It is also becoming increasingly important to deepen Russia's strategic dilemmas. Acting both unilaterally and in concert with allies, Poland can project stronger signals that aggression against NATO would impose high costs on Russia. This could be achieved by developing concepts for strikes against high-value Russian targets (such as critical infrastructure, including refineries) or by conducting exercises simulating the isolation of parts of Russian territory and transport networks, including blocking Russian transit in the Baltic Sea. Whilst launching such operations during a conflict would heighten the risk of both Russian escalation and reduction or withdrawal of US support, taking that risk could prove justified if limited US involvement and ongoing European capability gaps make executing NATO defence plans impossible. Such a situation would force Poland (and potentially other allies under attack) to seek other ways to persuade Russia to halt its aggression than those jointly agreed at the Alliance level.